

Reflections on Evaluations and the Law

from Susan Richman

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Like every other homeschooler in PA, I've done lots of reflecting this spring about our current homeschooling law. I've been hearing all the arguments against itâ€” the law is burdensome, we don't need anyone to help us, we should not need to be accountable to the government, we could use our time better actually teaching our children instead of documenting everything, it's a matter of freedom, it's our right, they do it in other states, who needs diplomas.... and more and more.

But then 1:00pm comes, and I've (hopefully...) got the dining room table cleared off, and I'm ready to welcome in yet one more family for homeschooling evaluations. I've seen over 150 children this spring, and each one is uniqueâ€” from the eager little 4th grader telling me about his 4H project raising chickens, to the elegant senior showing me her original jewelry she designed and made in the community college class she took this year, the programs for the harp concerts she performed in, and the major research paper she completed on textile embellishment techniques. Or there's the girl who hadn't known what in the world she wanted to do with her life after graduatingâ€” but in her senior year, she'd gotten a job at a local restaurant, and was now being trained to develop staff at new restaurants all across the country. She's the top employee, and has a whole new sense of direction and a whole new confidenceâ€” and I rejoice with her about it all. I'm immersed in looking into each family's educational world for an hour or more, focusing intently on what they've accomplished and learning all about their approach to learning. We talk together, usually laugh a good bit, share stories, share about many new resources, and more. It's my work, but it's also my time for really enjoying these very different families. I appreciate each one, and feel blessed to be a part of their lives.

And then it hits me againâ€” this law isn't just about 'paperwork'. It's about people. About kids and parents, sharing about their year with someone who really wants to hear all about it, who's eager to see the highpoints and celebrate them with the family. I've told many of my evaluation families this spring that I think all laws have 'unintended consequences', things that just were not at all foreseen at first by the legislators who wrote them. But usually we think only of the bad unintended consequencesâ€” like how the welfare laws were encouraging young single mothers to stay single or risk losing benefits, or encouraging successive generations to live 'on the dole' as it was the only way of life they knew. This spring I've realized that our homeschooling law in PA has had so many unintended positive consequences.... like these wonderful families that have become a part of my life, my good friends.

I just yesterday attended the wedding of a wonderful young womanâ€” I first knew her when she was about middle school age and the family had recently started homeschooling, and I was seeing them for evaluations for the first time. Now she's a college graduate, and making that important first step into starting her own family. I've been a part of her growing up years, I've had her as a student in my online AP US History test preparation class, I've seen her informally in various group outings and activities.... and I realize that without this law, this 'burden'... then I never would have met her. And it was heartwarming

and gratifying to hear Erin introduce me to her new in-laws proudly with 'This is my homeschooling evaluatorâ€” a very dear friend for so many years.'

Or I think of the family that came in last spring very depressed about their 9th grade year. It wasn't good enough, they were really thinking of putting the daughter into a Christian school, things just hadn't gone as planned, especially with math, and they just didn't know what they were going to do. Mother and daughter both looked very downcast and worried. This mother is an evaluator herself, who helps and counsels many other familiesâ€” but now they were in need of a bit of counsel, and a lot of encouragement, themselves. Looking over their portfolio, I saw no holes, no problems -- in fact it seemed to me to have been a wonderful year, full of accomplishment and adventure and service... and even a new horse! The math didn't even look that problematical to me -- certainly nothing to condemn the year. When they finally left (oh, we went quite a bit beyond the hour I'd scheduled....), they were beginning to believe for themselves that the year hadn't really been a washout after all. They began having a vision for 10th grade -- and this spring when they arrived with their very well-organized portfolio and many crafts projects and 4H notebooks and horseback riding awards, I could see they'd really built on that freshman year and had now completed a wonderful sophomore year. The daughter was just glowing, and such a positive spirit pervaded the whole meeting. Had this law been a help to them? I think so.

And then I remember the conversation I had at a conference this year with a homeschool mother who works as an evaluator for a large homeschooling support program in Maryland, where enrollment and oversight in these programs is one way to comply with the homeschooling law. The program she was with did not have any consequence if the family did not come in for their mandated twice-a-year evaluation meetings -- and often when families were feeling discouraged, they'd just cancel out or not show up, hoping to make it up the next year. This woman shared how discouraged these families often became without that regular 'boost' that would come from really meeting with a helpful and encouraging person who was ready to see the best in what they had done, and nudge them on to the next positive step. She'd often seen fine families just drop out of homeschooling altogether when this happened, as they sometimes just lost perspective and felt they'd really failed at the endeavor. People can make such a difference in other people's lives. We may like to be independent -- but we really do need one another. Often. I think it's why God didn't put us each on our own desert island.

Or I think of the hour-long conversation I had this past winter with a young mom with an 8-year-old daughter. She was calling initially to ask about switching legally from being under the homeschooling law to being a private tutor, as she had a teaching certificate, though maybe from another state. We got to talking, and I began exploring with her why I actually thought she might want to at least consider staying under the regular law. At first she balked at the idea -- she didn't need this sort of oversight, she had plenty of homeschooling mothers in her area to talk with and felt no need for an evaluator, she'd heard it was just a lot of work, and more and more. But we continued talking.... and eventually she asked with almost wonderment, "Wait, you mean the evaluator is supposed to help the family and give them good ideas???" I replied that that was how I saw it, and that many evaluators see such a wide range of families that they can bring ideas they've gained from one family to another -- sort of 'match-making' resources and families and kids. The mom was getting intrigued, and soon was asking if I might possibly have some openings. I decided I did have

space, even though I'd really been aiming to cut back overall on the total number of students I see.

I can't tell you what a blessing it was to meet this absolutely delightful family this month. The young girl was an avid reader who already met many of my favorite stories, and who wrote amusing little books herself, filled delightful and creative illustrations. The family had realized that indeed putting together a portfolio could be fun -- they made collages of photos showing all the really fun projects they'd done together as a family or with the many different homeschool groups they are part of.... here were the kids in their butterfly tent watching with amazement as they watched monarchs burst forth and edge out of their chrysalis shells, here they were in costumes at their History Heroes Club, or building a pyramid with blocks, or dressing up for a Medieval Fair and making a castle, or with the God's Eye crafts they'd made at their new Spanish Club led by a Penn State professor who just loved these homeschooled kids, and more and more. Here was a note and page about the probability experiments and coordinate graphing lessons with dad on the family computer, or copies of letters written to the NYC firemen and to US soldiers fighting in Afghanistan, about activities with a Catholic homeschoolers group and more and more.

I was so impressed with the richness and variety and enthusiasm shown by the family -- and this mother was now a real advocate of how valuable it was to pull together a portfolio and meet with an evaluator. She didn't 'need' my help to do all of these wonderful projects -- but it was a very meaningful time for all of us to look over and celebrate and appreciate all that they had accomplished in their year. I'm glad I opted to take on yet one more family. I'm looking forward to next year with them too -- I'm sure they'll become part of my spring season for many years to come... wonder if I'll even have the chance to see this little girl as a young woman at her wedding? Who knows... when you make people contact, all sorts of things can happen. I've sometimes heard longtime, experienced homeschoolers complaining about the 'younger' generation of homeschoolers, saying these 'newbies' just didn't seem to have the same drive and energy and enthusiasm we all had when we started out -- how refreshing for me to meet with this wonderful family and have that stereotype completely put down.

I think as each of us look back on our lives here, the important thing is always going to be our relationships with other people.... Did we encourage others? Did we reach out when we could? Did we appreciate the offered help of others or the special place they've had in our lives? Did we do something good for someone else, at the right moment in their lives when they really needed it, even if they couldn't exactly ask for it? Did we recognize the good in others? Did we help someone see better just where they were meant to go, or celebrate with them enough when they had a small or large triumph? Maybe surprisingly, this current homeschool law encourages just this sort of interaction -- oh, of course, it's hardly the only vehicle for these good deeds with others, but it can indeed be one way. We can choose to see the law in this way, and let it open up all sorts of wonderful possibilities for us.

And just now my daughter Hannah, taking a break from working on laying out this issue's Backpack section of children's writings, comes in to see me in the office where I'm typing. She wants to show me the new and unusual guitar chords she's learned to a tune from her new Shirenu book of Hebrew youth camp songs. And the words to this one really hit me, especially right now: "When I reach out to you, and you to me, we become betzelem elohim (Hebrew for 'in God's image')." Reaching out to others -- that's what this laws asks us

each to do. And that to me just isn't bad. It helps us reach more to that hope of being in God's image.

This law isn't just about possibly 'catching' those who might be abusing homeschooling -- it's about helping people make the connections that can help them really enjoy and celebrate and make the most of this wonderful way of life. It's about the encouragement that can only come person-to-person. I wonder if back in 1988 Representative Ron Cowell or Representative Joseph Pitts, the prime sponsors of our current law, ever intended this -- maybe it was at least a hope?