

# Shifting Gears.....

*from Susan Richman*

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I've found myself literally shifting gears lately -- we just traded in my beloved 1996 minivan for a little Saturn Ion.... and this new car has a manual stick shift. So my earlier days of our 30-year marriage are coming back to me, when I learned to shift the gears in my little VW bug that I bought 2nd hand for \$450, with money borrowed from my parents. It's now quite natural once again, and now I love smoothly shifting gears, enjoying the control a manual transmission gives... and the lower cost of the gasoline for our many weekly trips to Pittsburgh.

And I realize I've been shifting gears in other areas of my life too, just as many of you are. We could move from a minivan to a compact because we only have one child still at home -- we just don't usually find ourselves driving seven people around very often anymore. Our needs have shifted -- commuting to Pittsburgh with Hannah for various classes and activities fills our days rather than driving all four kids to the Kittanning library or to a local homeschool fieldtrip or to a meeting of our old Math Olympiad group at a homeschool friend's church. I no longer need a vehicle built for moms in carpools. And when I buy groceries, it doesn't take up as much room as when I was feeding six people, three times a day.

Shifting gears isn't easy -- just listen to Hannah's moans as she started relearning how to drive our new car! Didn't help that she had hoped to take her driver's test just a couple weeks after we bought this surprise new purchase -- that plan will be put off a couple of months or so till she feels as comfortable and automatic with our non-automatic new car as she did with the minivan. The payoff is worth it, of course -- after all, she feels the new car is much cooler than a minivan, and she realizes it will be much easier to park in the city (and on her driver's test!) once she gets the feel for backing up without zooming or stalling. But right now it's all still in the rough stage, and she misses the competence she'd gotten used to feeling with our other car.

And I think how this happens continually with our homeschooling... we shift gears in so many ways throughout the years, sometimes in planned ways, sometimes in surprise twists that we hadn't expected or seen in advance. See if any of these shifts resonate with you:

- Our kids grow up and we find ourselves learning new subjects that either we don't feel very comfortable with at first or that we just may not want to learn along with our kids -- when in the elementary years all areas were interesting for us, and not too overwhelming. We may need to find a new solution that hadn't been necessary earlier -- we may now look into group classes, video coursework, audio lectures, community college credit, distance courses online, a possible tutor, and more. We shift gears to find a new solution to a new problem.

- Our older kids start taking distance courses or serious academic co-op classes and suddenly we are not their sole teacher -- and maybe we're surprised to see them working much harder for this outside teacher.... the outside class might seem more "real" than "just homeschooling" with mom. Sometimes this shift to other teachers is wonderful, but sometimes it can be a tad hard on us!
- Many of you may find that the grandiose plans you set for your kids at the beginning of the year in your official objectives sent in with your affidavit need to be..... well... maybe the best word is downsized. Maybe you'd set your sites a tad too high, and reality is hitting now and you're realizing that maybe you all will need to be satisfied with more modest goals. It's wonderful to set high goals and to make sincere efforts to reach them □ but sometimes we need to just shift to "OK" and be satisfied, at least for right now. This has happened to me once again with our science program this year – we're in the process of deciding which of the many goals we'll actually hold to to call it "enough" (and I'm planning on tying this in to when Hannah can take her driver's test too... ). I'll have to let other families be the shining stars in science fairs and original experiments again this year.
- You may find, like a friend of mine, that your son just really isn't doing so hot with that upper level math book you were able to borrow free from a good homeschooling friend....maybe it's time to shift gears and try a completely different approach, at least for a while. It's scary and you're not sure you'll learn -- or like! -- this new approach. A shift like this can look as intimidating as the idea of starting up our new car at a stop sign in the middle of a steep hill, with annoyed drivers tooting horns with irritation as you attempt to let out the clutch smoothly without slipping back, while giving enough gas not to stall. But hopefully there will be a benefit □ the educational equivalent of the better gas mileage we're getting right now.
- Or maybe one of your kids is really dragging their feet on practicing their musical instrument, like Hannah was with piano a number of years ago. Maybe it's time to switch gears and take a break -- and realize that it is no failure to stop an activity that really doesn't bring joy or delight. We all aim to open up a new possibility for our children by offering music lessons -- but at a certain point we all have to be ok with realizing that our kids need to have the right not to continue, too. And you may find happily that eventually your child may shift gears into another musical adventure that suits them much more -- Hannah is now very happily taking voice lessons, and definitely has the loveliest singing voice of anyone in the family, in spite of being probably the least "sing-y" of any of our kids when young. You just never know. She's also taught herself the basics of folk guitar, and helps lead singing at youth services at our synagogue regularly. And she even still likes to sit down at the piano every now and then just to have fun with the instrument, improvising wonderful intricate melodies and picking out songs she knows. I'm glad we didn't stick with piano lessons -- we might have missed these other wonderful options.
- Or maybe you need to shift gears when you hear that your local school will no longer allow participation in an activity. One good friend of mine found that taking part in the high school orchestra was not going to be permitted, which was very disappointing after a positive experience in the middle school music program. However, the family opted to shift gears and look for other community options -- and their daughter is now the only high school student playing in a local community symphony, and she is having a wonderful time with this adult group. The level of performance is high, the music inspiring, and there's none of the high-security checking of her cello case each time she arrived for practice, as happened at the public school.

- Maybe you became a volleyball coach for your son's volleyball team... but now he's off in the Air Force. What do you do? Maybe like one homeschool dad I know, you continue coaching, realizing that your son opened up a whole new field of community involvement for you -- this is just something you love to do, even without one of your own kids involved.
- When our oldest heads off to college, or gets married, we have a real shift in the whole family structure. The older kids no longer have a physical space in your home in the same way -- which opens up new possibilities and new shifts in how everyone else uses your rooms. And sometimes this comes full circle. Jesse, our oldest, hadn't had a "room" in the house for years -- until this past year, when I realized that he and his wife could really benefit from using our old downstairs "project room" (that is, our old "school room") for their office and sewing rooms. They live right next door to us on our farm, but their small cottage was bulging at the seams since the birth of their second child, little David (almost one-year-old, cute as a button!). Jesse's office in their house was really needed as a children's play room (their "project room"), and Patricia was finding it really challenging to sew in her little corner of their kitchen. That meant that Hannah shifted her schooling space up to her bedroom -- something she'd been wanting to do for over a year, but that I'd been balking about. I'd find myself saying things like, "You can't switch your desk up to your room -- after all, there's that big shelf of old National Geographics in there, and it can't move!" Well, while I was away helping my elderly mother for a month last winter, Jesse and Hannah moved everything -- and I came home to a complete switch in rooms, and loved it. And six months later I (gasp!) even recycled most of the old National Geo's.... I had to admit that if we hadn't cut them up for science or geography poster projects yet, we probably wouldn't ever.
- Maybe you have been leading homeschooling group classes in your area for a good while, and you've really enjoyed doing this -- it's been energizing work, and gives you a real sense of fulfillment, and it meant that your own kids had positive group classes and activities to take part in. Now folks are assuming you'll still be doing this after your youngest graduates.... and you're wondering what your decision should be. Maybe you won't be able to lead things for free anymore, or maybe you'll need to cut back, or maybe you'll decide you are just ready to move on to other things as your own kids get older -- you're just not quite sure at this point. You got your hand on that gear shift, but aren't yet sure which direction to move it to.
- Maybe you no longer have little ones that you are homeschooling, and you are realizing that now you have time to take on some outside work. I know many homeschooling mothers who have found that this can be a special time to give something back to the homeschooling community -- they can now offer to lead in-depth classes in the subject areas they really love, they can become an evaluator, or they can serve as a mentor to beginning homeschoolers. Some mothers have found that the volunteer work they may have done to help "trade" for special classes for their kids now turns into a paying job, like it did a mother I know whose three children all took intensive ballet lessons 6-days a week for many, many years. Now that her kids have all graduated (and two really are professional ballet dancers!), this mother is now working for the ballet school, helping manage various tasks for the company. Another parent started writing little articles for her local newspaper about homeschool group activities in their area -- and now that both sons have graduated, she is a paid staff reporter. These parents shifted gears into a new career for themselves, and homeschooling led them there.

Shifting gears isn't always smooth -- we all have some stalls, or some times when we all do like I did the other day of trying to shift from 5th to 2nd.... without going through 4th and 3rd as intermediary steps! Or we try to start at that uphill stop sign while still in 2nd gear instead of first. We need to give ourselves some time to get used to the new shifts in our lives and in our homeschooling, as we and our kids grow. We also need to be not too afraid of tackling that challenge when it comes -- given some practice time, some shifting of our attitudes, and learning some new techniques and skills, and we'll soon be on our way... in a good new direction!