

Thoughts on Homeschooling Families Dealing with Sad Times

by Susan Richman

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It's evaluation season as I write, and I've already met with about 120 children so far, with about 50 more to go. But right now I'm not at home meeting with children at my extra dining room table, leafing through colorful portfolios full of original writings, photos of activities, and lists of field trips and engaging books read-aloud together. Instead I'm sitting in the lovely and calm private room of the *Hospice of the Golden Isles of Georgia* facility, where my 89-year-old mother lays comfortably in a bed, growing closer to dying. She had been living independently, in her own home, until she had a terrible fall three weeks ago-- after over two weeks in the hospital, we were able to move her here, to be calm and well-cared for until her final resting.

I've been staying with her around the clock, as has my older sister who lives nearby. I've found moments for (slowly!) writing up the evaluation reports for the 19 students I just saw during my recent trip to Harrisburg, in between getting up to check on my mom, smooth her hair, say a comforting word, talk with the Hospice nurses, talk with my sister, talk with my family 1000 miles away, and IM my husband Howard about details for this newsletter. We're pulling this newsletter together all through long distance, with the help of so many of you who've pitched in to get articles to us on time. I was frantically sending out messages to friends to see if they could get us something by this Tuesday, at 1:00pm--when suddenly a wonderful book review came in from a homeschool "alumni" mom who I hadn't heard from for several years, and a mother who had said she'd write a piece about the Envirothon sent in her piece (I'd forgotten about her promise). Prayers get heard in happily unexpected ways. I'm grateful.

This has all made me reflect back on this year, and to think of the many other homeschooling families that I've known who've dealt with very challenging and sad family situations, often involving the death of a close relative-- and even the death of a beloved homeschooling parent. When these sad situations come upon us, we can feel so overwhelmed-- and in the midst of grief we often worry, too, about how the time needed for helping a loved one, or grieving for a loved one who has gone, will affect our homeschooling.

I know two homeschooling families that each lost a parent this year, very suddenly, and several who spent much time this year helping an ailing grandparent through cancer treatments. Another dear family is working through lung cancer treatments-- for a homeschooling father who never smoked in his life. I know a homeschooling family dealing with the sudden diagnosis of leukemia for their youngest child. Obviously homeschooling can't just continue on as planned, or not immediately. Some time needs to be taken off for healing, regrouping, grieving, or for taking care of the sick family member. Daily math lessons may have to be shelved for a while.

Some families have really worried over this needed interruption of their homeschooling-- in the midst of grief, they worry about what the superintendent might say. Maybe they'll be found suddenly "out of compliance" with the law, because they won't have met all of their goals for the year. At best, parents worry over the time they need to spend away from their kids as they visit an ailing grandparent, or deal with the many details after a death--they just don't have the same level of daily interaction with their kids as during the "normal" times. Sometimes sudden long distance travel plans need to be made--like my situation right now, where a mother may literally be many miles away from her homeschooling children. The hope is that everyone is carrying on, but there are worries.

Besides needing to reschedule many evaluations, I had to miss two weddings of dear friends to come down to Georgia in time to be with my mother while she might still recognize that I'd arrived. I also had to email my Advanced Placement US History students to let them know that though the end-of-year AP Party and Square Dance at our farm would still be going on as scheduled, I wouldn't be able to be there to meet them. Fortunately, Hannah, our graduating 12th grader, had already had her evaluation meeting earlier in May, and her portfolio was all assembled and ready to turn in to the superintendent's office--although we'd felt rushed with our early date (we are usually mid-June folks for our own evaluations around here!), now we were grateful that that had all been completed. I would hate to have missed my last child's very last evaluation meeting.

My heart was so grateful as I heard by cellphone from Georgia that my older daughter Molly and her husband had come out to our farm to help get ready for the AP party--Molly took charge of everything, commandeered the final cleanup and the food, planted some flowers wilting in flats, and much more. Molly's husband Boaz worked with our older son Jesse to get all the twinkle lights working once again in our barn so that there would be a properly festive atmosphere for the dance. My daughter-in-law Patricia made sure all of their garage sale donations packed up in the barn were out properly to the sale, so we had room for laying out the potluck dinner and for dancing. Hannah found all my materials for the History Games we typically play at the event, and got everyone organized for them and carried it all out with enthusiasm. Someone else stood in playing guitar for me during the square dance. Everything worked out well--and though I was sad not to be there with everyone, I felt so grateful that there were so many others to take over for me. When each of us really needs help, help arrives.

Many of you may know the warm and welcoming Queen family, of Queen Homeschool Supplies, from various curriculum fairs across the state. When I read on the family's website dedicated to sharing the daily progress of their littlest son's struggle with leukemia in Philadelphia's Children's Hospital (www3.caringbridge.org/pa/jeremiah/), Sandy Queen mentioned that one of her older daughters, a young teen, was also staying with her and her little 3-year-old son, Jeremiah, in the hospital. I'm sure this girl was not doing her typical daily studies while in the hospital. But I think she definitely learned so much more that was so much more important--she learned what family members do when someone is ill and in need. She learned to give selflessly. She learned from her mother's attitude of acceptance of the situation, and she learned how to find out all they could about this illness and its probable course. She learned about the value of prayer, and seeing all of the possible blessings in the very small moments that went well each day--even when some days it was something so small as finally being able to find the one snack food that little Jeremiah wanted, available in the last vending machine they could check in the hospital. She learned to reach out to others on the cancer ward as she got to know the other families

sharing their same journey. I personally think this is more important learning than a month of spelling or science lessons.

One homeschool girl I know very well, Olivia Grugan, was able to take part in her regional National History Day competition less than two months after the death of her beloved father. One thing that sustained her in this effort, which was incredibly hard for her, was that she knew her *father* would have wanted her to continue with this project. She astonished herself by placing first in her region, qualifying for state level competition, where she also did very well. She was doing a dramatic monologue on the life of Nellie Bly, investigative reporter and marathon world traveler of the late 19th century. She found that throwing herself into acting enabled her to feel healed, for at least a bit. Gradually returning to her more normal schooling work also became part of the long healing process for her, and her strong social network of friends, both locally and through her AP online course, was a help as she re-entered the world. She was helped too by being in touch with several other homeschoolers who had experienced similar losses--she didn't have to feel so all alone in her grief. The larger community she was a part of, as well as her very close family, helped sustain her.

Sometimes I try to gently remind families going through these very difficult situations, who worry about how their homeschooling will fare during the crisis, that *even if* their children were in school, there would still be a major impact. Their kids would probably have fallen behind if in school--but there might not have been the flexibility to catch up during summer, or the chance to just readjust priorities and realize which things could safely be left out of the year without undue ramifications. After all, many of us set huge goals for each year--our plans can usually take quite a bit of judicious pruning and still be pretty good. One single mom I know spent most of one year living in a small apartment in Pittsburgh with her son and mother during each week, close to the hospital where her ailing mother received her chemotherapy treatments. They'd return home to the country each weekend. They learned to pack up basic homeschooling supplies in a box for the city, and to read and study wherever they could. Her son learned greater independence and personal responsibility, and they all made it through the year--including the grandmother. It might not have been the year to make papier mache puppets for some creative unit study extravaganza, but it was a very responsible year nonetheless. And sometimes these crises teach us that that is often good enough.

Sometimes these crises mean a whole change in future schooling plans. A mother may need to take on fulltime work, and there is no viable choice but sending the children to school. My experience has been that kids always understand the reality of these decisions--they know when there is no choice, and when what is needed is for them to be brave and cooperative and as positive as possible about the new shift. They generally rise to the occasion and do very well in their new schools. Other families, in different situations, are able to work out ways to continue homeschooling, sometimes through using more outside supports--online classes, cyber schooling, local mentors, or other homeschooling families willing to help out in major ways. Sometimes working to drastically simplify their lives helps make continuing homeschooling possible. Usually lots of soul-searching is involved, and each family works out what is best for their situation--and the rest of us can be most helpful sometimes by respecting and supporting whatever decision a family comes to at this time.

Each day I receive an email with an uplifting quote from Rabbi Zelig Pliskin, known for his helpful books on developing positive character qualities. Today I received a quote from his new book, *THANK YOU! Gratitude: Formulas, Stories, and Insights*. He recommends that people try, for at least one day, to answer everyone who asks about how they are doing, by saying, "I am full of gratitude today." This made me think of all I was grateful for today, as we are here with my mother in Georgia. We're grateful for this warm, welcoming Hospice, where people are fully treasured and treated with dignity and love right up to their last minute--and after. Where families are welcomed and counseled and helped, along with the dying patient. I'm grateful for the many people who developed cellphone technology so I can readily keep in touch with my family--even with my daughter Hannah as she flew off to Wisconsin while I was gone. I'm grateful that when I turn on my laptop here in the Hospice, I'm instantly online with their wireless network--this has made it possible to be in touch with Howard for this newsletter. I'm grateful for my family back at home and for how they've carried on in my absence, taking care of hundreds of little details that I was not able to wind up before I headed off very suddenly, when it became clear that coming five days later would very likely be too late. I'm grateful for all of those who dedicate their lives to working with those who are ill--all the nurses and doctors we've met, and all the support staff people who've been equally kind and helpful. I'm grateful for the example of both my mother's courageous fighting spirit, and for her sweet gratitude for every kindness shown to her while she was in the hospital for two weeks. During the few times my mother has been able to speak since I've been here, she's spent a good part of that time sharing how nice everyone has been, how wonderful all her care has been. She has not been bitter, even when in great pain.

If we can give our kids this lesson of learning to be grateful, even when our lives have taken a turn we never would have hoped for, we've taught them a great deal.