

## Lessons learned from knotweed ... and wild raspberries

from Susan Richman

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One of my favorite books, originally given to me by an art teacher in high school, is Antoine de St Exupery's delightful book *The Little Prince*-- or to those of you who may have met this book in an intermediate-level French class, *Le Petit Prince*. It's the lyrical story of a small prince from a tiny asteroid, who leaves his home and eventually lands on our earth, only to meet up with a downed pilot in the Sahara Desert. I read the book aloud to my kids in English, and they all later tackled it in French. One of my favorite parts of the story has always been the Little Prince's description of how difficult it was to deal with the *baobabs* on his planet-- an invasive plant that could look innocent enough on first sprouting, but which if not checked by daily pulling, would in short order literally take over and split apart his tiny world. The narrator of the story includes a luminescent illustration of the possible damage that could occur, with the strict admonition to take care of your *baobabs* daily, when they are small and inoffensive, and when pulling them up takes only minutes.

I've often thought about this idea of *baobabs*, and often seen them in metaphorical terms as the seemingly innocuous habits we all might have-- say, like hitting the snooze alarm 20 times in the morning, or not making the bed every day, or not doing the dishes daily. It takes lots of very regular vigilance to keep these bad habits in check. And as homeschooling parents, we may be especially aware of similar bad daily habits in our children-- we may notice their tendency to drop pencils into sofa cushions, or to let themselves get readily distracted from a math lesson by noticing a strange bird flitting by outside the window. Or they may persist in spelling "creatively" way beyond the time when it's cute and endearing, or they may start books but not finish them, or they may forget to fill in the log of studies that they know is supposed to be their daily responsibility. We all are filled with many types of *baobabs*, and how we react to them can greatly affect our happiness as homeschoolers.

Over the last year I've begun attacking a very literal *baobab*, right in my own back yard. I've been working to curtail the spread of the highly invasive plant Japanese knotweed-- and while spending many minutes pulling out new shoots, hauling away dead bamboo-like stalks to burn, or shoveling out the ubiquitous root systems, I've been thinking more about this issue of how *baobabs* are like our less noble traits-- and how we can react better to them. Call this perhaps, *Lessons learned from Knotweed*.

I've made some significant progress, too-- the small area I began clearing of knotweed last year, with the help of my little granddaughter Sarah, then 4 years old, was much easier to "tame" this year. I only needed to occasionally pull out a small sprout to keep it in line. The much larger areas I took on this year are more stubborn, but progress has been made there too-- other plants are now having a chance to grow once again, my stone path by our house is not overshadowed by towering knotweed shoots, I won't have to haul away huge dried stalks this fall, and with dedicated time-on-task, I can re-clear the area in about a half-hour.

I even looked up knotweed on the Internet, and found out there are organizations dedicated to knotweed eradication-- and even some sites with recipes for eating the young shoots. Turns out the weed can taste rather like rhubarb, and can be used in similar ways. It might make for an interesting science fair project to investigate how this weed has spread around Europe and America and what is effective in trying to curtail its invasion. Possibilities for study abound-- I could envision winning science fair project on battling this baobab of mine.

But all this focus on knotweed, and the negatives of letting wild plants -- and our own bad habits-- take over our land and our lives started eventually to wear on me. It lacked a parallel focus on noticing the good that also exists in the world-- even the wild plant world.

It was the wild black raspberries beginning to ripen that really shifted my focus. I have happy memories of going out with all my kids and collecting berries over many years-- we have lots of wild patches all around our farm, that migrate and shift over time and pop up in new places, perhaps thanks to birds or to some other inadvertant planters. Some people might view these free-ranging raspberries as baobabs too-- but I just feel they are wonderful little surprises, waiting for me to notice.

This year in particular I began spotting many new raspberry patches. It was as if my eyes were suddenly opened to possibilities that had been right in front of me, but that I just couldn't see-- reminding me of the Prophets talking about people who have eyes, but who can not see. Even after I was full into berry-searching, and thought I'd looked everywhere, I'd suddenly come upon a patch that was extensive, not at all far from my house, and bursting with even more luscious little fruits than the last one. I felt blessed, and I've even put away a good bit of raspberries for the winter (reminding me of my children's old favorite book *Blueberries for Sal*), and Howard and I have been enjoying fresh raspberries with our morning yogurt and granola for several weeks now.

And I began thinking that this is indeed another part of our homeschooling "eyes" that we need to keep open-- while keeping an eagle eye out for possible baobabs in ourselves and our kids, we also need to keep an eye open for the surprise berry patches in our days learning with our children. We could ignore our kids' delightful ideas and unique ways of seeing things. We might brush aside as unimportant their original drawings, their playful writings, their musings over the meaning of numbers, their tries at reading something on their own, in our focus on using a prepared curriculum, or just through being too busy or distracted to notice.

I remember many times when my kids were growing up when I shifted gears in a day in response to something they had initiated-- and I'm glad I noticed those "wild raspberries" and let them flourish. Once Jesse was having a terrible time concentrating on our math lesson-- his attention kept drifting to something inside his desk. He seemed to be jotting down notes on a scrap of paper. When I finally called him on this, and asked what in the world he was doing, he apologized sincerely, saying that he had been, well, thinking about a possible newspaper that he might publish... It would be called *The Richman Family Observer*, and he'd be the editor, and Jacob and Molly would be staff members... and well, he'd been writing out a little invitation to a meeting to get it all started, but he'd stop, he'd do the math lesson, he was sorry.

I rather suddenly remembered that I *really* had to do some dishes in the kitchen-- maybe he could just call his meeting right then if he wanted to? Jesse was relieved and grateful-- and the *Richman Family Observer* became a loved publication in our home for several years, and a wonderful tool for motivating their writing. Many of their pieces from the little paper are included in our book *Writing From Home: a Portfolio of Homeschooled Student Writing*, in a chapter on family newsletters. My eyes were opened to the value of this surprise "interruption" in our lessons--and I'm grateful for this. The fruits of this project were sweet indeed, and worth much more than our work on a stale textbook math lesson that day.

Or I remember the year when Hannah (who is heading off to Brandeis University near Boston this fall) was a baby, and Jacob was seven and an emerging writer. We'd begun taking part in our first Writing Club with a few other homeschooling families, and so Jacob was writing something regularly to share with the small group. He often chose to write about Hannah and what she was doing and what she was possibly thinking. After awhile I was worried that he was just getting into a "rut"-- he seemed to have no other topic he wanted to write about. It was looking, perhaps, like a baobab of sorts-- and that maybe I should 'uproot' this and encourage other topics to flourish as well.

Instead, I flipped my way of looking and started seeing maybe with "raspberry" eyes-- and I instead suggested that maybe he had the beginnings of a little book here. We gathered together all his scattered writings, he began making charming and earnest illustrations of each vignette, came up with the delightful title *A Baby Learns What is What*-- and eventually had a book that the *Growing Without Schooling* bookstore sold for quite a few years, and that we also carried in our little catalog. Jacob made quite a bit of money for a young child on this little publication-- but with a different attitude on my part, it might never have come to light.

Or I think of the many stories shared with me by the evaluation families I see each spring, where I hear about parents noticing the unique and maybe surprising strengths of their children. One family has a somewhat shy daughter who seemed a bit in the shadow of a very bright and capable older sister. The younger one began rankling at continuing to take part in the same activities and classes as the older one, even though the girls were best of friends. Rather than viewing this as a baobab, as a sign that they needed to pressure her to continue on with these activities she was no longer enjoying, they began instead listening to this daughter. She wanted to join a local drama class, something her sister had never done. She flourished in this brand new activity, loving the challenge, gaining real courage and absolutely blossoming on the stage. The family was so grateful they allowed their eyes to be opened to this new option. It's enriched their lives.

So, my hope is that as homeschooling parents we can keep a sense of balance between the *baobabs* and the wild raspberries in our lives-- they both exist, and they both need to be noticed. And though my legs and arms have surely gotten scratched when searching out those hidden berries, it's definitely been worth it.