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Our Daughters Helped Plan Their Education

In September, when Juniper was six, Laura started teaching her to read. Before Christmas, Juniper read well enough to read C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* on her own.

She worried toward the end of the book. When Laura responded to the absence of Juniper's usual ebullience by asking what was on her mind, she said "I might not be old enough to read this book."

Laura asked her if she had gotten to the part where Aslan dies, and Juniper said "Yes," obviously relieved to know she was not alone in dealing with this hard part of the book.

Laura said, "You'll like the way the book ends. The mice free Aslan. He comes back to life."

Juniper relaxed and ate dinner. After dinner, she finished reading the book. She was happy with the way it ended. She set it aside and picked up the second book of *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

At first, we didn't realize Amanda, four years old, had learned to read by sitting at the kitchen table with Laura and Juniper and listening to Juniper's lessons. Since it was Juniper's class, Amanda hadn't spoken up when she had questions, so she still had frustrating limitations on her ability to read.

When we learned that Amanda was reading, Amanda realized her frustration at not being able to read more complex books didn't have to be just the way the world works for four-year-olds. Her adults would help, immediately. She was delighted.

Spring warmed our mountains. I took care of Rouse brothers' hay and cattle ranch in the Blue Mountains of Northeastern Oregon then. We lived on the ranch in a ramshackle and thoroughly-loved old house. In spring sunshine, I irrigated meadows, fixed fence, and worked in our garden. Many places I worked, I took Amanda with me, in the pickup or on the back of the small motorcycle furnished to get around the ranch.

I cut grass and mud from a ditch across mountain meadow with a sharp shovel or spliced barbed wire up the ridge from the meadow, in the edge of

forest. Amanda moved with me, sat on a rock, on a ditch bank, on a log, on the ground, or stood and read her book in sunshine and asked me for help when she needed it. She learned rapidly. Learning to read by sounds of the alphabet combined well with her eagerly-growing, speaking vocabulary and gave her the ability to discover many new reading words on her own. By summer, she read complex books with little help.

At the age I read over and over again about Dick, Jane, and Spot in a world of white picket fences that I knew nothing about and began to get bored with school, Juniper and Amanda explored mythology and began to understand religious symbolism that C.S Lewis and other authors worked with.

Juniper and Amanda learned that people write plays, so they read and acted out plays. They wrote their own plays and acted them out. They recruited anyone available to act in their productions. As Charon, I rowed my boat (my guitar case) across the River Styx (our living room rug), while Juniper rode along as Orpheus on his way to the underground to free Eurydice when we performed the play Juniper wrote. We were careful with my guitar case.

Books are fun, so why not write books, illustrate and bind them? Amanda and Juniper both have boxes full of writings and drawings that started to accumulate early in their literacy.

Once they knew how to read, our daughters pursued their own education avidly, Shakespeare, Sherlock Holmes, Joseph Campbell's writing on mythology, Winnie the Pooh books, *Charlotte's Web*, the writings of J.R.R. Tolkien, and much more, a box full of books every time we drove to town and the library.

In the beginning, I thought we should have no structured classes, but we should try to provide whatever learning materials our daughters' interests demanded. We had read that the state of Idaho took children away from their parents because the family didn't meet state standards of education. Laura insisted that Amanda and Juniper study the subjects studied in public schools enough to keep up with Oregon's standards for their age level. An Oregon law saying that anyone over 13 miles from the nearest public school was not subject to mandatory schooling protected us from legal action for not having our children in public school, but legislators might change that law. I wouldn't work as caretaker of that ranch forever.

We might move to where the thirteen mile law didn't help us.

Through the winter, Laura and our daughters held classes that Laura designed to keep Amanda and Juniper up with public schools. The classes rarely took two hours of each day. Juniper and Amanda liked the classes. They thought some structured learning was fun, as long as it didn't get boring nor interfere too much with the rest of their education and their time to play.

We had no television. Juniper and Amanda read widely and deeply. As they read and learned, their play became a broader and deeper expression of their understanding of the universe.

We trusted our daughters' judgement. They threw out all color-inside-the-lines material very early in their education. "We don't need that. We draw and color our own pictures." Indeed, they did, creatively. All repetitive exercises and most reviews of material already learned followed color-inside-the-lines pictures into the stove. We never had a spelling lesson, and we didn't talk much about the structure of our language. Our daughters learned correct spelling and literate structure of the language by reading, writing, speaking, and listening to others speak.

Our family's education was and is undergirded with the knowledge that we are born with intelligence, that we are guided by the intelligence that created and powers us and the universe. We guided our daughters and helped them find materials they needed to learn. Their interests and ambition led them to nearly everything they needed for a well-rounded education.

Laura and I learned from the learning going on in our family.

We took frequent breaks from classes. We fed cattle for a week or two after snow began to fall each year, before workers from the home ranch moved the cattle to lower elevation. Laura drove the tractor, while Amanda, Juniper and I threw hay from the wagon to hungry cattle.

Christmas season and new year, classes dwindled or disappeared. Preparation for birthdays took some time. Grandma Leslie, Laura's mother, needed a visit to her home in California, and we needed to see her. We took breaks from structured classes for the celebration of life, of family, of religion. Regardless of what else we were doing, we continued to build an education in life, in love, in family, in living in the world.

Some people gave Laura strong advice in favor of the public schools

and against home schooling. I was usually able to reassure her. “Are your daughters literate? Are they educated? Do they love life and love learning? Are they happy?”

Amanda and Juniper each attended one year of public high school because they wanted to see what it was like. Juniper started college after her junior year in public high school. Amanda graduated from public high school and then went to college.

Juniper graduated from college with honors. Amanda graduated with highest honors. When they went into the world on their own, they remained rooted in strongly positive values. They stayed tuned to family and aimed toward morally informed achievement. They, and we, have strong respect for the divine force that powers the universe and all the manifestations of that force in forms of life and beauty.

The education of our family isn't finished. We all still learn, much more separately now than when Juniper and Amanda first started to read. Even that achievement of independent direction for each of us was part of what we worked for from the very beginning of our family and our family's education.