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Dear Teacher: Don't Split Kindling

Most of the snow melted that year in Whitney Valley, and Pat moved into Cow Camp, about two miles down the gravel road from us, with his three horses. On a horse, he patrolled national forest rangeland for the local cattlemen's association, watched for cows in trouble, checked fences, and moved cattle from grass grazed short to better grazing. He stopped to visit Laura, Juniper, Amanda, and me whenever he was close to our house, and we soon became friends.

Friend or not, I thought his first words that sunny autumn day, were a verbal attack aimed at me, and he startled me.

Laura and I were raising two active daughters, Juniper and Amanda, nine and seven then. We kept the responsibility for their education, and ours, within the family. I irrigated the 1200 acre ranch, took care of the fences, helped cut and bale hay, and bolstered our income by cutting and selling beetle-killed lodgepole pine for firewood. As much as I could, I participated in the schooling that progressed in our home, and I took care of the garden, with some help from our daughters. I wrote fiction, poetry, essays, and songs, and I sporadically tried to expand what accompaniment for my songs I could produce from my guitar.

Laura did most of our cooking and household management, with some help from our daughters and from me. She was principal and the main teacher in our family school. She tried to reserve enough time for a solitary walk every day, to study nature all around us in our wild mountain place of meadows and forests. She did well at regularly-scheduled spiritual study, for improvement of her own understanding and to provide a spiritual center for our family.

Most of our time went toward care and improvement for our family, and we found that use of our time very rewarding.

Winters in Whitney Valley always brought nights of forty degrees below zero and occasionally, even colder nights. We used two wood-burning heaters in our house, and we cooked on a wood-burning stove. Through the summer, I cut, hauled, and stacked our winter's supply of dry wood for the heaters. I supplied wood for the cookstove every day.

Laura walked out on the front porch and watched me splitting kindling with the small double-bitted axe. She said, "You make that look easy."

"It is easy. You want to learn?"

Laura knew how to fill kerosene lamps, trim the wicks, polish the chimneys, build fires and feed wood to the stoves and adjust air in and smoke out to keep them burning right. She thought maybe she should know all the processes of our living, so she said, "Sure," and she came out to where I stood chunks of lodgepole pine on the splitting block and reduced them to kindling, and she started to learn.

When Pat drove his pickup into our driveway, shut off the motor, and climbed down, Laura swung the axe and tried to hit a piece of wood accurately enough to split it. Pat said, "Laura, what are you doing?"

"I'm learning to split kindling."

Pat spoke sharply. "Don't you do it. You put that axe down right now, and you leave that to Jon." He walked forward and shook his finger at us. "If you learn how to split kindling, times will come when you're splitting kindling instead of teaching your daughters or taking care of the house or having your daily walk or your regular study. You don't know how to do it now, so Jon will do it, no matter what else he has to do. He might not mean to load more work on you, but he'll be in the timber cutting wood, and he'll think, well, Laura can split the kindling and get the wood in for the dinner fire, so I'll just stay out here and cut a little more wood, or he's working calves with the crew in the corral, and he won't show up come splitting kindling time, and pretty soon, you have another regular chore. If something happens to him, you'll always have someone around who can split kindling for you, or if you have to, you can learn when you have to learn."

I thought, *He's right. How come he sees that right away, and I never even thought of it, and neither did Laura? I'm plenty busy with my work, but my schedule is flexible. Stuff she does is the foundation for our family and for our daughters' education, and it fills her time.*

We had enough kindling, so we went into the house and ate dinner, Laura, Juniper, Amanda, Pat, and I.

I kept thinking. Our somewhat isolated way of living meant we didn't know very many people, but among most of the people I knew, the women learned to do the chores and were stuck with the work, just like Pat said. The men worked hard, but they had more freedom to fit entertainment into their

schedules and to do work that allowed them to be away from the family and house and out on the meadows or in the woods, where they wanted to be. They had a time in the day when their work was finished, and the rest of the day was for relaxation.

In ranching families, the women worked with the men moving cattle, branding and castrating calves, fixing fence, cutting and baling hay. When the day's work was done, everybody went back to their houses, and the men sat down and talked, drank beer, and watched television while the women fixed dinner and took care of the house and children. That seemed to be a strong cultural pattern, but it wouldn't work for our family if we wanted a good education for our daughters and a strong, effective family, and that is what we wanted.

Juniper and Amanda were fascinated by Pat, an aging cowboy who ate dinner with us, who owned beautiful horses, who knew how to laugh and how to tell good stories about his adventures riding in nearby forests and meadows. I ate dinner, joined in sharing friendship, and wondered where the old cowboy developed his sharp perception of cultural patterns in the family. I was grateful to him for his readiness to give advice, because I realized once again that the path we traveled as a family was different from most and required close attention to our goals and close attention to making sure we didn't develop habits that didn't support our goals.

Through our years of raising our daughters. I made sure Laura rarely had to fill lamps or polish lamp chimneys. I did a significant part of the teaching for math and English, but my most important contribution to our family's education was to do all I could, including always providing plenty of kindling, to make sure Laura, Juniper, and Amanda had uninterrupted time and a warm house for the schooling they worked on together.