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Family Cohesion on the Ranch

When Juniper reached the age when she would have started school, we took care of a remote ranch in northeastern Oregon. Getting to school on the rambling rural bus, being in school all day, and then getting home would have taken twelve hours. We weren't willing to commit her to that long a day.

We had already started her education ourselves. When she was six, Laura helped her learn to read, and Juniper launched into an avid reading career that has rarely slowed down since. Amanda, four then, listened in on the reading lessons and learned enough to read simple books. She expressed an intense desire to gain access to more difficult books. I worked with her, in between and during ranch work and garden work. Within a year, she could read almost anything she was interested in reading, and she had made a good start at learning to write.

Juniper and Amanda are sixteen and fourteen now. Tests required of home schoolers by the state show our approach to education has been academically successful. It has also helped build a firm foundation for a cohesive family. Our interests center around the home, the family, and the creative interests each of us pursues. We have no television. We pursue enough interests, writing (all of us), drawing and painting (some of us), music (all of us), reading (all of us), a deep and active interest in the outdoors and wildlife (all of us), that we never have time for television.

My jobs have not been full time, partly because I was severely injured in a highway accident, and it was many years before I recovered enough to work anywhere near full time.

When the owner of the ranch we took care of in northeastern Oregon died, the crew was laid off. We found a part time job caretaking the inlets of a water system for a central Oregon city. It was ideal. We were able to continue our home schooling and to have time together. I was able to complete a book about our ranch experience. After a year and a half at that job, we were offered a job as site managers of a Girl Scout ranch high in Colorado's Rocky Mountains. During our long time of working at jobs with low wages, more and more needs had come up that we had not been able to meet. We were ready for a full time job. I was ready physically, and we moved into the job with enthusiasm.

Our only transportation, a pickup, no longer comfortably contained the four of us, and it was more and more expensive to maintain. We sold the pickup and bought two older cars. We arranged for Juniper to continue with violin lessons in our new area. We helped Amanda buy a piano and get started on lessons. We caught up on buying clothing and other essentials.

We worked that job for twenty-one months. My working hours often far exceeded the scheduled forty per week winter and forty-eight summer. Laura worked twenty hours per week in the winter and ten in the summer. The higher wage was convenient and enjoyable, but we saw that the job cost us irretrievable time together and experiences that couldn't be replaced, once missed.

Our supervisor, aware of our interests and priorities, offered us a position taking care of another ranch. We took the job and made the move, even though it cut our cash income to a third of what it

had been, because it cut our hours to less than half of what they had been. We have been living and working here for seven months now. None of us regrets the change. Amanda said, "I feel like I have my parents back." Juniper agreed.

Our home education is going very well. I've gone fishing with Juniper. We've all worked together in the garden. Some afternoons, Amanda and Juniper and I get into the car, and Juniper drives, practicing for her driver's test. Amanda and I hiked up the ranch and found a dense area of wild columbines. Soon after, we took Laura up to show her the flowers.

We have time for leisurely mornings, when all of us work together to prepare breakfast, clean up afterward, and linger to talk about what we've dreamed or what we're thinking about. We sit around the table after dinner and talk. Juniper or Amanda reads to Laura as she works in the kitchen or Laura reads to them as they work.

Juniper, Amanda, and I take a volleyball out in the driveway and hit it back and forth, learning. Next time they go to a gathering of teens at the local church, when all play volleyball, they won't feel odd person out from no experience with the sport. Amanda and I work together with guitars. She's learning to play the instrument, and we sing together. We talk about going, taking Juniper with her violin, and Laura with her voice and singing in the old part of town in Fort Collins, with cases open on the sidewalk, for coins. We are saying it lightly, and yet it is an experience we would like to try, and not just for the possible coins.

Juniper's and Amanda's creative efforts receive audience in the family, when they want them to, and they didn't, much, when we worked full time. Laura has begun to work on a long-held ambition,

writing, and has sold two essays since we moved. I've been able to continue writing essays and to sell some of them. I've organized and sent out a book of my short fiction. I've revised the book about our northeastern Oregon experience, and I've begun two other books. In shorter words, we are usually able to give the family and the individuals in the family priority over the need to make money.

Is our existence ideal? No. Sometimes financial pressure can be intense. When we decided to make the move, I had been selling enough writing regularly that we thought we could count on at least two hundred and fifty dollars a month additional income from writing. My average went up for a while after we moved. Then the car we use (the other is inactive, without insurance) suffered a series of mechanical problems that cost us a thousand dollars in less than two months. The washing machine quit. A newspaper that had been a dependable source of income had staff changes, and my publications there dwindled, which meant our income dwindled.

But we have what we really need. A house, with utilities paid, is furnished with the job. Our income takes care of food needs, music lessons, and other essentials.

We haven't given our daughters a rich environment in material terms. Most of our clothing is from second hand stores, and we are pleased with that. None of us is caught up in style. Amanda likes pretty dresses, but she would rather have them cost four dollars from a second hand store than sixty dollars new, because she knows the difference in price can serve other needs better, including giving a small contribution to an effective environmental organization or giving a donation for people who need food.

When I think of enriching children's environment, I don't think of material enrichment. I think of enriching their environment with

love, with the parents' support, teaching, revering the children and being there to help with their needs.

We haven't been able to give our children this and a wealth of material goods, so we chose this. Do we ever regret our choice? Was it too much of a sacrifice?

No. We love our children, and our children love us. Love has become our environment. We, children and adults, love and grow in love. We teach our children, and we learn so much ourselves, from what we must learn to teach, from what our children learn on their own and then teach us. When we help our children get out into the mountains to experience the wildlife, the flowers, the forests, the freedom of movement, we also have the experiences, and we experience the joy of having them together. Our experience together increases the depth of our experience and the openness with which we receive. There is no guide as effective as a child for bringing one into experience with openness.

Has accepting the responsibility for education of our daughters and ourselves been a sacrifice? No. It hasn't. It's not always the easiest way to live, but it is the most richly rewarding.