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Unspelling

Laura and I read to Amanda and Juniper a lot, starting when they were very young. We progressed rapidly from picture books with short, simple comments to books with more and more complex text. If a book had no illustrations, our daughters listened with rapt attention and filled in vivid visual details from their own imaginations. They had no television to distract them or to blunt their imagination. Their images were their own.

Because they knew myriad treasures were available in books, our daughters were eager to learn to read. When Juniper was six, Laura taught her to read. Amanda learned to read when she was four by listening in on Juniper's lessons. Amanda was frustrated by her limited reading vocabulary, so she stayed close to me as I worked on the ranch we took care of then and as I worked in our garden. She spelled new words aloud to me, and I told her what they were or helped her sound them out and define them.

Juniper and Amanda learned to use our dictionary. In less than a year from when they started learning to read, they could read any book they wanted to read, with only occasional assistance. Amanda and Juniper were as enthusiastic about writing adventures of their own invention as they were about reading everyone else's version of life, so they started writing soon after they learned to read.

Laura and I enjoyed the original spelling we saw when they started writing. We saw "Gaurd," "embarrassing," "exercize," "blugh" (for blue), "dought," (for "doubt"), "way" for "weigh" and "bowtiful," because Amanda asked our friend Jan how to spell "beautiful," and Jan said, "just like beau (meaning boyfriend), and then t-i-f-u-l," but Amanda heard "just

like bow,” since the two words are pronounced the same.

We thought our daughters’ spelling made an interesting comment on the English language, which has inconsistencies in spelling and meaning because English has its origins in several different languages. We decided not to call attention to misspelled words and not to have spelling lessons. We wanted to support their learning with positive reinforcement, without negative criticism.

We taught them reading by phonetics, because learning the sounds of the alphabet allowed us to work closely with them at first and then to turn them loose in the wide world of books. They soon worked their way through books on their own by sounding out words and matching them with their spoken vocabulary or by delving into the dictionary when a word was new to them. Laura and I were available when they needed help beyond what they could find on their own.

As they began writing, their misspellings made good sense, in phonetic terms. “Bare” and “bear” sound the same, and either of the spellings could mean a large, furry wild animal. Reading the words in context shows us the difference between the two words.

Juniper and Amanda continued reading voraciously and writing more and more complex works. Broadening experience with the English language taught them to recognize the words that don’t sound like they look, and we didn’t use their time or ours with what might have become a boring practice, the consideration of words outside of their context in active language. Their spelling straightened out rapidly as their experience with the English language increased, just as Laura and I thought it would.

As they grew, Juniper and Amanda took over more and more of their own education. Laura insisted on staying with some structured curriculum, in an effort to keep them at least abreast of what the students in public school were learning. At first, I argued against this approach, because I thought our daughters’ interests would guide them most effectively

through learning.

We home schooled in Oregon early in the home schooling movement. Only a state law saying that students who lived more than 13 miles from the nearest school were not subject to laws requiring all children to attend public school kept us from having to fight in court for our right to educate our own children. Laura thought that law could be rescinded, or our situation could change, and we would be in the strongest position to defend our approach to home schooling if our daughters could match or exceed what students had achieved in public schools. Since our students harmoniously accepted Laura's approach as long as formal classes in "subjects" didn't break too far into their time for self-directed learning and play, I stopped arguing for my ideas, and our family's education proceeded quite well.

We used very little time, as our daughters grew and learned, to deal with the structure of the language. We didn't teach spelling nor grammar, and we didn't diagram sentences.

Juniper attended her junior year of high school in public school, to see what it was like. Early in the year, she said, "I can achieve more academically at home, but I do need to develop social skills and public school might be a place I can do that."

Juniper was disappointed in the possibilities for developing social skills in public school. "Five minutes between classes gives you time to wave at your friends. No talking in class. If you socialize much after school, you're going to miss the bus. They need to have classes in developing social skills. Then the kids could settle down in academic classes and get something done." She earned excellent grades and stuck with public school through the academic year, then skipped her senior year as not worth pursuing in a public high school and went directly into college.

Amanda, two years younger than Juniper, started public high school that same year as a sophomore, attended about half the year, then returned

to home schooling, primarily because public school used so much of her time that she had little time left for her own music, drawing, painting, and writing. She attended public school her senior year of high school and stuck with it primarily because she was privileged to work with two inspired teachers, one who taught art and pottery, and one who taught honors humanities. She earned excellent grades.

Amanda and Juniper went to and graduated from college.

Amanda graduated with highest honors. While she attended college, she helped pay her way by teaching other students how to write more effectively. She has published fiction and poetry in small magazines and essays in The Home Forum page of *The Christian Science Monitor* newspaper. Juniper graduated from college with honors, served an internship at *The Christian Science Monitor* and published essays in the paper during her internship and afterward.

Now, as I struggle to publish several of my books, Amanda sometimes serves as my adviser, checks the structure of my work, proofreads and offers advice on how well I've achieved what I mean to achieve with my writing. Her spelling and her ear for correct grammar are unerring, and she achieves acute understanding of complex meanings in all her reading.

Part of Juniper's job now is writing, and her command of the language is excellent.

One of the most important lessons the four of us learned about learning was that trusting our students' abilities and intelligence, basing our approach to learning in love and respect, and allowing our students most of the responsibility for their learning works very well and establishes habits of learning that will last all our lives.