LOVE THE JOURNEY

HOMESCHOOLING:
PRINCIPLES TO PRACTICES

MARCIA SOMERVILLE
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Homeschooling:
Principles to Practices

Lampstand Press, Ltd.
Kingsport, TN
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MARCIA SOMERVILLE

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This book is dedicated to the mothers and fathers who choose the road less traveled because they love their Lord and their children.

May it be a blessing to you, chiefly by helping you to love the journey itself.
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Some Words of Thanks

Like so many of my other writing projects over the last twenty years or so, this one began at someone else’s request. In this case, it was my son, Mike, who wanted me to write a book to young homeschooling mothers who were just starting their homeschool journeys. It was conceived as a companion component to his new program for Kindergarten-aged children entitled Tapestry Primer.

Also like so many of my other writing projects, I was surprised where the Lord took it. I was amazed to see how much He had worked in my life over the years through homeschooling, and (consequently) how long the book grew to be!

Another parallel circumstance with previous projects was the humbling nature of writing. One feels quite vulnerable when expressing personal insights or opinions, revelations that have worked for oneself, and teachings that have arrested one’s attention. An author becomes so aware that she is going out on a limb when expressing these things, and she has no real assurance that her words will help others. Writing this book has been more of a leap of faith (if anything) than writing curriculum. At the end of the day, my prayer is that you will take to yourself whatever is helpful, and think charitably of me for whatever doesn’t seem to ring true.

Finally, this project is like all previous ones in that it never would have gotten done without the help and support of others. Besides Mike and his wife, Jessica, who got me started with pleas and then encouragement, I would like to thank my daughter Christy, who spent weeks reading and minutely smoothing many awkward lines and questioning (or improving) theologically informed constructs. I’m also grateful for my son David for his brilliant cover design. It has been such a blessing over the years to work as a family on our various projects, and this one felt a bit like getting the band back together!

I also need to thank the staff at Lampstand Press for bringing their skills to bear so that this book could come to completion. It would simply not be here without you all; though the readers (and beneficiaries) of this book may not know of your efforts, the Lord knows their worth, and so do I!
Introduction

“Oh, this is nice!” said Jill. “Just walking along like this. I wish there could be more of this sort of adventure. It’s a pity there’s always so much happening in Narnia.”

JILL, IN THE LAST BATTLE

People have used many metaphors for the process of educating and discipling children that we have come to call “homeschooling.” My favorite one by far is that homeschooling is a journey. And by “journey,” I mean a long, extended trip full of adventures, sights to see, and unexpected delights—as well as the inevitable frustrating or hairy trials, the delays, and the trudging.

Somewhere out there on the horizon, one believes that there is a destination point where the journey will end. While we hope it will end well, and that we’ll all make it to the end alive, a long journey is not mostly about getting to our destination. Or, if it is, we will sure miss a lot!

This book is written to women who are disciples of Jesus Christ and are new to homeschooling. It is not a “how to teach your kids from soup to nuts” manual. Nor is it a theoretical book: my husband, my six children, and I have actually made this journey, and we have enjoyed fellowship with many others who have as well! My experience has been that the homeschooling journey is worth the effort, and I’d like to do what I can to help you to start yours well!

What this book is, or is trying to be, is a book that helps you to find (and define in your own words) the principles behind wise homeschooling practices. It’s a book about ways to be intentional, purposeful, and Christ-centered as you sit in your house, and as you walk by the way, as you lie down, and as you rise to serve your family, day after day. As you read it, picture yourself sitting across from me in some delicious setting, where I have all the time in the world to share encouragement, wisdom, and exhortation with you as an older woman who has been down this road.

It wasn’t my idea to write this book. My now-adult kids alternately bugged and sweet-talked me into it. As the publication deadline loomed nearer, I have dragged my feet more and more. I know that not everything that I’ve learned on my particular
journey translates to every other woman reading this book. So, I pray that if parts of this book don’t help or speak to you, please just let my words fall to the ground. At the end of the day, I am just one beggar telling another beggar where I found bread.

As I got further into this project, I did feel that as an older woman I bore a responsibility to share how, in the context of homeschooling, younger women can better love husbands and children, become more self-controlled and pure, take greater delight in working at home, become more kind, and grow in heartfelt submission to husbands, and generally walk worthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ, that the word of God may not be reviled (1 Timothy 2). These goals define the heart of what I learned during my homeschooling journey, and I offer my insights and experiences for your prayerful consideration.

You might ask, “But what about practical stuff, like, about education and teaching?” Yep. That’s here, too. I’ve learned many good things about managing a houseful of kids while teaching academics, choosing the right curricula for my kids, planning lessons and then implementing those plans, etc. They are all a part of the homeschooling journey, and I’m willing to share! Let me briefly explain the way that I’ve organized the book, so you can find your way around.

You may be contemplating homeschooling for a host of reasons, and in Section 1, we’ll get into some of the most common motives that newcomers have. The chapters in this section are all aimed at helping you to identify and refine your reasons for and vision of your journey. Since God created all families unique, there is no one right way to homeschool, but with the bewildering array of choices that a new homeschooler faces, it can be really helpful to know which direction you’re headed. That’s what Section 1 is all about: helping you define your direction.

In Section 2 (Mountaintop Views) I am far less technical. This section offers some of the “big picture” principles that I hold most dear. You’ll find broad theological, parenting, and educational concepts are shared here that inform one’s whole journey from start to finish. As the quotation that opens this section suggests, these are some of the deeper principles (or fruit-producing processes) that can be invisible to those who are just taking to the homeschooling road. I hope that knowing about them serves you as you journey.

The titles of Sections 3, 4, and 5 are all taken from the passage of Scripture that many homeschoolers consider our proof text for the decision to homeschool: Deuteronomy 6:4-9 (ESV).
Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

These sections contain the bulk of the practical tips of this book; the chapters are loosely grouped, and they really may be read in any order. Indeed, to some degree, this whole book is a bit of a potpourri of my life experiences, things I’ve been taught along the way, and gleanings from the Word of God. But enough about me: let’s get back to you!

Somewhere in the mix, I suspect that you’re interested in the homeschooling journey primarily for either the sake of your children’s characters or educational well being (or, for some, both). I hope that you also have a sense that God is calling you to homeschooling. Without His accompanying presence, you could find it a long, weary, and lonely road ahead!

But, let’s suppose you have come to believe that our loving, Heavenly Father is saying to you, “Come this way, Daughter. I have an adventure for you!” What many younger moms really don’t see coming until they’re down the road a piece is that God will use the homeschooling journey to shape you fully as much as He’ll use it to shape your kids. Homeschooling is a sanctifying experience—and broadening, just like travel!

You may not really like adventures much; they can be scary, exhausting, discouraging, and uncomfortable in places. Like Jill, in C.S. Lewis’ The Last Battle, you may wish that you could just amble along with your family and friends, enjoying sunny days and some pretty spectacular scenery. There will be moments like that on the homeschooling journey: good days where laughter, learning, and peace are in perfect balance.

But on many other days, there will seem to be too much going on to really enjoy the journey. Then again, though, rest and relaxation are not the purpose for which God has called you to homeschooling. Not primarily, anyway. If you pursue your
own soul’s development while discipling your children, you’ll find that, by the jour-
ney’s end, you are more Christlike, more dependent on God, and wiser. I promise!
And that, Best Beloved, is the goal. Keeping that goal in the forefront of our minds is hard, but it is what enables us to embrace sanctifying grace and press on for a prize that will never tarnish or fade. It is what enables us to truly love the journey!
Romans 8:28-29 (ESV) is a sure promise that you carry with you as you go:

> And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good,
> for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he fore-
> knew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.

Conformity to Jesus, dependence on God, and faith-forged trust are the fruits that you can savor as you follow God’s leading to homeschool. We may define what would be “good” for us as an easier relationship with a child or being transformed into a superwoman who has no limitations (and no need to depend on God) but that is not how God defines our good. He defines it as something infinitely more precious than even the most flawless environment, relationships, and personal abilities. Did you catch it? God defines our good as us becoming more and more like His Son, our Savior.

For many of us, if we are brutally honest, that’s not an exciting prospect (at first). But think for a moment about Christ: think of all His personal excellences and beauties, His strength and creativity, His sense of humor and kindness and sympathy and … well… it’s a long list! He is simply the most attractive person in the universe, and as you are attracted to Him, it is God’s good pleasure you make you to be actually like Him. The reality is that God’s plans for us are so much grander than our dreams for ourselves.

I’m praying as I write this that what I have included in this book will help you see evidences of God’s sustaining grace, lovingkindness, and good work in you, so that you truly can love your homeschooling journey!
8.

“All things are lawful,” but not all things are helpful. “All things are lawful,” but not all things build up.

1 Corinthians 10:23 (ESV)

Training in Liberty

One of the most fruitful parenting (and educational) paradigms that I ever learned came from Gregg Harris. (You may recognize Gregg’s name, as he is the father of Brett and Alex Harris, co-authors of Do Hard Things.) Back in the 1980’s Gregg criss-crossed the nation while presenting weekend seminars to help give parents a vision for homeschooling. I attended one of these seminars in 1985 and caught my vision for family renewal in the context of homeschooling there.

That weekend, Gregg told a little story to illustrate what he meant by a parenting principle that he called “training in liberty.” He taught that parents need to be aware of how much freedom they are giving their children. As those who keep watch for the good of children’s souls, we need to see to it that they can manage their liberties
well (by which is meant “to the glory of God”). Our freedoms as Christians seem boundless (as the Corinthians whom Paul quoted in the passage on the previous page indicated), but as part of our discipling efforts, we are to teach our children how to choose wisely the things that “build up.”

Since then, Scott and I have applied this paradigm to so many areas of parenting and homeschooling that I’ve long taken any possible opportunity of passing it along. Here’s Gregg’s illustrative story that explains the general principle, as I received it years ago (from memory):

A boy was given a ball for his fifth birthday. It was a big, red, India rubber ball. Immediately after presents were all opened, the boy wanted to play with his ball. So, his mother helped him find his jacket and sent him out into the back yard of their suburban house with very specific instructions.

“Joey,” she said, “You can play with the ball all you want to in our yard. But, if the ball goes over the line into our neighbor’s yard, I want you to please come and get me. I’ll get the ball back for you.”

Mom went into the house, and Joey began to play with his ball. His back yard was a typical, small suburban one. It backed up to similar, small yards on two sides and in the back. There was nothing separating those yards, save for a few bushes here and there and a small difference in the height of the grass that had been more or less recently mowed. Certainly, there was no danger or harm presented to Joey if he crossed those boundaries.

This is what he thought about after the ball went over one of those lines after about ten minutes’ play. There it was… about ten feet over the line. He looked around. The house seemed far away. He would have to go into it, and find his mom, and then wait for her to come. It seemed like it would just be so much easier to go and get his own ball! So, he did.

Mom knew his temptation. She was watching out the window to grab the teachable moment for training in liberty. As soon as Joey stepped across that line to retrieve his ball, Mom was out the door, and calling her errant
son to herself.

“Joey, what did Mommy tell you?” she demanded in a stern voice.

“To come and get you if my ball went over the line?” asked Joey.

“Right. And did you?”

“No, Mom. I didn’t.” Joey mumbled, and felt ashamed.

His mom was firm, but kind. She reminded him of the rule, and said that he really must obey it, even if he did not see a good reason for it. Joey nodded, and ran off to resume playing. Mom went back into the house.

Ten minutes later, the ball had bounced in a different direction, and into another neighbor’s yard. Joey sighed. He looked back at the house and could see Mom doing dishes at the kitchen window—and watching. He sighed again, and reluctantly walked back to get her. She came right out, got the ball, and praised him for a good choice.

Over the next week or two, Joey went out to play almost daily with his beloved ball. At first, it was a tussle to obey his mom’s rule. But, after about a week, he realized that she meant it, and began to be really okay with going to get her, though he still didn’t understand why.

After two weeks, he was cheerfully and reliably obeying the rule. An entire four days elapsed without one infraction, even when Mom was watching from windows where Joey couldn’t see her.

At the end of that week, Mom called Joey to her, and said, “Well done, good and faithful son. You have obeyed me consistently and have called me to get your ball whenever it rolled over a line, though you did not understand why. Now, enter into the joy of your mother! You may now play in the front yard with your ball, where there is a busy street, and danger for you from
cars. *I know that, if your ball rolls out of the yard and into the street, you will come and get me so that I can safely retrieve your ball*!"

There are several principles here that serve parents really well. One is the emphasis that it places on the responsibility of parents to set the amount of liberty that a child exercises. This is our job! And if we do not do it well, the child is given too much liberty and will not be able to manage it. Imagine a child who is told that he can set his own limits for watching TV, or playing with video games? Or that he can entirely manage his own academic lessons from the tender age of five? Or that your young children can all decide when it’s time for bed?

Scott and I got into a situation more than once as parents where we had given a child too much liberty, and they were either overwhelmed, frightened, or sinning regularly as a result. One example of this was the season when Scott was busy with work and told one of our sons to regularly check his math assignments, and then rework those he got wrong, and then bring to his father the ones that he still did not understand. Scott would work with him then. It was three months later that Scott found out that this son had done his homework daily, but never checked it. The work was riddled with errors, and the child was getting into a deep hole of confusion about math concepts as a result.

Or, there was the time when our daughter developed a selfish and arrogant attitude about those who did not, like her, own and love horses. We discovered that she was being rude and dismissive towards all girls in our new church who did not share her passion for riding. After trying to correct her in less drastic ways, we decided that her liberties needed serious adjustment, and determined that we would sell her horse and take her out of riding altogether. It was one of the toughest decisions we ever made as parents, but it was done in love and in light of this principle!

In situations like this, we found that it was sweet to go to a child who was erring and say, “Son (or Daughter), I am sorry. It is my fault. It is my job to control the
amount of liberty you can have so that you can successfully grow into skillful living. In this case, I have given you too much liberty. We need to dial back the amount of freedom you have until you can manage it well!"

You can use this principle of training in liberty in a hundred different ways as you go through your homeschooling journey. When they are little, for instance, you can use it to help your kids learn to keep toys and other belongings in order.

Let’s say that you struggle daily with toys being strewn all over your floors. Start with an analysis: maybe it’s your fault, really. For instance, are there too many toys for them to keep neat because storage is lacking? If so, you need to establish a place for everything, so that everything may be put into its place.

But, now let’s say that there are good places on a shelf for toys, but your daughter owns twenty, and none of them actually make it back to that shelf, day after day. What you do according to the principle of training in liberty is this: you get a big box, label it “Susie’s Toys,” and come to her with your apology about having allowed her too much liberty. With her agreement, you have her choose the five toys that she’ll keep out on the shelf in the upcoming month. You and she put the remaining fifteen toys and dolls into the box and store it.

Over the next month, you train Susie on keeping her five toys neatly on the shelf. Like that mom in Gregg’s story, you have to put in some energy here! You must faithfully teach, correct, and train Susie to keep the five toys in good order. You must define clearly what “good order” means. Is she allowed to leave the toys out when you call her for lunch? Or are you going to require her to put each toy back on the shelf each and every time she is done playing with it? (In our house, we settled on doing a morning and evening pick-up of all toys and school supplies, but you might choose a different standard.)

If she does well during the first part of the monthly training, great. If she does poorly, warn her that she may still have too much liberty, and she’ll have fewer toys to keep track of at the end of the month. If this discipline tempts her to rebel, you’ll need to deal with her heart attitudes towards her authority as a separate issue.

At the end of a month’s time, retrieve the box with Susie’s toys in it. If she’s done well, allow her to exchange any five toys out and to increase her liberty by choosing an additional two toys to take charge of (and play with). If she’s done poorly, reduce the number of toys that she’ll have access to, but allow her to change out and keep out any three toys she chooses.
In all this, you must remain kind, gentle, and encouraging. Putting aside bad attitudes about your authority for now, and focusing attention on the actual skill of keeping belongings in order, your restrictions on her liberty are not to be a punishment for Susie’s lack of skill. You are training her by giving her only as much liberty as she can handle. This is very key to this principle: it is not punitive! Posture yourself as being in her corner, ready to help, and eager to give her ever more liberty.

You can easily see how to use the same principle on a host of life skills that you’ll need to train your children in as the years unfold. Such things as time spent with friends (or, actually, doing any desired activity, like playing video games or attending sports events) while balancing other responsibilities, like chores and schoolwork, leap to mind. In that case, you’ll be limiting the enjoyable activities according to the way your child handles responsibilities.

As your child gets older, issues arise about the kinds of friends teens hang with. If their liberty (choosing their own friends) begins to adversely affect them, then you (the parent) can apologize for giving them too much liberty, and (hopefully with their agreement) scale back the time that they are spending with poorly chosen friends.

This idea applies to choosing music, clothing, or TV programs—if your child isn’t able to choose well and wisely for herself, then you have erred in giving her too much liberty. She has not yet developed enough discernment or self-discipline to handle her liberties well and you, as responsible parents, must scale them back (gently, in the fear of God, and hopefully with the child’s full understanding of this principle and agreement).

Driving or other privileges—visiting friends, babysitting, any kind of job during high school—all these can be governed by the same principle of training in handling liberties: we don’t want to give our kids more than they can responsibly manage! The things that they must do must come first; the things that they wish to do are privileges given to responsible young people.

In all of this, remember: the beauty is that you get to sit far more often in their cheering section than in their critics’ corner! You can (and should) verbally express time and again how eager you are for your children to demonstrate competence in an area so that you can responsibly trust them with more liberty in that area. They need to know that you are for them. Tell them so, and demonstrate it by celebrations of key milestones along the way!

One final word: it’s certainly easier to begin training in liberty—and putting this
approach into both practice and your family’s culture—when children are small. But, young or old, we humans don’t like our wills crossed! And, we tend to doubt that our authority figures are really for us when they are telling us “no.”

Let’s think together about those times when taking away liberties will initially spark anger and/or resentment. You need to be okay with this, in terms of your choices. You stand before God, first and last, as the gatekeeper of your child’s soul, so you’ll need to take some heat sometimes. What helps is to realize that rebellious children are really fighting with God, not you, as long as you’re truly acting on God’s behalf. (Passages like Exodus 16:8, 1 Samuel 8:7, Luke 10:16, and Romans 13:2 clearly demonstrate this truth. You might need to gently remind them of that sometimes.)

Try not to personalize what isn’t personal when your children respond badly to reasonable restrictions. Since they are tussling with the Almighty, be with them in that tussle—not with them against God, but with them in the sense that you are sympathetic to the pain of being a sinful human being who is wrongly beating his tiny fists against the loving lordship of the Master of the universe. As they sense your compassion, love, and identification with their situation, they’ll usually turn to you in their misery after a bit of fussing, as long as you don’t give in.

When we took away our daughter’s horse, she remained angry with us for three years. Her idolatry of horses was deeply entrenched by the time we addressed it. But, over time and especially after she became a Christian, she came to see that we really had acted out of love. Since then, she has often thanked us for what we did, and told us that it was the right choice; she actually told us that we had acted well—she had been in a bad place, and we had rescued her.

It may surprise you to find (especially with children who have been taught this over the years, or are still young) that narrowing down liberties actually becomes a relief to your overburdened child! Our daughter is not the only one who has come back to thank us for having stepped in and saved her from the pain and/or the embarrassment of being in too deep to handle her liberties. What a joy it is when that is the reaction, and how God must feel the same when we turn to him in a similar way!
Parenting in the fear of God involves training our children to faithfully handle both their responsibilities and their leisure time. Keeping those in balance in our modern society is a skill that takes years to master. I hope that this one principle will aid you in your quest to do the very best job that an imperfect sinner can do of helping your child to grow in both liberty and responsibility!

Remember, though, that without God’s help, no parenting principles are worth much. Please do ask the Father to help you to see how you can use this tool in joyful submission to and dependence on Him.
The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Genesis 1:2-5 (ESV)

Schedules and Structure

Looking back on my homeschooling years, one of the key building blocks of success was a focus on schedules and structure.

By “schedules” I mean that I worked at actually writing out detailed schedules in order to make sure that all the commitments I had made, both to my own family (cooking, cleaning, and schooling) and those outside our home (music lesson teachers, friends, extended family, church members, etc.) really could fit into specific time slots in my week.

By “structure,” I mean keeping a steady focus on the flow of our daily lives such that the children knew what would likely happen day by day, and knew with reasonable certainty how to fit themselves into that flow.
Let’s take these one at a time, with a special focus on ways that they relate to how children in homeschool settings learn both character and academic lessons.

**About schedules**

In my experience, there are women who love to make (and have) schedules, and women who don’t. Very few of us are in between the two extremes. Those of us who love them tend to be generally organized, are often neatnicks, tend towards being controlling in general, because we can have trouble with life situations where we just have to “go with the flow.”

We are most often the ones that are called “Type A” personalities. We like to have all of our ducks in a row. We tend to buy curriculum for the next school year in March or April, if not sooner. We’re planners and researchers, and we like to run a tight ship or, at the very least, serve on one! We know that sometimes we can trample on relationships, and we’re sorry about that, but for us the importance of the mission usually trumps the feelings of others. We are the Marthas of the world, and while Jesus rebuked Martha for her focus on the tasks at hand, we point out that houses don’t clean themselves, meals don’t cook themselves, and someone has to give direction for the work that life demands!

Those of us who don’t like schedules tend to be creative, passionate, and somewhat (okay, a lot) disorganized and messy. We usually don’t want to take things too seriously, we value relationships above tasks, and we don’t want to be hemmed in by either our own choices or the rules that others make. In fact, one thing that most attracts us about homeschooling is the freedom that we have to make our own decisions day to day so that our creativity, our Spirit-led ministries, and our joy in living and learning can be fully expressed!

The idea of planning our weeks seems like everything from busywork that is unnecessary (a waste of time, actually, given all the unexpected twists of our days) to a straitjacket that will stifle us if we are forced into it. We secretly feel that, if Martha had just remembered how Jesus miraculously fed the five thousand, she could have relaxed a bit about getting dinner on the table and spent some time listening to Him instead!

Now, I know I’m painting caricatures here, but I do believe that there really are such personality tendencies (to differing degrees, to be sure) among us homeschooling moms, and that these will influence us significantly as we get down and dirty...
with decisions about how we will teach and how our kids will learn. And remember, the learning we keep discussing in this book will be not only about the content of academic lessons, but also include our character as displayed in how we approach everyday life. These traits will then be reproduced in our children.

Here’s the message of this chapter in a nutshell: God is at once the most orderly and the most creative Being in the universe. Order and creativity do not have to cancel each other out; they can complement one another.

For a Scriptural example of this, look at Genesis, chapters 1-2. Here we see God “bringing order out of chaos” as He makes an entire world in six days, yet in a way that was bursting with creative energy as well! Leland Ryken, style editor of the English Standard Version of the Bible, remarks on this in his book Words of Delight:

“In this story [of creation] the great opposites of human experience—rule and energy, order and impulse, restraint and abundance—complement each other. On the one hand, the process of creation is described as an instantaneous act of God’s word and as an ordering process. . . . In this pattern, the verbs name acts of ordering [e.g., specific things being created on specific days], as God is said to have separated, called, and set.

But [this description of an orderly creation] . . . is balanced by passages that describe creation as an act of biological generation. . . . The imagery is physical rather than abstract, and the language stresses energy and vitality rather than rule and order. We read about plants yielding seed and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed. . . . The motif reaches its climax in God’s command to creatures to be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth (v.22). Such images of overflowing generative energy complement the passages that describe creation as an ordering process brought about instantly by the word of God.1

I believe that children learn best when order and creativity are in balance, and to that end, I’m going to try to describe the beauty of schedules by showing how they

serve creativity, flexibility, and Spirit-led ministry, especially in the homeschooling context.

Let’s think about God’s world together. He created such order, and yet such variety. In the plants and animals of this world, in the bodies of people, and in the ways that people image Him in their daily lives, we see a vast symphony of creativity that is exquisitely orderly at the same time.

It was the sin of Eve, who listened to Satan’s lie that she could disobey God and walk well through His world on her own (and the sin of her husband, who agreed with her) that brought sorrow, death, disorder, and mind-numbing sameness into God’s perfect world. In seeking to accurately image my Creator to my children, I believe that I need to balance my desire for freedom in the moment with keeping our days full of orderly, steady patterns of work, rest, and the joy of discovery.

Humility would teach me that I need to use my time wisely because I am a mortal and fallen creature. Unlike my Creator, I am neither infallible nor inexhaustible. I need food, I need sleep, and I need rejuvenation. If I try to “do it all” as if I did not have limits, I lie to myself and I will eventually disappoint someone, or sin against someone, or burn out quickly.

As a woman who wears many hats, I have too many tasks and obligations to do all that I would like to do (or even ought to do). Making a schedule helps me to identify and quantify the bits and pieces of my life, to consider before God which are most important in the short and long terms, to prioritize accordingly, and then to see what I can and cannot accomplish within my limited time frames. They help me to number my days aright so that I may gain a heart of wisdom (Psalm 90:12).

Obviously, homeschooling adds another layer of complexity to the already-significant list of tasks associated with being a wife, bearing and raising children, keeping our house and possessions in order, caring for our aging parents, being a good friend and church member, etc.

Were it not for the leading of God and His sustaining grace, I do not think women would succeed in all that we are called to undertake! One of the features of homeschooling that helps us, though, is that it overlaps our other roles, rather than pulling us from them—and here is where the quiet home concept begins to make sense.

When we become pregnant with our first child, many of us must decide whether or not to keep working outside the home. Modern society enables and encourages women to work. Many young couples find that they need the extra income to make
ends meet, while others find that they can either live frugally on one income, or are blessed with abundant income from the husband’s job.

The decision to put small children into day care, or with family members to baby sit, is entirely between you and your Lord; I’m not going to preach here, for I have seen a great variety of choices made well in this area. Some parents I know worked, and some didn’t; we’re not all the same, and those choices made in faith will always have God’s enabling grace to sustain them.

One thing is clear, however. When women do work out of the home, their focus is split and their lives are more complex than their sisters who stay at home full time. After there are two or three children in the family, the economics for most of us make it at least an even shot as to whether it benefits the family more for the mom to be home full time or continuing to work.

For many Christians, the decision to homeschool adds worth, as it were, to the impulse that many of us have to focus our attention on our families, and to disciple and raise our own children rather than allowing others this privilege. If we choose to stop working a job and care for our husbands, children, and homes full time, our lives become centered primarily in our homes, and all our roles begin to overlap and contribute to one another. Thus, raising the younger children and early education of those just coming into the grade school years go naturally together, along with the tasks associated with helping to support our husband’s career, keeping our homes neat and clean, and befriending those in our communities.

But even if all of our focus has now shifted to the home, because children grow and change so fast and because with homeschooling we are now adding new tasks into our daily lives, making a written schedule of the weekly tasks and events is a highly useful exercise, especially when we are beginning to actively teach academics. As with orderly physical environments, making a schedule helps us to find a place for everything, and to put everything in its place. We find times to work, times to play, times to learn, and times to fellowship. I’m not going to get into the details here; that’s
for later chapters. But I will say that, to me, the greatest benefit of scheduling is more the *process* of writing the schedule (thus examining and setting values and priorities in my life), than following the schedule that I create to the letter.

Here’s where the free spirits among us may be reassured! The point of having a schedule is not to create a straitjacket that will make you feel guilty if you wriggle out of it even for a few minutes—nor does writing out a schedule mean that you are unrealistically ignoring the many curve balls that God will throw into your week! Rather, the process of writing a schedule is primarily a tool to help you notice and prioritize what is going on in your week.

Besides the above advantages, the joy of having created a detailed schedule (say, of cleaning chores as well as school lessons) is that you know what to drop when the Spirit moves you to depart from your plan. Let’s say that your schedule says that you vacuum on Tuesday afternoons. Now posit that a neighbor drops in on a Tuesday to borrow a cup of sugar, but then bursts into tears, confessing marital difficulties. You draw her into your home, put aside all thoughts of running the vacuum, and minister to your friend for two hours. Most of us would agree that this unexpected opportunity to minister is likely God’s priority and plan for your day!

But now, witness the beauty of having a schedule: you know that you missed that vacuuming chore. You know that you’ll need to fit it in somewhere, and soon. You can quickly assess what other tasks and events upcoming will have to be shuffled so that you can get that cleaning done.

Or, perhaps you let it go for that week entirely. Well, if the next Tuesday is a brilliant, sunny spring day and you are tempted to blow off the vacuuming and take all the kids on a nature walk, I’m betting that you’ll at least remember that it’s been two weeks since you vacuumed. You are aware that this task is becoming a significant priority. You might even decide to vacuum earlier in the day than your schedule says, while the kids are having lunch, so that you can both get that important (but boring) chore done and follow that creative impulse and get outside.

Another hidden benefit of scheduling is that you find time slots for things (like vacuuming) that really must be done but do not seem to have value in the moment when compared with other things. Most house cleaning chores fall into this category for me, but my personal “ah ha!” moment came in connection with the mundane task of dealing with papers on my desk, specifically the daily mail and correcting my kids’ seat work assignments.
Having four kids under the age of six and one on the way when I began home-schooling, the only way I could see to bring order out of the chaos in my own mind (let alone my environment) was to write up a plan that would give me time slots where babies were napping, toddlers playing, and older children doing lessons. I never really expected to follow the daily or weekly plan as written; I started by wanting to just see if I could even hope to fit everything that I wanted to get done into a single week.

Back then, our mailman came at about 11:00 AM, and I used to make sandwiches at about 11:30 AM and pray a blessing with the kids and then go get the mail from the box. The lunch break was supposed to last an hour, and then the babies went down for a nap, the toddlers for a rest, and it was prime time for me to teach the older kids to read and do math.

But, you know how it is. When you get the mail, you want to open interesting letters, look through catalogs, and file bills so they don’t get lost. At this time of my life, I had a small business (the home party kind) so the mail almost always brought things that I did need to attend to in short order.

However, opening and processing the mail was not something that I had scheduled in, so the typical result was that the kids would drift away from the lunch table as I sat and digested both the meal and the mail. I would even get into answering it via my computer, make phone calls related to it, or sit at the table browsing catalogs, since the kids were basically peaceful with full bellies or sleepy heads. Thus was key time for teaching and interacting with my older children often misspent!

Now, I know that this sounds minor, and in a way it was. But it was a bad pattern. I found it easy to adjust once I realized that the consistent misstep in my days could be corrected simply by creating a scheduled time slot for reading and responding to my mail that worked better for our family.

I determined that I would not go out to the mailbox at lunch time, but rather in the late afternoon, after all lessons were done. I then could roll reading and responding to mail in with later afternoon phone calls that I had already scheduled in that time, as well as folding laundry and starting dinner preparations. In that same general time frame, my kids did their afternoon pick-up, settled into their “free time after lessons” mode, and were usually reading, playing outside happily, or occasionally watching a video.

This one adjustment to my schedule made a huge difference in my productivity as a teacher, and also in my kids’ character formation and academic progress. I don’t
think I could have made this change if I hadn’t put the work into thinking through the elements of our days and putting a structured schedule in place, so that when the problem arose I could both see the imbalance (I was not getting lessons done that required undivided attention from me) and make the needed adjustment to right it (change mail processing to a different time of day). After seeing this relationship between scheduling and structure, and having applied the lesson on a small scale, I then applied this principle to more and more decisions that I made about how my children and I spent our days.

**Schedules support children by giving them structure**

Now, so far in this chapter I’ve been focused on how schedules help us moms. Let me end this chapter by reminding you of how they affect your children.

Most (but not all) of us discover the benefits of putting infants on feeding and napping schedules when we begin building our families. While those among us who like to get up and go might have our infants napping at odd times and in car seats or portable cribs, I think we can all agree that most babies benefit from regular daily rhythms that allow for a healthy cycle of nutrition, rest, activity, and early bedtimes. (We moms especially love the last one!)

What may not be obvious to you as you come out of those infant-centered years and are now defining new patterns for your homeschooling days is that young, school-aged children thrive just as much as do infants on a regular, structured, weekly plan. Having reliable weekly rhythms that toddlers and early school-aged children can predict provides the same elements that are important to infants—and more.

School-aged children need good nutrition provided at reasonable intervals. They can go longer between meals than can infants, but their capacity to be cheerful, or learn lessons, or play quietly can be significantly affected by low blood sugar (resulting from not eating regular meals on time) or sugar crashes (resulting from meals that are “quick fixes” and thus sugar-laden).

School-aged kids need periods of intellectual activity, where their young minds are exercised, challenged, and expanded. They also need free play time (ideally outside), and creative undirected play times, during which they process what they’ve experienced that day and learn to amuse themselves in constructive ways. They need rest periods during the day, and early bedtimes that allow for the hours of sleep that their growing bodies require.
Children typically thrive when these elements are assembled into a routine. If they regularly get up at a set time and do the same kinds of things at the same times day after day, children tend to feel emotionally secure and content. In this kind of ordered environment, they know what to expect, their biorhythms are kept steady, and their days are interesting and varied, yet orderly and predictable. Thus are they positioned to do their best—physically and emotionally.

They don’t tend to get stale unless they are cooped up for too many hours a day. Fresh air, sunshine, and some variety of scenery benefit all humans. But young children rarely crave the variety and excitement that bored adults do. Too much of what adults perceive as “everyday life” is still new and exciting to have become blasé quite yet.

**Structures really aren’t straitjackets!**

Does this mean you can’t ever change up the day? No! That neighbor who showed up on Tuesday afternoon changed things up: you let the kids watch a video instead of doing their afternoon pick-up and playing outside, where they would have needed your attention.

Seasonal (or weather) changes often bring welcome variations: we stay in on rainy or cold days, and decide to take nature walks instead of doing book work on those glorious spring days, or have super-fun snow days during blizzards.

For little ones, a trip to the grocery store, a walk to a nearby park, or an outing to the mall can be all the change-up they need! As they grow older, children might have after-school sports or clubs or visit friends or go on scheduled field trips or attend co-op classes or have weekly music lessons. All these will bring variety to their days, but can be kept in a regular, weekly, predictable structure.

The key here is the term “change up.” I’m circling back now to those of us who are free spirits by nature, who love to go and do, and whose impulse is that the kids need to experience a broad variety of things outside the home. You might be thinking of good things, like field trips, play groups, co-op meetings, time with friends, farming or sports activities, and crafts or hobbies. Here’s what I would lovingly say, however: if you don’t have a basic schedule, a regular rhythm, or a clearly defined structure to your week, what you tend to then generate is a randomness, where plans are often impulsively made and followed, leading to a downward cycle of inconsistency on your part with schooling and uncertainty and an accompanying lack of motivation, trust,
and respect on the part of your kids.

The moms that I have met who tend to impulsively follow their desires to “go and do” often feel chronically rushed, and often speak unkindly to their children as a result of the urgency born of over commitment. Their children do not know what to expect next, or how to meet their moms’ expectations, and can grow surly, or demanding, or petulant, or exasperated and disrespectful. They generally grow in self-dependence and look to their own devices to cope with chaotic conditions. And those are just character issues.

With academic lessons, if moms skip them in favor of trips out of the house to touch the sky, or if they don’t discipline themselves to correct the schoolwork that students have done, their children will learn that they don’t really have to study, or work diligently, since there is no reliable reward for their efforts (or consequence for their sloth). Nor do they feel like they progress towards a goal.

Students who don’t receive corrected schoolwork back don’t know if they’re making errors or getting A’s. They muddle through as best they can, but gaps are forming in the fabric of their knowledge of the world. Furthermore, certain academic subjects build on concepts that must be taught in order, and cannot be quickly made up. Spotty lessons compound learning difficulties for these subjects, and your kids can truly fall behind in school if lessons are regularly skipped.

And all this bad fruit can result from prizing what we think of as spontaneity, creativity, or energy, when the reality is that we are often lazy, undisciplined, self-focused, and lacking self-control. Successful homeschooling (and parenting) involves planning, consistency, diligence, and faithfulness.

There are not really any shortcuts here, but the fruit of submitting our wills to disciplined living is sweet. My favorite Scripture passages that would teach us these truths are below, for your consideration and meditation. May the Lord show you His will in these things through them, and may He grace you to grow in submission to these truths.
O LORD, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it.

Psalm 139:1-6 (ESV)

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.

John 15:1-2 (ESV)

Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior ... [and] are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled.

Titus 2:3-5 (ESV)
“Let another praise you…”

Don’t look now, but I think we’re being followed. When God turns a nervous, young homeschool mother into an older, wiser, more seasoned homeschool mentor, younger mothers are going to follow. And when they do, it is good for that older mom to look back over her shoulder once in a while, just to let everyone know she knows where we are going and that we are on this journey together.

Marcia Somerville’s new book Love the Journey is like that. It’s as though Marcia is smiling at her readers through the pages, looking into our eyes with understanding and saying “I know it’s hard. But it’s worth it. You can do this.” Thank God for books like this. Intelligent, but never dry. Theologically sound, but never tedious. Practical, but also spiritual. Opinionated, but rightfully so. Thank God for those who remember to look back at those who are trying to follow.

Gregg Harris, Director of Noble Institute.org
Instructor for “Raising Kids to Do Hard Things” Conferences

Marcia Somerville, wife of Scott Somerville, homeschooled her six children K-12. There were many days when Marcia wanted to give up, but God had a different plan. He led her to overcome her own obstacles, and in that process she wrote the Tapestry of Grace curriculum as a way to share what she had learned about home teaching. Today, thousands of families in America and overseas benefit from Marcia’s 18-year labor of love. Tapestry of Grace has won many awards and has brought both joy and quality education to many homes. Love the Journey is written for new homeschooling mothers, whom Marcia desires to help get off to the best possible start. Her title says it all!