THE BRAVE LEARNER

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Finding Everyday Magic in Homeschool, Learning, and Life

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A TARCHERPERIGEE BOOK

CHAPTER 8

LIBERATION FROM SCHOOL

To Schedule or Not to Schedule, That Is the Question (Answers Inside!)

School's out for summer. School's out forever.

—ALICE COOPER

Some parents are gaga over their decorative planners and Bullet Journals. Can't live without them! I'd been seduced into believing that a well-ordered calendar was the magic wand for homeschool success. I successfully implemented a daily schedule for my two oldest kids for three whole months. Right at the zenith of my gratification, ten-year-old Noah declared: "I hate my life." Shattered, I realized that my idea of success and his didn't match. I returned to essential questions: What is learning? How do I measure it? What is the relationship between inspiration and discipline, joy and steady effort?

Unschoolers treat an ordered schedule like a taboo, replicating the school system and undermining their children's natural ability to self-instruct. Eager to try a better approach, I ditched the schedule. I adopted the unschool doctrine wholeheartedly. We burst into new energy: *This is the way to a happy, free homeschool!* Until it wasn't. The helium escaped our balloon of happy learning; I couldn't figure out how to sustain that level of natural curiosity every day—and neither could my kids. I caught them drifting aimlessly through the house. Paralyzed: I didn't want to

overly direct them, but I also couldn't bear their sudden listlessness and apathy. I knew that *real* unschoolers weren't having such a flat experience, but I didn't know what to do.

Over the next several years, I experimented (like you do) with as many philosophies of education as I could. Each one felt fraught with both amazing power and tedium, until one day, I reconsidered everything. I turned my attention away from homeschool philosophies and toward our daily lived experience. In other words, I dropped my *school* focus and, instead, paid attention to my *home* life.

✳ Home, Not School ✳

Homeschoolers: we're at home—that place we return to where we kick off our shoes, rip off our bras, and flop onto the couch. We *yearn* for home after too much time away. Home is where I get to *be myself* without the pressure to be some other version of me.

When I began homeschooling, the temptation to transform the house into a school (it's baked right into the word "homeschool") was profound. Yet home and school combine about as well as oil and water. In school, you need a hall pass just to pee! In school, you can't flop on a couch—you're trapped in chairs attached to tiny desks. Class starts with a bell. Snacks are scheduled. Behavior is monitored and evaluated.

What happens at home when you impose the structure of school? Irritation. Children instinctively rebel against turning the place they love into a place with pressure and guidelines. They also know that the imposition of "the homeschool schedule" is false. They watch you take a text message in the middle of the math lesson. They see you dart to the refrigerator to grab a glass of juice for the toddler while you were supposed to be reading aloud.

In your bones, *you* know that you're not required to live up to the schedule you set. Everyone knows it! You make exceptions for yourself freely—which makes sense. You're at home. Home is all about accommo-

dation of each person's needs and wants. People come first—not the schedule.

To have a more effective home *education*, I realized I needed to abandon the trappings of school and harness the energy of home. I dropped my allegiance to the sacred "school schedule." Instead, I adopted the more forgiving "home routine."

* Routine, Not Schedule *

Have you ever planned a week of meals for your family? On Sunday, you head to the store to purchase a list of ingredients. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner—times seven days.

Monday comes: oatmeal for breakfast, grilled cheese for lunch, and stir-fry for dinner. So far, so good. Everyone eats; everyone is satisfied.

Tuesday arrives: a breakfast of scrambled eggs and toast. You all eat it with pleasure, using the designated ingredients. Out of the blue, a text message arrives from your best friend: *Can you meet us for lunch at the park? Don't worry,* she writes. *I've got tacos and chips for everyone!*

Oh no—what about the eating schedule? What will you do with the lunch you have already purchased and planned? You reason: *I wonder if I can get the kids to promise to eat the tuna sandwiches with dinner so we don't get behind.* Of course, they agree to do just that, because picnics are fun! But when dinner arrives, tuna sandwiches plus baked chicken and mashed potatoes is too much food. Your children swing their feet under the table, whine that they're full, and promise to finish the leftovers at breakfast.

The pressure of the eating schedule mounts. What must be consumed the next morning? Cheerios, half-eaten sandwiches, and cold mashed potatoes. Just to catch up. Lectures ensue: "You promised to eat it all and now you won't. That's it. No more picnic outings for you!" Your children, stuffed, exasperated, and confused, wonder what they've done wrong.

Theater of the absurd. What parent would stuff a child with food to

keep up with a meal schedule? Yet many parents run their homeschools just like this. Scheduled learning based on numbers of pages, days of the week, sometimes even times of the day, leads to performance anxiety. I had a friend who didn't take a single Monday holiday ever because her curriculum had scheduled pages for every Monday of the year. She hated to "get behind." Schedule feels like this judgmental, critical aunt with the hair growing out of her mole, who looks down on you for not keeping up with her exacting expectations.

The truth is, we don't eat by schedule. We eat by routine. We purchase foods that can be prepared for any of the three meals so that we'll be able to eat when we're hungry. If we get a better offer—someone invites us to lunch—of course we're going to scrap our tuna sandwiches. When we return home, we simply eat the next meal—we don't also stuff ourselves with leftover tuna sandwiches. In fact, sometimes we realize we had a *better* eating experience by *not* eating the planned meal.

Fun Aunt "Lady Inspiration"

Education benefits from a similar strategy: embracing a routine over adhering to a schedule. If you homeschool according to a schedule, it's tough to allow inspiration to lead. Inspiration is your fun aunt—the one who brings cans of Silly String to class. Lady Inspiration wreaks havoc on a schedule. She comes in the form of an invitation to abandon the plan—that's her chief mode of transport. Alas, inspiration is not a lengthy visitor. Once the can of Silly String is empty, she departs without so much as a goodbye! What do you do now?

Parents who temporarily abandon the school schedule worry that their children will get behind in academics; they wonder if the detour to inspired learning was worthwhile; they double down. But what if we treated learning the way we treat meal planning? Sure, we can plan a week's worth of lessons, but we gladly follow inspiration to a better learning experience. After inspiration leaves, we simply pick up where we left off.

Does this work? Can our children *learn by routine* rather than sched-

ule? The routine is sturdy: it's there when we need it, ready for us to resume. Not only that, when Lady Inspiration moves on to her next family, we aren't left wondering how to fill the empty hours. My unschooling dilemma was quieted. I had a plan for how to spend our days when our inspiration ran dry.

In my family, our routine looked like this most years:

* Wake up whenever (once rested).
* Eat breakfast and play for about thirty minutes. I usually spent some time on the computer and listening to the radio before the day got going. The kids played with blocks, clay, dolls, arts and crafts, or video games.
* Gather in the family room for an hour of read-aloud time, which included a chapter from a novel, an Aesop's fable, a poem, a paragraph from the current nonfiction read, our history text, and a couple picture books for the littlest ones.
* Head to the kitchen table for copywork/dictation or handwriting pages, phonics and vocabulary, grammar or logic—our "language arts" portion of the day.
* Use our bodies to learn—math facts, prepositions, our home address, letter sounds.
* Take a break (jump on the trampoline, get a snack, run in the yard with the dog).
* Tackle math (game, worksheet, manipulatives).
* Eat lunch.
* Work on a project (history, writing, science).
* Have free time or take a trip to the library or a movie.

This routine could be adapted if we had a dentist appointment or when my friend called to offer free passes to the petting zoo. I ditched the day's plan to feed the goats. Goat feeding is almost *always* a better exchange on learning than filling out a worksheet. The next day, we returned to the routine—the predictable pattern to our days together.

Most people agree that *eating* by routine is obvious. If you miss lunch,

you really *aren't* behind in eating. What about subjects like math or grammar, though, that depend on a series of steps? Isn't it possible to get behind in those? Shouldn't these be scheduled?

"Getting behind" implies that you believe the program designers know the pace at which *your* child *should* learn. Because you *are* at home, you have a front-row seat to whether your child is, in fact, learning the material. If it is true that you have become so cavalier about your child's education that you're traipsing around town every day and not dedicating time to mastering phonics or skip counting or exploring the solar system, you have the complete freedom and prerogative to turn down the "better" offers. Stay home. Focus on your routine until you feel that your homeschool has stabilized.

That said: most people do not lead from inspiration every day. Having a learning routine and a predictable pattern to eating and sleeping help you stay sane. Not everything can depend on a child's outsized curiosity or a parent's inspired initiative. Establishing habits brings calm rather than anxiety.

Interval Training

There's no magic number of minutes, hours, days, or workbook pages that will reassure you that your child is educated well enough. Once you capitulate to measuring a child's academics by external standards, you'll never rest because those standards shift year to year and subject to subject. Instead, focus on growing stamina and competence.

To learn anything means to apply your current set of skills to the new challenge without losing heart. Some lessons require greater concentration or sitting with the discomfort of not being good at the "thing" yet. That's why stamina is so important in learning. The axis of learning goes like this: the newer the concept, the greater the effort required to master it. If the concept is familiar or built from an existing framework, and the next step is not too big, a child can make an earnest attempt with her current set of skills and energy to learn.

One model helped me enormously in building stamina to learn. Con-

sider the structure of athletic training. I'm a marathon runner. When we prepare for a marathon, each day of the week we run different distances as we lengthen our mileage week by week. A typical week is structured like this:

Monday: Rest

Tuesday: Run 3 miles

Wednesday: Run 5 miles

Thursday: Run 3 miles

Friday: Rest

Saturday: Run 8 miles

Sunday: Cross-train

Notice that there are rest days before the longest run (each week Saturday goes up by one mile). Sunday is a "cross-train" day, which allows for aerobic activity of a different kind.

If we apply this model to homeschool, what would happen if you talked with your child about goals for math, for example?

The goal is to learn the multiplication tables by the end of February. It's January now. What if we set up a training schedule to help you grow into your times tables?

That routine might look like fewer practice problems on some days and one day per week that mixes up all that's been learned up to that point, with more problems than any other day. Why wouldn't there be rest days or a day where you play Yahtzee as your cross-training day? Example:

Monday: Do 3 problems

Tuesday: Do 5 problems

Wednesday: Do 3 problems

Thursday: Take the day off

Friday: Do 8 problems

Weekend: Play Yahtzee for fun!

What would it look like to work on phonics and reading? Could you "read" a wordless book first, then try a book that has only words your child knows how to sound out, then read a book to your child, then try a book with the most recently acquired phonics? Do just a page and then have a big snack and hug for all that effort?

My running partners and I looked forward to snacks on our long runs. Like, we *totally* obsessed about them. Mile 6, mile 12, and the end of the run at mile 18 held magic—cherry Life Savers, blue Gatorade, orange slices. Manna from heaven! All that effort rewarded.

What if your child reads a paragraph with you, sounding out with all her little heart? What if she pauses to take a big swig of her favorite juice before the next effort? We forget that our kids are working their mind-muscles—concentrating, making sense of abstraction. They can get there if they know they aren't required every single day to push *just that much more* because you said so. It helps if they can see the pause coming, marked by a deliberate break. Use the interval-training mind-set to grow stamina. Competence will follow as your child becomes more and more fluent in the skill.

Seasonal Schooling

I have a saying: classical education in the fall, unit studies in winter, and unschooling in the spring. There's a tendency to be ship-shape schoolish in the fall when all the books are easy to locate and every pencil is sharp. By winter, home educators gravitate to unit studies and projects. But once the first waves of spring arrive, everyone wants to head outdoors! It's natural that big projects, sports, and nature hikes dominate. Everyone's tired from all that "scholastic" effort. Plan your homeschool with these seasonal shifts in mind and you'll feel so much better when your homeschool dribbles to an unceremonious end in mid-May. Use the fall

for the dedicated book study, plan projects for winter, and schedule field trips in the spring, for instance.

If you use the ideas of routine, interval training, and seasons to help you create reasonable expectations, your kids will feel so much more able to cooperate with your academic goals for them.

✳ Meaning-Rich Materials ✳

The predictable pattern of a lovingly created routine will fall flat, however, if the materials you choose are tedious. Unschooling parents know this. They're allergic to traditional curricula. Mention on an online discussion forum that you're teaching reading with a phonics program and prepare yourself for a sound digital flogging! There's a reason they're so staunchly against schoolish materials. Most programs written for education are mind-numbingly dull. They take the adventure of learning and turn it into a system of rote paper production.

I remember my first encounter with a writing program for homeschoolers. I read the sample paragraph in the first chapter. I turned to my friend who owned the curriculum: "Did you like this paragraph?" She looked puzzled. I pressed: "Do you wish there were a second one?" Her eyes widened. She did not. I wished there hadn't been a first!

I told my friend, "If the sample paragraph in a writing program is this unmemorable, why would you want your children to learn to write based on this model?" And that's the problem with most curricula of every kind. If the program doesn't inspire *you* to use it, to enjoy it, to learn from it, why would it work for your children?

We can do better! When I researched math programs, for instance, I looked for materials that made math concepts concrete and approachable, because my background in math was poor. I also knew how dangerous it would be to my children's love of math if all they ever did was fill out worksheets at a certain dogged pace each day.

Math games, picture books and novels about the story of math, hob-

bies that use math (like knitting, origami, woodworking, Lego, computer programming, online gaming), and running a cookie business were all ways we made math more meaningful in our family. Toggling between skill work and math used in context helped us ground all that learning in real life. It kept us from merely completing abstract objectives for some future date of certification (like college admission).

Homeschoolers are brilliant at bringing meaning to learning when it comes to literature and the study of history. Historical fiction, for instance, brings the two together, delivering beautiful writing about a remote time period and empathy for the people living through those events.

Science instruction lends itself to hands-on activities at home. We can provide enough tools for everyone. We don't have to worry about liability or safety in the same ways schools do. There's time and space to let an experiment evolve over weeks.

To ensure that you select great tools, read programs before you buy them. Ask yourself: *Am I drawn in?* If you're not (if the grammar

Checklist for Meaning-Rich Materials

- You like it!
- The information is presented in a way that you can understand.
- You can comfortably explain it to your kids.
- The materials are attractive. (It matters!)
- The learning experience provokes curiosity, not only rote skill development.
- The lessons are multifaceted (incorporating mind and body, heart and spirit).
- Your children also like the program and buy into it.
- Materials apply to multiple subjects (across the curriculum).

book is so tedious, you resent it before you begin), set it aside. Look for a program or book that invites *you* to think more deeply about the subject. Try some of the problems or exercises yourself and see how they feel to you. Make sure you aren't asking a child to do what you find dull and lifeless.

When all else fails, triangle in help. Find another adult who is passionate about the subject and let that person teach your children. I swapped writing instruction for math tutoring with a dear homeschooling friend. I brought passion for writing to her kids and she brought a dish of candy and mathematical aptitude to mine.

✳ Invitation, Not Insistence ✳

Once you've got a vision for your routine, you may wonder how to enforce it. What if your kids fight you? That moment is excruciating! Every so often I read a Facebook plea from an exasperated mother: "I'm ready to give up! My kids hate learning and I don't know what else to do." How can these little people topple your big efforts of love on their behalf so easily—with an eye roll or a shrug?

When I got exasperated with silliness or the lack of attention to the lessons I had prepared, I whipped out the parental power tool: insistence. I'd simply get bigger, louder, and angrier. I'd *insist* that the work had to be done, whether they liked it or not, and if they didn't get with my program, dire consequences would follow. I prophesied doom, when dealing with teens: "You'll never get into college" and "No one will hire you." Insistence, coercion, shaming—these power tools sever the parent-child connection. Suddenly your kid is cooperating to get relief from accusations and punishments. Gone is the love of learning and nurtured bonds of homeschool.

Instead of *insistence*, try *invitation*. At the moment of your greatest frustration, pause. Ask yourself: *How can I invite my child to participate in today's plan?* Here are some examples of how to invite your children and teens to the table of effort:

* **Notice what's missing.** Surprise, mystery, risk, or adventure? Adapt the experience to provoke one of these enchanted forces—move the lesson to a new location, introduce new tools (like gel pens and black paper for copywork), add treats, create a cozy environment, introduce an element of danger (like a drill or sewing machine or candles), help your child set a personally meaningful goal.
* **Become curious about the topic yourself.** Find the edge of *unknowing* so that you approach the subject with your own interest on display. *Lead* by doing the activity yourself, without preamble or explanation. You might complete a page of the workbook after breakfast, in front of your child, without saying a word. You might mix chemicals for a science experiment. Perhaps you set up the board game or copy a passage from your own book. Lead by doing.
* **Collaborate!** Do the page, project, or process *with* your child or teen, side by side.
* **Give time to explore.** Save the hard work for another day. Begin by handling, contemplating. Try a little, take a break, discuss.
* **Suggest micro-lessons.** Ask for a single effort (one word, one sentence, one thought, one problem, one chapter, one conversation). Celebrate the concentrated effort.
* **Appeal to the mind, body, heart, or spirit connection.** Introduce surprising facts, add movement, pair the lesson with a subject your child loves, find the angle that tugs on a child's natural compassion.

Insistence establishes hierarchy and resentment. Invitation creates connection and responsiveness. Choose which one you want to characterize your home life.

Measuring Progress

Even if you get the plates spinning and establish connection with your children, how do you know you're making *measurable progress* in their educations? The biggest challenge most parents face is the anxiety that

they can't know their child is learning what ought to be learned at the appropriate pace.

Schedulers are tempted to rely on *plans in the future* to reassure them that they'll get a certain quantity of information "covered." Schedulers like to plan tasks and then mark them complete. The quickest way to kill joy in learning, however, is to put too much trust in planning ahead. How can we quantify inspiration's contribution to homeschooling?

Planning from Behind

Many parents feel guilty when they follow inspiration. I remember when my family became immersed in World War II. We watched endless videos while I recovered from childbirth. I read the book *Number the Stars* to my children from my king-size bed, while breastfeeding the newborn. The older kids drew pictures to go with their descriptions of the book. Noah built a rudimentary website with his dad to showcase tanks. We checked out books of WWII weapons and my kids traced them onto tracing paper.

Each day over dinner, our family conversation organically turned to aspects of WWII—sometimes in-depth, other times flippantly. My children played with dress-up clothes, pretending to be war orphans in need of medical care from the Red Cross. It dawned on me at the end of the six-week period that I hadn't planned any of it.

Did I feel elated and pleased with this excursion into a worthy topic? I didn't! I felt guilty. I worried that I was cheating in some way. In my imagination, dedicated home educators made lesson plans, thought ahead, and studied history chronologically. They organized reading, math, and spelling units. Why couldn't I plan a quality unit study like those superior mothers? I wondered if I could "count" the postpartum period as "real" education since, in truth, I was scrambling to fill time.

I can't say when it happened, but one day it dawned on me that *this inspiration-led learning* was the core of homeschooling. I realized that I *had* spent hours reading books; discussing learning online; attending homeschool support groups, conferences, and seminars learning about

learning. I kept notes of movies, books, math games, and poetry that I hoped to share with my kids one day.

All those ideas and recommendations worked invisibly inside me, influencing how I spent time with my children. In the moment when I needed an activity or course of study, I drew from the swirl of ideas that had secretly rearranged themselves into practical action. Inspiration rarely appeared when I stared at a blank planner page, begging my mind to create an integrated course. Rather, inspiration caught me off guard when I moved with the currents of enthusiasm, my energy level, my children's curiosity, and available materials. In those moments, our fun aunt Lady Inspiration led the way, and she did so beautifully.

I learned to *count* these educational excursions by recording them on my calendar *after* they occurred. I call this practice "planning from behind." It turned out that many of my best homeschool plans grew inside me without my conscious awareness, only to flower into a wonderful learning experience serendipitously. I noted these learning moments confident that we had been on task—deliberate, thoughtful—even if spontaneous. I had a record of how all that reflection and study had led me to some of our best homeschooling experiences. I also could see what was missing—which subjects had not risen to the level of importance that month. My mind would then deep-dive again into more reading and conversations that would help lay the groundwork to explore those subjects.

The framework of our days (the routine) remained, but I allowed the role of inspiration-led learning to grow. I trusted it more over time and became amazed to see how powerful it was to both pay attention and lose focus, to research and ponder followed by concrete action and practice.

In addition to keeping a calendar record of activities and learning experiences, I offer you two tools that will revolutionize how you track your children's academic progress. These tools work well with both the routine you establish for your garden-variety days, and those weeks when your fun aunt Lady Inspiration shows up.

Sketch a Narrative

The learning you care about *is* likely happening in your home right now. It's especially likely if you've been applying the Superpowers of brave learning. Let's shift our gaze from measurement by rubric, to *sketch by narrative.*

When a child writes a paper for a school assignment, a teacher reads the paper, marks the mistakes, and evaluates the content. She then assigns a letter grade. The grade tells a parent that the child is performing well, average, or poorly compared with age-mates. The letter grade offers no description of the process the child went through to write the paper. A grade can't tell a parent whether or not the student enjoyed or hated the assignment. The teacher's grade doesn't account for a child's illness that caused a poor performance, nor does it highlight the interconnections between subjects that show up in the writing. Grades are a stingy system of evaluation.

In homeschooling, we get to dump summary judgment of school work. But with what do we replace it? Too often, parents joyously give up grading, but then succumb to pressure to do year-end testing or to get an evaluation by a teacher, or they call me and ask if their child is "writing at grade level."

You can reassure yourself that your children are learning, and you can pay better attention to their struggles and strengths, if you shift how you assess. I recommend writing a *narrative sketch* of a single twenty-four-hour day in your homeschool each month. Because homeschool is not confined to six hours of instruction, it's important to jot down the events and conversations that occur even when "school" is not in session. That means that the great conversation about how cavities are formed on the way to the dentist counts. It means the bathtub recitation of "The Three Little Pigs" by your first grader matters.

If you include all the activity from Lego building to Minecraft playing to the questions about why dogs sleep so much and how to make suet from scratch, as well as soccer and ballet practice, you'll discover that

your children are learning all the time—and from more sources than you realized. Not only that, you'll also pay better attention to struggle and find new ways to address it. You may also note what you haven't featured in your children's educations for a while—*It's been two months since we did a science experiment.*

Your narrative may include a child's tears when he can't sound out the words quite yet, or the eleven-year-old's complaints because she finds handwriting painful. Writing a narrative sketch once a month allows you to gently face the truth of what's happening in your home, rather than reacting with shame due to low test scores. By writing a sketch once a month (rather than daily), you also resist the temptation to micro-assess (focusing on day-to-day fluctuations). Some parents enjoy doing

Written Narrative Evaluations in College

Until 2001, the University of California, Santa Cruz, issued written narratives of student performance crafted by professors (the university has since succumbed to the pressure to issue grades for the sake of graduate school applications). My sister, who majored in Spanish at UCSC in the 1980s, received written evaluations from her professors describing her progress.

St. John's College (Annapolis, MD, and Santa Fe, NM) uses oral narratives to evaluate student progress instead of grades. At the end of each term, students attend a meeting called a "Don Rag" with their "tutors" (what most colleges call professors). These tutors describe the student's participation in class, their strengths and weaknesses, and their overall performance in front of that student.

Written and oral narratives require the instructor to pay close attention to the student, not just the student's output. The information in the narrative is meant to help students improve for the next term. Attention to the whole student is what makes these evaluations so valuable.

them weekly. Pick the frequency that frees you to celebrate your children's learning adventure.

In my Homeschool Alliance coaching community, the monthly written narrative sketch has transformed member homeschools. The discipline of a page-long description of activities and conversations on a single day gives parents reassurance that they are, in fact, leading a lifestyle of learning, and that their children are making meaningful progress in subject areas and personal development. Parents can compare the September narrative to the one in March and May and note the growth. They also have a place to put their worry. They can wonder in October if a child's struggle in handwriting is temporary or a sign of a larger issue. By March, they'll have more information to compare. These narratives can then be compiled to submit to a state assessor, if your state requires end-of-the-year certification to continue homeschooling.

When I began this practice in my family, I kept my Monthly Narrative Sketches on a private blog. I liked being able to pair photographs with my descriptions. Some parents prefer Word docs, and others still journal in a notebook. Use the tool that motivates you to keep the practice going.

WHAT TO INCLUDE IN A MONTHLY NARRATIVE SKETCH

* **Conversations:** Direct quotes from your kids; big juicy family conversations about any topic, including nontraditional school subjects like film, puns, sports, and gaming
* **Reading:** Books, websites, game manuals, song lyrics, inspirational literature, and poetry your children read to themselves; your reading to your kids—books, poems, instructions, websites, placards at the zoo . . .
* **Activities:** Dance, quilting, archery, tying shoes, telling time, making a smoothie, dumping all the pots and pans on the floor and banging them like drums, reading spontaneously to a sibling, texting a friend, painting, bathing self, training a pet, arts and crafts,

gardening, bird-watching, attending Shakespeare camp, martial arts, making stop-action videos

* **School subjects:** completing X number of problems or pages in math; grammar, spelling, and vocabulary in copywork or dictation; French; applying a subject to a real-life activity; mastery of a rote skill; co-op or online classes
* **Games:** Tabletop, video, cards, online
* **On the way:** Meals, bath time, lying in bed, trips to the library or orthodontist—all the conversations and tiny learning moments tucked into the ordinary routines of life
* **Household tasks:** Cleaning, laundry, organizing, meal prep, yard work
* **Spontaneous learning:** Moments when inspiration grabs hold and won't let go!
* **Challenges:** The stuff that feels hard, upsetting, or puzzles you or your kids
* **Field trips:** The zoo, library, museums, historic sites, travel to new places
* **Parenting:** Questions about how to reach a specific child; how well you give attention to each child individually and as a group; sibling rivalry

Write your narrative in your natural voice. Don't treat it like a checklist assessment. Tell the story of a single day. Take notes throughout that day to remember the conversations and topics. Don't worry about picking *the best day* or *the right day.* Any day will do because you'll continue this practice once a month. Eventually, you'll have a full portrait of your homeschool and how it functions. In fact, sometimes it's worth writing about a day gone wrong. You may notice characteristics of how that day went when writing about it that help you adjust for the future.

Below is one example of a narrative sketch from Homeschool Alliance member, Christina. To read others, join the Homeschool Alliance (bravewriter.com/homeschool-alliance).

Christina's Blackberry Fool

We started the day today with a trip to the library. I always look forward to seeing what my children wish to learn about every week. They find so much delight in searching the shelves for the perfect book (or, to be a little more realistic, thirty to fifty books) on whatever strikes their fancy at the moment. This week, the theme seems to be insects and amphibians. This is no surprise, as we have spent the first few evenings of summer waiting for the sun to set so we can chase and catch lightning bugs and toads. The kids aren't the only ones who look forward to this every day. I think I get more pleasure out of seeing them run through the yard with their arms up, squealing, trying to catch lightning bugs. My heart warms when I hear, "I found one!" from the darkness, only to see one of my kids appearing from up the street, toad in hand.

So, we schlepped home with our three totes of library books and decided that next on our agenda was whipping up some Blackberry Fool. Today is Tuesday, and that means Teatime. We are going to read *A Fine Dessert* by Emily Jenkins. It is about four families, over four centuries, who make and eat the same dessert. We thought it would be fun to make some and eat it while we read. We usually read poetry or do an artist study during Teatime, but we thought we would change it up a little today.

While the Blackberry Fool cooled in the fridge, my daughter sat down to do her French-style dictation taken from a passage from *Secret of the Andes*. She then decided that she would draw and label a butterfly's parts and lifecycle for her science journal.

The Fool is still cooling, and all three kids are in the family room collaborating on a robot motorcycle, patiently waiting for Teatime. I love moments like these.

We did not do a math lesson today in favor of using a cooking lesson with lots of measurements. The afternoon will be relaxing, with some quiet independent reading time and perhaps a movie

night. Not every day is as relaxing and laid back as this one. That's what we love about homeschooling. We take days as they come, go with our moods and interests, get excited about what to do next.

Time to check the Blackberry Fool . . .

Try It!

The purpose of the Monthly Narrative Sketch is to reassure you that learning is the ongoing, continuous state of affairs in your household. These portraits also offer you a gentle, nonjudgmental glimpse into struggle. Writing a narrative alerts you to fatigue; braces that were recently adjusted, making a mouth so painful it was difficult to concentrate; and more. Most importantly, your family's unique story of learning becomes apparent—how subjects interlace and relate to one another, how your family grows together. No two families will have the same story. It's exciting to discover what yours is.

The Scatterbook

The second tool I recommend is what I call a "Scatterbook." You're probably familiar with scrapbooks and journals. The Scatterbook is the name I gave to my assorted collection of notes in a notebook. I didn't have neatly organized sections or even clearly delineated categories (though feel free to create them if that works for you). What this book included, however, was a wide array of notes that helped me be a better home educator, such as:

* I jotted thoughts from books I read about education or a specific school subject.
* I drew bright, abstract shapes and colors, overlaid with keywords that put motivating concepts in a place where I would see them regularly.

* I copied important quotes about learning and parenting.
* I made endless lists—books, birds, parks, plays to see, family-friendly films, websites, businesses that let us take field trips, artists, musicians, materials to introduce Shakespeare, meaningful poems, etc.
* I taught myself to appreciate art; I also learned to draw.
* I made notes about individual children; I kept track of who needed extra attention.
* I journaled about what *I* was learning (history, math, science) while teaching my children.

HOW TO KEEP A SCATTERBOOK

1. Pick a notebook. Functional or pretty, you choose. Or download an app like Evernote.

2. Begin. Don't wait for a special day to start. Start now. I began by copying quotes from books I was reading while my kids did their copywork. My copywork practice helped sustain my children's practice as well.

3. Freewrite. Kick-start your Scatterbook by freewriting about education and your learning adventure.
   - My happiest memory in school was _____.
   - If a genie could grant me one skill, aptitude, or awareness, I'd ask for _____.
   - If I didn't have children, what would I study for my own enjoyment?
   - What do I wish I understood better right now?
   - Who told me I wasn't good at _____? (Did I believe them? Do I still believe them? Why or why not?)
   - If I could add one thing to my life to make me happier, what would it be?
   - How do I know I've made progress (in anything)?

4. Collect memorabilia. Glue a few envelopes into your Scatterbook to hold brochures, ticket stubs, receipts, and flyers. Or if your Scatterbook is digital, photograph these and put them in a folder.

5. Label a page for each subject. Keep track of ways your kids express learning in those areas. When you notice a page staying blank for a long time, plan a day of deep diving into that topic. Give it an all-out daylong treatment. See how that goes.

These two tools, the Monthly Narrative Sketch and the Scatterbook, will ground your homeschool. They enable you to track your journey, to store your worries in a safe place for further reflection, and to keep all your homeschool aspirations and ideals together.

APPLICATION

1. Begin. Keep your Scatterbook with you.

2. Title and dedicate a single page to each of the Forces of Enchantment, Capacities for Learning, and Ports of Entry. List ideas to help you on days when inspiration flags.

3. Make a monthly date with yourself to review notes and narratives.

4. Community helps! Meet with a group of friends who also keep Scatterbooks and write Monthly Narrative Sketches. Read to each other, discuss ideas for applying the Superpowers, brainstorm solutions to your most pernicious struggles, and *definitely* order mimosas with brunch.