

BOOK REVIEW 'Real Learning: Education in the Heart of the Home' by Elizabeth Foss
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Elizabeth Foss (expecting her sixth child at the time of writing this book, now expecting her ninth) sets out by explaining that she was committed to home educating her children right from the start: a brief spell as a standard first grade teacher had convinced her that '*...no child of mine would ever sit in a classroom*'. Looking for an alternative to the school system, she began to study the writings of Charlotte Mason, and to apply Mason's methodology of living books, real life experiences, great art and music etc. in her home. Several years into the home educating journey, she discovered the works of Edith Stein, who concurred with Mason in many areas but provided the Catholic element missing from Mason's work. These two educationalists figure largely in the approach which Foss eventually came to make her own: she calls it '*Real Learning*'. Foss does not mince her words when it comes to conventional schooling:

"Some parents are 'home schooling' in an endeavour to bring a Catholic school experience to the dining room table. This book is not about home schooling at all. School is an artificial institution contrived by man. This book is about educating the child in the heart of the family given to that child by his Creator. It is not about school at home- it is about something better".

She contrasts the prevailing notion of education, "*...pouring facts into a child's head so the child could take a test and move onto more facts...focused upon measurable quantities of information and retention of information,*" with Mason's vision of taking the child's "*interest in the heroic past and in the age of myths...a desire to know about everything that moves and lives, about strange places and peoples; ...a wish to handle material and to make,*" and "*plunging (the child) into vital knowledge, with a great field before him which in all his life he will not be able to explore*". Foss illustrates how Edith Stein's comment that the teacher's job was to "*get the student excited about the material, encourage a response, offer guidance, but ultimately let the child make it his own,*" echoes Yeats' oft -quoted dictum, "*Education is not the filling of a bucket, but the lighting of a fire*". Armed with the thoughts of these writers, Foss writes of a "*new paradigm for home-education, one which focuses on developing the whole personality of the child.... in order to pursue a happy, wholehearted, academically excellent, spiritually complete childhood.*"

Sounds attractive, but how does Mrs. Foss go about achieving these admirable aims? Before examining her 'nuts and bolts' advice, I think one essential point to make is that though she has ditched the school model, Foss has certainly not ditched discipline and rigour. In true Charlotte Mason style, she writes of the discipline of education in terms of the habits to be formed: the habit of attention (for example, the child is trained to listen so attentively that he can retell a story in great detail after only one hearing); the habits of orderliness and neatness (applied to both chores and schoolwork); the habit of close observation (especially in nature and art); the habit of obedience; the Catholic habits of doing God's will, persevering in adversity, controlling tempers and working diligently. None of this is, she asserts, incompatible with allowing the child the freedom to follow his own interests, abilities and gifts. Indeed, this freedom is essential if a true learning atmosphere is to be established. Again, in Mason-inspired language, she talks of the need to create an 'atmosphere of home-centred learning' in which children learn even when the

parent is not actively teaching. The parent's role is to present ideas, provide the resources and (echoing Mason's 'masterly inactivity') get out of the way. Foss asserts that when the atmosphere encourages learning, then learning will be inevitable. She explains:

"In a 'living books' home, we don't 'do school'. We have lesson time to be sure, but we don't do school... We live in a learning environment all the time. Learning doesn't stop when lessons end. Because children live in an atmosphere of great ideas and because they have the habits that enable them to learn, they are learning all the time. They are living a learning lifestyle."

So here we have the two pillars on which 'real learning' stands, and which allow the parent to exercise the freedom to 'get out of the way' and let learning take place (and, it might be said, without which such freedom would probably lead nowhere): creating a learning atmosphere and instilling good learning habits. How are these to be achieved? Foss emphasises again and again that the cornerstone of this type of education is 'living books' (books which express, in Mason's words, "worthy thoughts, well put, and inspiring tales, well told... the fit and beautiful expression of inspiring ideas and pictures of life." In other words, no 'twaddle'!). In turn, the cornerstone of a living books education is narration, which simply means this:

"When a child is read a story or reads it himself, he is required to retell it, with as much detail as possible, after paying close attention to the first and only reading... Young children narrate orally, with Mom occasionally transcribing what is said; older children, at around ten years old, begin to write their narrations."

This method is applied not only to books of all kinds but also to historical or scientific field trips. Children learn to pay close attention, and to retell stories and events with complex, textured language and sentence structure, infusing each narration with their own character: they learn, in short, to express themselves effectively (the hallmark, asserts Foss, of an excellent education). Narrations (dictated or written) are kept in notebooks, which are illustrated (with drawings, nature items, souvenirs from trips etc.) and organised by the children, truly becoming their own work. To avoid boredom, the pattern of 'read, write, read, write' is altered now and again: a child might produce a newspaper article, a political cartoon, a play, even a series of photographs. These notebooks form the core of the child's work, replacing standard text books or workbooks.

Foss helpfully goes through various subject areas, giving specific tips and explanations as to how all this works out in practice. The living books approach with its emphasis on comprehension and retelling lends itself particularly well to the development of good **English language skills**, providing the parent with ample opportunities to point out, correct and reinforce spelling and grammar rules (interestingly, Foss, following Mason, believes that one intensive course of grammar in the middle to upper grades is quite sufficient - no need, she asserts, to struggle through a grammar book year after year). Copy work, dictation and spelling corrections all have their place, but are carried out within the context of the child's existing work (passages taken from the books they are reading; spellings taken from their own writing).

For **history**, the child creates a 'Book of Centuries', crammed with his retellings and illustrations from the books he has read or the places he has visited. The emphasis is, again, not on textbooks but on 'living history' books- well written books, fiction or biography, which make some historical period come alive for the child- backed up by

visits, maps, timelines and so on.

Even **science** comes in for the living books treatment: a mixture of non-fiction books, biographies, natural history books and fictional books with a science theme forms the basis of the science curriculum, backed up by occasional experiments. All the book work is only there, however, to provide a foundation on which the child will build his understanding of the natural world, and, for this, field trips are absolutely essential. As Foss puts it, *“All the books in the world are of little use unless one is willing to pack up and get outside.”*

In **mathematics**, the aim as ever is to create an environment that supports and encourages a mathematical way of thinking, to make maths a ‘living discipline’ and avoid the ‘kiss of death’ that the maths textbook can bring. To achieve this, the parent crafts a sequential list of concepts to be learned, taken from any good scope and sequence and then works slowly through each concept. Manipulatives play a large part in maths lessons, not only at the beginning as a concept is introduced but throughout the child’s education to reinforce what has been learned. Maths games and drill work side by side to keep a balance, and, again, living books have their place (indeed, Foss asserts that we should aim to build a maths library just as earnestly as we strive to build a nature library).

Art and music appreciation figure largely in this approach to learning, as one would expect with a Charlotte Mason inspired curriculum. Foss sums up its importance thus: *“Art education is not an extracurricular pursuit. It is integral to a child’s education as art itself is integral to the expression of a man’s soul,”* since it is in the creative aspects of the learning process that we come closest to our Creator.

Which brings us to the area of the curriculum at which this approach excels: **religious education**. It is here that an understanding of the need to reach the child’s heart and soul as well as his mind is so essential. Here, the truth that faith and character are transmitted best through relationships comes to the fore, as the parent-teacher strives to model the faith she wishes to impart to the child, for, we are reminded, ‘faith cannot be taught’; it can only be demonstrated, and an invitation be given, and this is best done by creating an atmosphere of religious formation in the home. How is this done? Through a habit of daily prayer (family and individual); through celebrating the seasons, feasts and fasts of the liturgical year; through art and crafts; through music; through gardening (in reality the list is almost endless). Creating particular times in the day for quiet reflection is held to be essential: Foss is quite famous for her daily ‘teatimes’, combining cakes, cookies and discussions of the Faith! On a more formal level, she recommends that study of the catechism should involve parents closely: the mother should read for herself the section to be studied, then present it to the child in her own words before listening to what the child has to say. Memorisation has its place, but, as the author points out, it is just a beginning, not an end in itself: *“It facilitates, but does not substitute for, real learning. Learning is integrating the facts into their hearts and souls.”* This can only take place when the parent-educator takes seriously her own study of her faith, and, perhaps more importantly, her practice of it on a daily basis.

Of the remaining chapters of the book (focussing on special needs children, team sports, chores, character formation, and battling burnout), I’ll deal only with the last, partly because it was through her advice on burnout that I first came across the writings of Elizabeth Foss. Here is a definition, quoted by the author, which hits the nail on the head:

“It’s burnout when you go to bed exhausted every night and wake up tired every morning....when everything becomes too much effort...when you find yourself cranky all the time, bursting into tears or going into fits of rage at the slightest provocation. It’s burnout when you feel trapped and hopeless, unable to dream, experience pleasure or find contentment.” (Sarah Ban Breathnach, ‘Simple Abundance’). If you recognise these symptoms (and I know many mothers who do, myself included!) you may find the practical advice in this book (also available on Elizabeth’s website) very helpful. As the author writes, whilst our vocation as home educating mothers does call for a great deal of ‘giving up’ of ourselves, it does not demand *“sacrificing at the altar of perfectionism, over commitment and disorganisation”*. Elsewhere Foss comments that since Our Lord has promised, ‘My yoke is easy and my burden light’, if we feel overwhelmed, then perhaps it is because the yoke we are carrying is of our own making and not His.

The final question has to be, just how realistic is this ‘real learning’ approach? Towards the end of the book, Foss poses this question to another veteran home-educating mother. In response, the lady describes a pattern which many home educators with growing families seem to follow: *“Plan a schedule, follow the schedule- it works, it feels good- pile on more formal work, then end up discouraged when it all comes crashing down... plumb the depths for a while feeling very inadequate then recover by spending more time with the children, relating to them; get things more stable, then start the whole cycle of scheduling formal work again”* (and in all of this, read alouds, art and music and getting out of doors are treated as nice extras, but not essential). What many mothers seem to be searching for is away to educate which gives them the security offered by formal learning (the ‘covering what needs to be done’), but liberates them from the negative aspects of the textbook scheme (boredom, repetition, information being processed but not made meaningful, burned out mothers and their children trying to fulfil the requirements of someone else’s curriculum ...). The attraction of the *real learning* approach seems to me to lie just here: that it offers a synthesis of these aspects, a balance between formal learning and ‘*laissez aller*’ (letting go/unschooling): it offers a means to give your child an education which is disciplined enough to make sure the essentials are covered, whilst at the same time encouraging you to make reading aloud, conversation, getting out of doors and creative arts pillars of, rather than extras in, the curriculum. It allows you, in other words, to put your relationship with your children (which often suffers when mum plays ‘teacher’ in a traditional sense) at the heart of the curriculum, and thereby hopefully enables you to engage their hearts as well as their minds in the whole educational process.

This book offers a grander vision of what we are - or could be - doing than ‘school at home’: as the author concludes, *“The opportunity to educate our children is a precious blessing. When we spend large quantities of time listening to each other, working together and enjoying one another we build a lovely family culture. It is within this culture...that we begin to change the world for Christ.”*