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**The First Ride**

There have been bicycles in my kitchen for weeks. Six of them... well, four and two halves, to be precise. The little boys' bikes are one wheel and peddles that attach to the back of our big bikes. Their tires have been inflated and inspected. Tony and Gabe have cleaned each chain (messy business, I assure you). Seats have been adjusted. Carrying racks have been added to the four big bikes and panniers (rather like saddle bags) fitted to the racks. There has been much discussion and head scratching about how to make the handle bar bags fit on the half bikes and how we will do without the hand made racks that no longer fit with the panniers. I'm sick of bikes in my kitchen. We've watched with doleful expressions as snow continued to fall on our hill well into April and even the children, avid sledders all, were beginning to pine for the open road. Then it happened. Unexpectedly, the weather changed and we had a 70F weekend immediately after a hard winter storm. There was only one thing to do.

We have good friends. They ASKED to have our kids for both weekends of New England home school conventions. What's more, they didn't bat an eyelash when, on their only weekend off from minding our kids, we called at seven in the morning on Friday and invited ourselves to dinner (we brought the food) and asked to camp overnight in their back yard.

We pushed off at one o'clock, and rolled past the snow, still several inches deep in our yard, and the ice on our local skating pond, basking in the warm sun and the dry road. Well, it almost happened like that. We spent at least ten minutes trying to make it the first twenty feet out of our driveway. You see, it was our first day to ride our bikes fully loaded: four panniers and a big yel-

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low bag on the parents' bikes. Two panniers and a big yellow bag on each kid's bike. An extra 25lbs or so per kid... which is a lot when the kid only weighs about seventy pounds to begin with. Gabe dropped his bike twice and struggled to lift it. Hannah dropped hers about four times and ended up crying in the road, "I just can't do this! I CAN'T!!" she sniffed, as she proceeded to suck it up, hoist her heavily laden bike back onto its wheels, get on it and ride, albeit a bit wobbly, off after her Daddy and Elisha who was happily peddling away on the back, oblivious of the 40 or so extra pounds that was loaded in front of him.

It is a mere twelve miles to the Woods' house from ours. Less than half of what we consider a good day's ride. Never in my life has twelve miles felt so far! My thoughts echoed Hannah's when, at about mile 8, I was pushing my fully loaded bike with one hand, pulling Ezra behind, up a steep hill while Hannah inched hers ahead of me and I helped Gabe with my other hand to push his. At the top of the hill we had to stop for bandaids as Elisha had managed to dismount, in his usual graceful fashion, skinning his left knee. We really are as crazy as we look.

The evening with the Woods was lovely. We made pizza (out of our panniers) and roasted marshmallows. We slept in our brand spankin' new tents in the 30F weather, perched next to their last pile of snow. Well, we sort of slept. Actually, Ezra and Elisha coughed half of the night. Tony didn't sleep and flopped like a fish next to me and we had to get up at four to put on another layer of clothes because our highly rated better than down sleeping bags turned out to be highly overrated and in need of a return trip to the store. Better to find that out in our friends' back yard than on a cold night in the Sahara I suppose. We were treated to a breakfast fit for kings before we packed everything back up and perched our seat sore bottoms back on our bicycles to ride the measly 15 miles home.

I must say that day two went better. We pushed our bikes up hill for most of the first two hours. I spent more time at Daniel Webster's birth place picking metal splinters out of the puncture wound that Hannah somehow managed to give herself whilst parking her bike and bandaging it up than I did enjoying the history. But then, we crested the little mountain that felt to us like Everest and we rode down hill for a good two miles. What a joy. We ate at a fabulous little family run cafe and moseyed on toward home throughout the afternoon. We sat by a pond for an hour watching the fattest tadpoles we'd EVER seen, and investigating salamanders in their underwater incarnation. We saw dragonfly nymphs and this little creature who lives in a tube he builds for himself... rather like a fresh water hermit crab. It was Charlotte Mason science at its best. When we finally dismounted and pushed our bikes up the last hill, our driveway, Gabe summed up the general sentiment by asking, "Dad, can we go ride our bikes now?"

## A Philosophical Discussion

If there is one theme that emerged, once again, from our discussions with families at the conventions this spring, it is this: Philosophy. When we mention Philosophy, many people think of a terribly boring major in college with huge books by musty old dead people to read through, with no prospect of employment at the end. That's not what we mean. Philosophy is not just something we study from books, it is something we live. Everyone has one, even if he isn't conscious of it.

A working definition of Philosophy is this: Why we do what we do. Your philosophy will drive your methods in all areas of life. Your philosophy is your set of beliefs that cause you to act a certain way and do a certain thing instead of doing something else. For example: We believe that children are a gift from God, that parents are endowed with the responsibility to teach them and that children are born avid learners in every area of life, that each day we draw breath is a gift and a stewardship. That is an aspect of our Philosophy. The action that comes from that is that we have chosen to home school our children and weave learning into every corner of life, not just "school time" creating an exciting, adventurous life for them to live and learn in.

So many families we meet have spent years following various methods, hopping from curriculum to curriculum hoping to find the

answer to their current dilemma in a box where someone else tells them what to do with their kids. Not surprisingly, they haven't found it, and they are not happy with where they are at in their methods. Most of these folks can't articulate what the problem is at first, but after discussion it becomes apparent: They believe one thing about life, child rearing, education, you name it; but they are doing something that doesn't match that belief and so there is conflict. Something is not working. Something needs to change. Maybe it is what they think or believe about children and their education. More often it is their methods.

I spoke with several moms across our booth this spring who said the same thing: "I have this warm, homey vision of home schooling, with lots of reading great books, activities, and learning adventures, but I am struggling to get it all done and we don't have any time left over." Upon further discussion the "it" that they were struggling to get done was someone else's idea of what their schooling should look like. Often they were trying to "do school" to their children in a very institutionalized school way when their Philosophy was causing them to rebel against the very thing they were doing.

There are LOTS of ways to educate a child. We are not trying to advocate any one way of getting the job done. Some families thrive on the structure of a packaged curriculum in

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which everything is laid out and pre-planned and “fool proof.” Others are exactly the opposite and still get the job done. Most of us fall somewhere in the middle. The trick is, NOT to find the perfect curriculum, but to carefully define your philosophy. What do you believe about children, parents, how kids learn, what the Scripture says to families, how you yourself were educated, what your family vision is? Think carefully through what you want the end result to be for your children. If you can't see the whole map and know where the destination is, how will you ever get there? Then, when you see where you are going and what you would like the journey to be like, you can easily choose the best vehicle to ride in.

Defining your Philosophy BEFORE you purchase next fall's curriculum will give you the confidence you need to do something different from what all your friends are doing. It will allow you to walk right by some curriculum providers without even a twinge of guilt about what you are not covering that they are because you'll realize that you're on a different path, with a different destination. It will allow you to buy only cut and paste art books from the big name curriculum (like I do!) because they are great for your three year old's fine motor skills without feeling badly that you aren't teaching him cursive at four like they suggest. You can happily dig through the catalogs, mining out interesting living books or buy a whole package of workbook oriented PACES that might make me cringe

because you'll know where you are going and what you need to accomplish for your family for this year and over the long haul. And, you know what? It will work for you. If you've considered carefully your Philosophy up front, then you're much more likely to choose the materials that will get you where you want to go and you'll enjoy the ride more. So will your kids.

If there is one encouragement that we have for families on this marathon journey of schooling their own children, it is this: Think and pray through your Philosophy first. Know what you believe and why you believe it. Then you'll be prepared to choose wisely for your children. Your school doesn't have to look like mine. In fact, it probably shouldn't because your Philosophy will be different than mine and that's a good thing! We wear ourselves out as Moms comparing ourselves to other people when what we are comparing is apples and oranges.

While you are laying at the beach watching your kids swim this summer, consider your Philosophy. Suss out the “Why” and the “How” will become easier!

## As Seasons Change

by Stephanie Payton

\*\*\*This is a reprint of an article written three years ago. It is equally (maybe more so) applicable today as it was then. I look at the changes that have occurred in our family, and I am blessed and inspired. I continue to be amazed by the graciousness of our Lord, and how He meets us in our EXACT moment of need. Praise God that though the seasons of our life change, He is forever the same.\*\*\*

May is here. I can feel the whisper of hot summer days to come. The taunting, the teasing, the question of “Am I here to stay or not?” Unlike the cold days of winter, it slides in smoothly, almost sneaking up and taking all creation by surprise. It is a month where anything truly goes. At least, here in the Midwest. It is as likely to be snowing as it is sunny and humid. You might find yourself in jeans and a sweatshirt, or just as likely in a bathing suit. With all the changes in the air, I find myself moving at the speed of a turtle. The turning of May feels more like the end and beginning of a new year than January first. It is a time when I reevaluate what has happened in the previous year, and where I am headed from here. This year has been no exception.

It has been a full year for us. This time last year, we were just finishing up all of our paperwork to adopt our new son. We were eagerly anticipating what the summer would hold for us, hoping that our “turn” would come quickly. And it did. The summer passed in a blur as our travels took us around the world, and we were filled with the hope of our return trip to add Lucas to our family. Fall came quickly, and we were engaged in the whirlwind activities of homeschooling, trying to cover as much ground as possible before our new addition. At that same time, our third child was “officially” diagnosed with a communication disorder, and we found ourselves attempting to deal with all the ramifications of that. As we began to realize the extent of her needs, both physically

and emotionally, we felt challenged in many ways.

With winter came all the adjustments of a newly adopted child, and figuring out what our family now looked like. It’s interesting, how every child enters a different family than the child before. And how the family is then shaped and formed into a NEW creation. The reshaping and molding can be challenging at times. It happens, though, as it did with us, and we began to move forward as this new, stronger entity.

Spring sprang upon us, and we were all filled with the promise of fresh air and new life. Spring is usually my favorite time of year, as all things seem bright and fresh in a new way. I feel like a young child, discovering all that is new and wonderful in the world. This spring, however, has been an exception.

I have felt the weight of discouragement. I have battled for the grounds of my mind. I have spent many days feeling smothered by the waves of life’s expectations. Even as I write this, I am struggling to hold on to the faithfulness of God. To know in my mind Who He is, and to fully embrace all that means in my heart, are two different things. But my hope remains in this. As I go through the motions of what we call “life”, I must recognize the various seasons I will pass through. And some of these seasons will require me to follow what I know in my mind, and trust that my heart will catch up at some point. There is an enemy on the prowl, just waiting to devour us, and sometimes our only defense is simply to walk in obedience. We may not FEEL like it, but this is the time for our faith to be demonstrated in action. One step at a time, maybe in the dark, perhaps only as far as a small beam of light will reach. We walk. And we can know that the One Who holds the universe in the palm of His hand walks only a step ahead of us. He is there.

With each new day, I am more aware of how time is but a fleeting vapor. He has given us a life that

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lasts but a moment. I am constantly challenged to live it in a way that is not just pleasing, but GLO-RIFYING to Him. Time is precious. Instead of trudging through life in the valley, I am called to dwell in the shadow of the Most High. It is the only place I will find the rest I so desperately seek.

Why do I share this with you? I imagine there might be others who are feeling the weight of pressures that sometimes cannot even be identified or understood. We live in a world that is moving with a frenzy. This pace, if we try to keep up with it, can leave us feeling too drained to LIVE the life that is important to us. And when we are drained, emptied out of our joy, we are left open for despair and discouragement

to come in. I know for me, when discouragement sets in, it is so difficult to see clearly the way the Lord has made for us. It is easy to compromise on values once held firm, and easy to forget the One Who cares more deeply for us than any other ever could. Have courage, my friend, and take heart. God knows your need of the moment, and all you need do is reach out and touch the fringe of His cloak (Matthew 9:20) and your need will be met. God contains the strength and courage that we need to face the circumstances and trials of our lives, and He is faithful to impart that strength to us. As the shadow of time rides on, do not forsake the One Who knows you best, and loves you still.



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## The Wilds of Creation

### Rascal & Bandit, part 2

by Judy Daley

Rascal & Bandit, my baby raccoons, were mobile now and I found myself under attack constantly. For some reason, they found it hilarious to ambush me at the most inopportune times. I would be standing at the kitchen sink listening to them playing in another room, when out of nowhere, I become the victim of a toe bite! As I looked down I would see the raccoons bouncing away, only to sneak around the wall to the other doorway for a second attack.

I thought they'd get tired from all the exercise, but apparently that was not the case with raccoons. The more they ran the more energy they had.

One day, I observed them interacting with one another. I was able to gain an understanding of their body language and vocal sounds. Body language is a huge part of communication. But the distress (vocal) call was the most important thing for me to learn. It was a nasally-cry used to provoke fear, which would cause them to run back to me for protection.

At any given moment I would be trampled by two bouncing boys chasing each other through the house. Off the couch, onto the chair, around my legs and down the hall they would run. Just as fast as they had whooshed by me, back they flew. When it came to folding laundry one raccoon would distract me by sitting in the basket of clean clothes, while the other stole an article of clothing running it into the kitchen to be dipped into the dog's water bowl. As soon as that mess got cleaned up I would notice them grabbing dog kibbles, running to the couch and then they would push the pieces underneath the cushions. Apparently they did that more often than I thought. I found kibbles in the baseboard heaters, under the carpets and even in a closet!

One day I caught the boys pulling the dog's fur and biting his tail. I scolded them for picking on the dog and sent them into the living room for a time out. A few moments passed and all was quiet.....too quiet. When I peeked into the living room to check on them I saw Rascal balancing on his belly atop the aquarium. It housed my two guinea pigs. The little bugger stretched his arms down as far as he could into the aquarium just to "feel" the guinea pig. I could not hold back the laughter and I grabbed the camera. That was worthy of a photograph!

In early summer I found myself taking the boys with me just about everywhere I went. This included camping. Tent camping with nocturnal animals was quite an experience. First of all, sleeping is not an option with loose raccoons in one's tent. Just as I would fall asleep, I'd feel warm hands sliding gently through my hair, rubbing my entire scalp. I pretended to be asleep,

but then felt a thump on my chest and two more little hands sliding back and forth over my face. At first it was quite soothing, until I had to bare the pain of those long fingers slipping up my nostrils nearly into my sinus cavity. OUCH!

Secondly, they do not take well to the confines of a tent. In the darkness the two raccoons began a crazy game of chase, bouncing off the tent walls in a relentless frenzy that went on and on!

They growled and grunted at each other which sounded rather frightening at times.

When morning came we made the long hike to the latrine. Shared by other campers, one must be courteous and patient. These are two qualities raccoons clearly do not possess. As I stepped into a stall, the boys took the opportunity to “take a look around”. They had become explorers in the uncharted territory called “the bath house”.

Water was pooled up on the floor which they immediately began playing in. I had hoped they would stay there for a few more minutes but that wouldn’t happen. I felt a twinge of anxiety as the raccoons disappeared from my view. They had noticed several pair of feet under the stall doors and decided to go check them out. As you can imagine, cold wet hands on your feet first thing in the morning can surely catapult you into the day. All it took was for one woman to scream for Bandit & Rascal to go into high gear. They ran underneath every partition wall after that, grabbing feet, and hunching their backs in a playful gesture as they bounced along. I could track where the raccoons were by the comments I heard flying out of each stall. “My apologies ladies, it’s their first time camping” I said. Fortunately for me, the woman and young girls seemed quite amused by Rascal & Bandit’s antics.

During the day the raccoons explored the campground. Around noon we would walk down to the lake front, four-legged stragglers behind me feeling every rock, plant and bull frog they could find. They would jump on the tree stumps, seemingly to play king of the hill. They chased each other around the picnic tables and wrestle over blankets lying on the beach (occupied or not). They were oblivious to everyone around them. When the time came to return to our campsite I was hard pressed to get the boys moving in the right direction. Inevitably, I would resort to using the distress call which never failed me. Bandit & Rascal would run straight for my legs, climbing all the way up to my shoulders before looking back to see what it was they were running from. Once on my shoulders, I made haste getting back to camp.

By the end of the long weekend I was exhausted. Bandit & Rascal seemed to be more rejuvenated than worn out from all of the fun they had.

I put them in their cage for the ride home. It was safer that way plus it gave me time to relax without little hands slipping down my collar, or digging in my ears as I drove.

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It seemed like such a short summer. By fall the raccoons were full grown and showing how aggressive they could be. They spent the winter months in an outdoor cage with a nest box full of straw for warmth, only coming out to eat on rare occasions.

In spring of the following year the boys were dangerous and wild. They were cranky and unpredictable, making it tricky to get them into a crate for transporting them to freedom in the mountains. The release was bitter sweet. I remembered in the beginning how much they needed me but now.... They were on their own, free and wild.

### **Mail Bag**

*Jennifer,*

*It was nice to meet you at the Indianapolis convention. Last week we began using your year 2 curriculum. This is the first real curriculum we have used with our kids and it went great.*

*Just to refresh your memory of us, we have four children age 1,3,7 and 10. Up until last week we have been un-schoolers. We have to do a three week on and one week off rotation due to a visitation situation. We went one week and then had this week off, next week we will do week two.*

*I know that starting our school year in April seems a little strange, but we have to go year round due totaking a week off a month. We camp most of the summer andI wanted to establish our school schedule for each daywell in advance of going to the campground.*

*Thank you again for answering my questions at the convention and all the help you have been.*

*May God bless your work and your family.*

*I look forward to beginning again and I think that this will work out for us.*

*Tara B*

Tara: I'm so glad that things are going well for you! Keep us posted on your progress. I'd love to hear more about your transition from un-schooling. -j

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## **A Day On The Farm... The Weasel Farm**

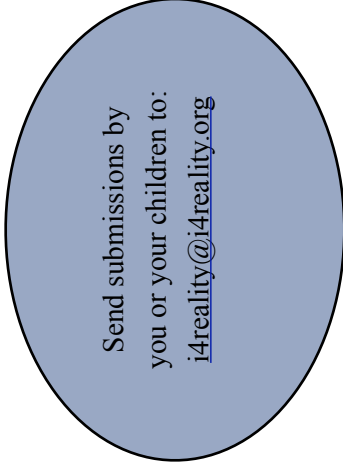
Visiting our house is not for the faint of heart. You never know what will happen. My children are all forest babies who thrive on adventure. A warm spring day is ripe with inspiration for them and they love nothing more than to drag other unsuspecting children into their grand schemes. My friends are prepared for this. They bring extra bandaids.

We mothers enjoyed our quiet time and tea while the girls played pioneers under the fort. The boys had disappeared deep into the forest to explore their castle fort (a pile of rocks left from blasting the road out of the mountain). It is about half a mile back into the bush, they'd taken the radios and a water skin Gabe made last spring after his birthday. It was a perfect morning.

Then: static coming from the radio the boys left me and Gabe's voice screaming: "Mom!" crackle crackle "...fell..." crackle "...there's blood everywhere!!" Mrs. McDonald and I leapt from the couch, I grabbed two towels from the front of the stove and sprinted out into the woods with the radio yelling to my friend to drive her car around the other side of the hill and meet us closer to their fort. I ran across the hill, over the 60ft tall downed white pine that is a four foot high obstacle in the path, through the swamp, past the state forest sign and back over the rocks toward their castle fort, all the while shouting through the radio to Gabe, trying to ascertain just who fell, the McDonald boy or Elisha, and how bad the injury really was... "is he awake?!" "Yes Mom, but there is BLOOD EVERYWHERE!" Let me just say, a half of a mile is a long way to run through the forest. When I arrived, panting, at the castle there he was: Elisha, of course, howling at the top of his lungs, looking for all the world like he'd landed the starring role in a B grade horror flick. There was blood everywhere. He'd been showing off and tumbled an undetermined number of feet down the rock pile and put a 2.5 x .5" gash above his left ear. The upside, no concussion, no broken bones and I couldn't see his skull.

My friend, Jenn, finally made it around to the back side of our hill, in her van, to find us walking, the boys carrying their gear and chattering excitedly about the grand adventure and what happened, Elisha sniffing, but walking, and me: holding a blood soaked tea towel to his gaping cut. Head wounds bleed. Mrs. McDonald drove us to the hospital where Elisha received three staples as a badge of honor to be proudly displayed for the next week to his less fortunate friends who were positively green with envy for the glory. Three weeks later, he's no worse for the wear, except for a little bald spot from the scar, and begging to go back to castle fort... I think not.

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