

BOOK REVIEW

UNSCHOOLING!

A Little Way of Homeschooling

Thirteen Families Discover Catholic Unschooling

edited by Suzie Andres

THIS IS A RADICAL BOOK going to the *radices*, the roots of education. It is less about teaching and more about learning, with or without a teacher.

Unschooling is **natural learning**. Its most radical form is simply a full family life without formal lessons. It works if parents can trust a child to find things out for himself: the *what, how, why* of things and events, using his God-given *appetite for knowledge*; an appetite in the soul, often unrecognized as the feeding of the mind, a spiritual form of eating.

CONVERSATION

NATURAL LEARNING depends on lots of talking about everything in life.

Children first learn from listening to parents and later on talking with them. Meanwhile parents themselves are learning from the child how he thinks:-

- (1) remembering their own childhood;
- (2) listening and talking with their own children.

Key unschooling ideas are that a child:-

- learns what he wants to learn
- at his own pace
- within varying degrees of parental permissiveness
- encouraged by his own curiosity and initiative
- with parents as resource persons and facilitators.

NATURE, CIVILIZATION and SOCRATES

UNSCHOOLING needs time outdoors in nature, and time in libraries, museums, art galleries and historic sites; it uses ancient and modern sources, from books to internet; simple activities: shopping with written lists, reading labels, adding up, weights & measures and responsibility; fun activities like 'window shopping' in hardware and fashion shops; and time together, time alone: "Never less alone than when alone."

A salesman says, "The best teacher is a good book," and the priest adds, "God's book is best — read the Bible.

Parents and tutors say, "The best book is a good teacher;" and the priest adds, "God's teacher is the holy Catholic Church."

Talk and listen and question. That's what Socrates did (470-399 B.C.). His pupils were learning to think, reflect, observe, and even without books.

HIDDEN CURRICULA

SUZIE ANDRES's book allots a chapter each for her own and eight other autobiographies of the full version of Catholic unschooling. And none of them expect radical unschooling to suit everyone.

Unschooling parents have **hidden strengths** to which they do not advert, of virtue, grace and character. Without these hidden strengths, informal learning would not work. These strengths are *caught* informally by children, even when not *taught* formally.

Nor do they abandon the **Church's supernatural**

curricula. As good Catholics, they live the liturgical life and the daily piety of prayer, penance, and resisting Satan's promptings from original sin.

There is also **nature's curriculum** of times and seasons, of day and night, summer and winter, of sleeping, eating, working, playing, which all men must observe.

They are rejecting only formalized teaching.

PARTIAL UNSCHOOLING

HER BOOK has four chapters of autobiographies on a less radical form of unschooling which includes some formal teaching of **Reading, 'Riting & 'Rithmetic**, with the usual **reading aloud** as a family and lots of **private reading** motivated by delight.

In this modified form, parents specialize in *strewing clues* like a treasure hunt, each prompting a search for the next. Good parents and teachers always did it.

So a child might even choose school, or at least partial attendance for some subjects, which is possible in some Australian states, but not in NSW at the time of writing.

ST THOMAS AQUINAS and ARISTOTLE

A **philosophical appendix** by Tony Andres, Suzie's husband, sums up Aquinas and Aristotle: men are meant to be happy through **virtue** and **natural morality**:

1. Education should be good for the learner.
2. All men by nature desire to know.
3. Learners are the principle agents in their learning.
4. Different learners learn different things at different times.

All home schooling attempts 1-4, but unschooling claims to do them without a planned curricula:-

SCHOOLING	UNSCHOOLING
with formal teaching	with informal learning
rigid time table & curriculum	agenda: all times, places, persons
in an age grouping	all learning personalized
same subjects at same time	adjusted to interests & abilities
marks awarded for all work	desire to learn for its own sake

HOMESCHOOL & UNSCHOOL in FICTION

THE *Bush Boys* books by this reviewer include home schooling and some aspects of unschooling.

Not till the end of *Cuthbert Joins the Bush Boys* (the second book) chapter 31, is it revealed to their visitors, and hence to the reader, that the Cumberland family home school. The author knew already, but kept it concealed in *Bush Boys*, the first book, by carefully omitting any mention of Greg, Bernie and Kate going out to institutionalized school.

In a draft of *Cuthbert*, Kate said, "We have three hours school in the morning and run wild in the afternoon." This shocked some of Victorian home educators who were helping improve the draft: "It's illegal!"

So the text was modified. Bernie says, "Mum used to

teach in a one-teacher school and we older ones have private study in the late afternoon and after tea."

And Kate says, "We have lessons for three and a half hours in the morning and an hour and a half in the afternoon, and there's lots of time to play outside."

But this left the author battling to find enough time to fit in adventures every day... After all, it's an adventure book!

Later, he realized it is unnecessary to have trained and practised classroom teacher; indeed, some ex-teachers in Suzie's book consider it a disadvantage for *any* home schooling.

This reviewer's rigidity! His third story, *Bush Boys and Bush Rangers*, chapter 10, has a schoolroom in the home and a tight timetable, the syndrome of the "school at home", the extreme 'right wing' of home schooling. Other homeschoolers reject such rigour, and not just the unschoolers.

Despite this rigour, each child is given free reign to choose his own **indoor and outdoor projects** — a partial unschooling. A sympathetic Protestant homeschooling mother-of-ten was intrigued: "Where did you get the ideas for the projects?" He told her, "My own imagination!"

However after this reviewer had seen homeschooling in action, he freed things up in *Bush Boys on the Move*, chapter 5. Mrs Cumberland explains to a neighbour that she has **given up rigidity for flexibility**, and all chores, hobbies and roaming the bush count as 'educational'.

Thus six boys from four families go on a six-day 'educational' expedition, daily making entries in a log book during their rest in the shade straight after lunch.

New Boys in the Bush introduces the Lawsons whose circumstances require leaving suburban Boxwatch for an ancient house among trees in the Wild Bush Mountains, but without electricity. In chapter 11, Jack, Jim and Joe are put on a week's trial: home schooling in the morning and getting firewood each afternoon for the fuel stove and hot water system. Their reward will be afternoons free for exploring the bush, and it will count as 'education', but on two conditions: a verbal report at the evening *convivium* (Dad's grandiose title for dinner), and keeping a log book — with written entries 'padded' out with maps/diagrams.

Dad's over-permissiveness and his insistence on the discovery method nearly kills his sons every day! Finally, he *discovers* the limitations of *discovery*, and that the negatives, "what not to do", must be learnt by *direct instruction*! Such subtleties pass unnoticed by a young reader leaving joy in wild adventures unalloyed.

IMAGINATIVE LEARNING

Ten Ways to Destroy the Imagination of your Child by Anthony Esolen uses **bitter irony** (*Handouts* n. 91):-

1. **Keep children indoors** so they never learn self-reliance.
2. **Never leave them alone**; waste time in school & transport.
3. **Keep children from machinery** and its operators, and from finding out and doing things.
4. **Get rid of Fairy Tales.**
5. **No Heroes and Patriots** and only cynicism about them.
6. **Cut heroes down with flippancy and sniggering.**
7. **Replace love with lust**: abolish manhood and duties.
8. **Unisex all the children**, 'herd' them and stop deeper friendships.
9. **Distract them** by the Shallow, the Unreal and Noise (both sound and colour): abolish silence and solitude and thought.
10. **Deny the Transcendent**: proclaim atheism and that there is nothing but 'matter' and that nothing has meaning.

Not surprisingly, Professor Esolen is highly critical of the politically correct mentality which has made institutional schooling normative. So he is sympathetic to alternatives...

SEVEN "R"s in Christian Curricula

1. Religion
2. Respect
3. Reason
4. Responsibility
5. Reading
6. 'Riting
7. 'Rithmetic.

See *Handouts* n. 112 of 29-9-14 for a homeschooling apologetic. It summarizes the submission of the Cardinal Newman Catechist Consultants to the Select Committee on Home Schooling of the NSW Parliament.

THE ART OF TEACHING by Gilbert Highet

FIRST PUBLISHED in 1951 and frequently republished (a rarity for books on education!), his wisdom will enrich all parents, school teachers, home schoolers, unschoolers.

The usual study divisions into individual subjects, English, Maths, Science, History, Geography etc can be enriched by revision lessons which do not simply summarize but present the content from a completely different angle or a grand overview. This **integrates** the seemingly isolated facts, breathes life into them, and forges the links which bring the mind to understanding and it makes it all so memorable.

Some homeschoolers make **unit studies** their curriculum and span the individual subjects in a more life-like fashion.

ALIEN FORCES

THE NSW Board of Studies declares Australia's National Curriculum to be the basis of the NSW Curriculum and binding on all homeschoolers. Many school teachers and homeschoolers find it suffocating, not just the unschoolers.

Such coerciveness in details is contrary to parental rights to choose education and to the common sense maxim that "one size does not fit all".

Parliament's Select Committee gave a private hearing, closed to press, public and bureaucrats, and protected by Parliamentary Privilege, to the unregistered (and thereby illegal) homeschoolers. They included some unschoolers.

Many homeschoolers distrust the bureaucrats, more so since August, 2013, and most especially some oppressive Authorised Persons (inspectors) of the Board of Studies.

Indeed, NSW is now proven to have the most oppressive regulations in Australia on home schooling, some say worldwide, apart from a few countries like Germany where Hitler's ban on homeschooling in the 1930s has never been revoked.

THIS UNSCHOOLING BOOK is worth reading!

ITS nine autobiographies of unschoolers include families ranging from 2 to 8 children.

They offer a *story of a soul* (a title borrowed from St Thérèse's autobiography) from thirteen homeschooling mothers living their Catholic spirituality; they offer enriching ideas which can help all parents help their children to grow in "wisdom and stature, in favour with God and man," Luke 2:52.

They offer us encouraging accounts of loyalty to Our Lord inspired by the Little Way of St Thérèse of the Infant Jesus, that "Jesus does not demand great actions from us but simply surrender and gratitude"... so easy to say and so hard to do.

And they do try to face up to the problems of original sin and temptations to laziness, selfishness and other wilfulness. All insist on active participation in the family jobs (I prefer 'jobs' to 'chores') on which family life depends. They do not allow slackness in religious duties or good manners. Nor are they irresponsibly permissive in rejecting learning curricula.

So you don't have to be homeschooling, let alone into unschooling, to benefit from *A Little Way of Homeschooling*. It's good spirituality and good on the lay apostolate. Its homely old-style B&W illustrations quietly underscore the greatness of the themes it treats.

PB, 233 pp. **\$29.95**

Father James Tierney