



Introduction

The Heart of the Matter

Several years ago I was asked to share with a homeschooling group about the “heart issue” of homeschooling. I was not given an outline, but a topic: “How to Have a Heart for Your Kids.” I thought and prayed about it, and as I prepared for the presentation at our state conference, I took the word “heart” and turned it into an acronym:

- H** — Have a heart for the things of God
- E** — Enrich your marriage
- A** — Accept your kids
- R** — Release them to God
- T** — Teach them the truth

I peppered the presentation with plenty of examples from my own homeschooling journey, also known as

Mr. Toad's Wild Ride. This teaching seemed to resonate with my audience, as many moms told me they had been affirmed and encouraged.

Then I was asked to consider turning the presentation into a book. I struggled with this idea because writing is so different from speaking. So many of the audiences I had spoken to knew my family's story, and this particular presentation made sense to moms who had the benefit of this foreknowledge. But unless my readers were already familiar with our family, well, the notion of a book seemed like a birthday cake without a party: What's the point? So I hope you'll indulge me as I provide a little background.

Having told our story over and over to audiences all over this great country, I am amazed at how it touches so many lives and hearts. Yet I can take no credit—God wrote it that way, not me! It is my prayer that our story will bless you and that it will bring you closer to the Master and help you point your children to Him as worthy and able.

Has Anyone Seen My Heart?

The short version of how we got into homeschooling is simple: There was a lot of yelling and screaming. In fact, I was ready to quit almost before we started. Our party line to family and friends was, “This is just for kindergarten. Surely we can’t mess that up!” Our plan at that time was to just get through the one year. Mere survival was the goal.

True confession: I had lived most of my life principally concerned about myself, and all in all, I had been rather successful. I had my faith all mapped out from a young age: I went to church, sang the songs, recited the verses, and knew the facts. What I lacked was a real, growing, intimate relationship with God. After I married Davis, we continued to go to church, but I still did not need God; He was only fire insurance.

Then God blessed us with a son. I remember thinking when I held him at the hospital, “Are they really going to let me take him home? I don’t know how to do this! What if I mess it up?” Now, you must understand that there were many friends and family who would, and

some eventually did, help me with the new challenges I was facing. Yet I did not want to admit to needing help from anyone.

Eighteen months later, Charles discovered (as every child will at some point) that he was independent of me and that he could exert himself and his will. Indeed, he was by-the-book strong-willed. Charles knew at a young age what he wanted, and he had an amazing determination to get it. In fact, he was one of those kids that was willing to die on every hill!

During this time, we had a great pediatrician, Dr. Elberson, and a great friend, Paulette Gates. They supported us in our goal of positively redirecting Charles's strength of will. They encouraged me to keep up the fight, assuring me that it would all be worth it in the end.

Living for Someday

I looked forward to the start of school almost before Charles was born. I had taught public high school in Texas and performed some homebound instruction in Ohio. I loved teaching! I loved the classroom, and I loved the challenge. But I also knew that I wanted to be home

for my kids. I knew that was important. But the fall of 1990, when Charles was a newborn, when the leaves were changing and the buses started their routes, I was already dreaming of returning to my passion.

I think it should be noted here that we were planning on having only one child, maybe two. (This marked a notable increase from the “no kids” napkin agreement we had once signed together in a restaurant. But that’s a story for another time.) As I sat on the front porch of our seventy-year-old home on Paxton Avenue in Akron, Ohio, full-term with my firstborn, watching the students making their way into the high school across the street, I dreamed of the day I would go back to teaching full-time.

God is so good to go before us, leading us to places we never intended to be, much less wanted to go. On this particular street there lived five stay-at-home moms. One of them, Courtney Fairfax, had been praying that God would send other moms to the neighborhood, and He answered her prayers. We were still settling in when new neighbors, the DiPaulos, moved into the home on the adjacent corner. Davis went over to meet them, and when he got back, he mentioned a word I had

never heard before and which would significantly change our lives, though not for five more years. That word was “homeschooling.”

Lesla DiPaulo was planning on homeschooling her two young daughters. My first question was “Why?” Once I got to know her, she seemed smarter than that. What was she thinking? She was gracious and patiently explained that she thought it was best for their family and that it would encourage the growth of their family relationships. I listened, not at all interested—not even amused.

Now that I was a new mom, I set about meeting the other moms in the neighborhood, and I learned there were two others who were homeschooling. Was it something in the water?

I thought the choice to homeschool meant these moms had nothing better to do, that they had no passion, no dream, no drive. I figured they just couldn’t let go of their kids and get on with their lives. Or perhaps the parents simply couldn’t afford to send the children anywhere else. I feared their poor kids would become socially inept outcasts, unable to work with others or solve conflicts.

They proved me wrong in living color.

God is so good. I was privileged to watch these young women and their families live out loud in front of me for three years that proved foundational in our preparation for homeschooling. For the three years Courtney, Kathy, Lesa, Carolyn and I were neighbors, we had a regular Bible study together, we gardened together, and we watched each other's kids. We laughed and cried, shared life together, and grew close. I came to know these women as lovers of their husbands, children, and their God. They were faithful, seeking to obey and honor their heavenly Father in all things. They were not the weirdos I had made them out to be. No, these were women of God willing to sacrifice themselves to be all He had planned them to be. God was real to them. He was part of their every decision.

And their kids? Their children were the most polite I had ever known. Conflicts were resolved in a timely manner, apologies made, and relationships strengthened. It was just about an ideal neighborhood situation.

This was the experience of a lifetime, and it became a reference point for my life, a safe time and a time of great blessing that I often return to in my mind.

Moving On

Then came the time to move away from Akron. The office where Davis was working was about to go under, and though he was not out of a job, it was time to look. I admit it: I was ready to move back to the South. This Texas girl was ready to defrost. Snow in April and May and chilly fireworks on the Fourth of July were not my cup of tea. Davis had tried to warn me about the winters; he had wanted to stay in the South all along. Now I was more than ready to get back to the heat and humidity. And so it was that Davis took a job with the same company that would move us to Charlotte, North Carolina.

I was thrilled. I could already feel the sun on my skin.

Yet moving was bittersweet. I had been so blessed by the women in my neighborhood. Even though I was hopeful for the future, I knew in my heart that we had all been a part of something I might never get to experience again. We had a party in the park, they gave us a picture collage, and we said good-bye. At the time, I underestimated the long-term impact these friends would have on my life.

In choosing a new home, our highest priority was the schools. Charles would soon be nearing school age, and the public schools in Charlotte were undergoing a transitional growth period marked by changing school assignments, teacher shortages, and bond issues. Keep in mind that homeschooling was still nowhere on my radar screen. I had a plan, and it included a big yellow school bus.

Our initial move to Charlotte proved to be more than a little complicated. The following details are of no real relevance to our homeschooling journey, other than to leave no holes in the story. We found a house and moved straight in upon arrival in May. We were there long enough to paint, wallpaper, put up a fence, and get connected at a church. Essentially, we were in town long enough to exhale. Then the company moved us back to Akron in the spring of 1994.

We moved back unhappily and were there for twelve months when the company changed course once more and moved us back to Charlotte in June 1995. Shortly after our arrival in town, Davis began looking for a new job and started with a new company in May 1996,

just after the birth of our third child and first daughter, Savannah Anne.

Praying for His Teacher

With this second move to Charlotte, we again focused on schools. It was now time for Charles to start kindergarten. We could not afford a private education, so we purchased a house in the “best school district” in town. I had it all planned out: This was the year I got my life back. This was the year that Charles would go to school and Anderson (our second boy) would go to preschool two days a week. I would have time alone with little Savannah Anne. I had visions of joining a Bible study again, cleaning house and having it stay clean, completing some long-neglected projects, and having lunch with friends. This was going to work out perfectly.

After we enrolled Charles, we were asked by the school to submit a letter as to what we wanted in a teacher for our child. They wanted to know our child’s strengths and weaknesses and our desires and dreams for his educational experience. Wow. We hadn’t expected this. Davis wrote a detailed letter, and we began to pray

for Charles's teacher. In July, we were invited to an open house and met his new teacher. In retrospect, there were many glaring red flags, most of which we were blind to. Nevertheless, we were underwhelmed. When we got to the car, Davis turned to me and asked, "Is that the teacher you have been praying for? Because that is not who I have been praying for." I felt the same way.

So we continued to pray for his teacher, and I kept planning my life. We had it all worked out. Davis would take Charles and the neighbor boy to school in the morning on his way to work, then the neighbor mom would meet the boys at the bus stop and walk them home. It was perfect. Charles was off to school, and I didn't have to leave the house. Everything seemed to be going off without a hitch.

The Yellow School Bus

On the first day the kids were suppose to wear a tag with their bus number pinned to their clothes. Charles was tagged with #809. He was all smiles, off on a new adventure. But that first day he did not ride to school alone. We all loaded up the car and took him to school as a

family, complete with pictures. Interestingly, the teacher seemed even less like what we had prayed for, but what could we do?

That afternoon, as I went out to check the mail and meet my son after his first day of kindergarten, I saw my neighbor come over the hill with her dog and her son, but mine was missing. “He wasn’t on the bus,” she told me.

I ran into the house and called the school. The secretary responded, “That must be who this is sitting here.”

I called Davis, and he left work to pick up our son and bring him home. On day two, Davis took the boys to school and went inside to talk to the teacher and get the plan straight. We even retagged Charles so that there could be no mistake—he was to return home on bus #809.

So that afternoon I went down to check the mail and meet my son after his second day of kindergarten. Again I saw the silhouette of my neighbor, her dog, and her son, but mine was nowhere to be seen. I didn’t wait for an explanation—I went to the phone.

“He’s not here,” I was told. “He was put on the wrong bus.”

Davis was hot. Again he left work to retrieve our son. Charles seemed more upset this time. Davis talked with the secretary and the principal and found out that the teacher was the one responsible for getting the kids on the right bus. He then made the point that she had failed to do this two consecutive days despite the tag, which still clung to Charles’s shirt.

Though the principal was sympathetic, he was unwilling to change Charles’s teacher per Davis’s request. He asked us to please just forgive her and go forward and let this thing work itself out.

Work itself out?! What if Charles had gotten off of the bus just because he was ready to stop riding around aimlessly? What if someone had picked him up? What if . . . ?

We decided to keep Charles in school as we moved on up the chain of command to secure a change in instructors. In the meantime though, Charles was unwilling to ride the bus. By now it had completely lost its appeal. My plan was quickly unraveling as I joined



other parents in the afterschool pickup line, all because his teacher couldn't read a tag.

But that wasn't all. The neighbor boy was bringing home papers, and Charles wasn't. I mean, nothing. This seemed strange to me, because when he was in preschool I practically needed a suitcase to lug everything home that he did each day. Charles had been in kindergarten for twelve days, and the only thing he had brought home was a "How I did today" slip.

Davis had made several phone calls, but no change in teachers was forthcoming. The principal controlled teacher assignments, and he was refusing to budge. Finally, on day thirteen, Davis took the day off from work to visit Charles's class. Davis went to school with Charles at 7:30 a.m. and was home with him by 12:30. He described it this way: "It wasn't like anything bad was going on. It was more like nothing was going on. Just filler, nothing impressive. Nothing."

So Davis took the radical step of withdrawing our son from public school.

Now What?

I had been afraid of this possibility. While Davis was at school that day with Charles, I had investigated every available option to salvage my plan and my life. I had called every one of the too-expensive private schools in the area. I made appointments and put us on waiting lists. I had formulated Plan B.

When Davis came home that afternoon, I don't even remember asking how it went. Instead, I immediately launched into my proposed option. We had appointments to keep, a plan to enact—no time to waste!

We were off in a hurry, running all over town with promises of admission in anywhere from a couple of days to a few weeks. This was great. It was going to work out after all. Or was it? When we finally got home with three exhausted kids, I was all out of words but convinced we had a feasible plan.

Davis finally spoke. He mentioned the obvious issue of finances. How were we going to pay for this? It wasn't in the budget. And how long were we going to do this? Just this year or for the long haul?



Then he asked the question: “What about homeschooling?”

Davis says that my head spun on my shoulders and I responded in my most unattractive and selfish voice. I said, “Oh, yeah, great. Let me get this straight: You get to go to work, and I get stuck here all day with the kiddos. This was the year I was supposed to get my life back!”

“I was just thinking,” he continued patiently and gently, “we have been praying for months for Charles’s teacher, and I think we have been praying for you.”

The words were like a hammer against my hard heart, a shock to my dead senses, a long-overdue wake-up call. The Holy Spirit had spoken through my husband, piercing straight through to my heart. I was speechless.

Okay, But Just for This Year

Let me be clear. When we made the initial decision to homeschool, it was to be a short-term fix. After all, I couldn’t mess up kindergarten, right? Being the planner that I am, and being convicted by my husband’s words, I was now faced with formulating Plan C. I knew enough

to understand that I really didn't know what I was doing. I needed to make some calls.

My first call was to a local homeschool mom I barely knew. She gave me two pieces of advice that I still give to others as they start: First, she said, I needed to relax. She said that homeschooling is more than an educational choice—it's a lifestyle. (At that moment in my life I couldn't appreciate the depth of that bit of wisdom.) Then she said something that stunned me: "Relax and read to your kids. Get to know them—their strengths, their weaknesses, their interests. Then you will know where to go with curriculum, but you don't need any now."

Get to know them? What did she mean? I knew my kids. Didn't I?

Then I phoned my friends from Paxton Avenue back in Akron. Talk about eating humble pie. (It's not too tasty, by the way.) I got in touch with Carolyn first, and I think that she just about collapsed. Was I serious? After all, I had made fun of her, to her face, for homeschooling. Carolyn just laughed, though it had to have really blessed her. She promised to pray for me, and I received my first

glimpse of what God had done for me in advance by giving me those friends back in our old neighborhood up north.

The First Year

Confession time again: When we started homeschooling in the fall of 1996, I did not have a heart for my children. Although I loved my children, I was ready to get my life back. I was done with the motherhood gig, ready to get back to me.

I learned that year that in many ways I did not know who my kids were, though it would be accurate to say I knew who I wanted them to be. I had a plan for them to make me look good, but I had not considered what God's plan might be for their lives. I knew what they liked to eat—what kind of pizza they preferred and their favorite snacks. I could pick out their favorite clothes. I knew their favorite cereal, ice cream, and cartoons. But what else had I taken the time to learn? Not much.

I didn't see my children as a trust or a blessing or a gift. Not really. Perhaps in words, but not in deed, not

in my heart. No, in all honesty, I thought they were slowing me down, keeping me from what I really wanted to do, and often I saw them as an inconvenience. Of course, I would have never said this out loud. I would have vehemently denied the implication had anyone suggested it. But in my heart—my hard, crusty heart—there was only me. All of the “sacrifices” I had made had been for show, not from the heart.

Our first foray into homeschooling was rough. Oh, I threw myself into it, but I found myself mourning the death of my expectations. Everything had changed. Charles and I had not been together 24/7 in three years, since he first entered preschool. As I’ve mentioned, he was strong-willed—a character quality he had inherited from me. I understood how he operated but had little patience for it. I was certain he was the answer to my mother’s prayers. You know the one: “I hope you have a child like you someday!” Okay, my mom is not really like that, but I remember calling and apologizing profusely on more than one occasion after Charles had given me a fit, realizing that I must have done the same to her.

I wish I could say that I unerringly heeded the

wisdom I had gleaned from my friends. I did not. I began by ordering a reading program. I went to the local teacher supply store and purchased charts and writing pads. I even bought a lesson plan book. After all, I had the training to do this. I had been a teacher.

My first priority was getting Charles to read. It was slow going. It would have been nice had someone told me then that he would be a late reader albeit an avid one. Our days were often punctuated with tears as I tried to conform him to my perfect plan. I expected him to make me look good by reading, and he simply wasn't cooperating.

Still, Charles and I were having a good time. We were laughing together more, and I discovered that I liked him. That December, Davis remarked that he thought we were actually growing closer instead of becoming more contentious. Was this possible?

The Heart of the Issue

In the spring of 1997, several homeschooling pioneers were encouraging us to attend the annual state homeschooling conference in Winston-Salem. Davis and I saw

this as an opportunity to get away together for a few days. Our plan was to go so that we could say we did, but we had no intention of getting in any deeper. We secured childcare for the kids and headed to the conference.

By the time we checked into our hotel room, I had developed a slight fever and was not feeling well. Nevertheless, we headed out to register for the conference and take in a workshop. We had been advised to spend our time upstairs, being encouraged in the workshops and seminars, not downstairs in the book fair with its myriad curriculum choices. That shouldn't be hard, we thought. We weren't there to shop. We had no intention of homeschooling for the long haul.

We literally wandered into a workshop hosted by Chris Davis of the Elijah Company. Remember, we just wanted to be able to say we went—we really didn't care which seminar we attended. Yet during the next hour our perspective, attitudes, and subsequently, our lives were changed. By the end of the workshop we were both in tears, convicted by the Holy Spirit as to His call on our lives. It was awesome.

Needless to say, we attended several workshops

over the next couple of days. There was energy and inspiration everywhere we looked. There were thousands of parents, some of whom had brought their children with them. They were parents just like us—normal, seeking, discovering new possibilities.

No one in the curriculum hall was selling a replacement heart. Besides, I hadn't known that mine was missing. But now I knew it would be a key component in going forward on this new adventure. And I was anxious to move forward, but I would need to recover my heart first.

But how?

I am so grateful to be able to tell you that the seemingly impossible is possible. You can recover your heart. It may be lost, but it can be found. Your heart might be wounded, but it can be healed. It may even be broken, but it can be mended. The Great Physician is waiting and more than willing to help you in this process—and He makes house calls!

Just like the Tin Man in *The Wizard of Oz*, I got a brand-new heart. I am more vulnerable, more open, but I'm also more invested, more joyful, more contented,

and more full than I ever thought possible. I had bought into the world's lie that I had to harden my heart to find happiness as a modern woman, when in fact, true joy can come only by keeping the heart tender. I had been taught to guard my heart, to remain suspicious of others who might seek to destroy it or ridicule it. However, it turned out that the key to happiness was to entrust my heart to Him who alone is able to keep it until the day of His coming. As a result of trusting Him with my heart, I have come to know the peace that passes understanding. This book is a compilation of lessons I learned along the way to this revelation and in the days since.

I'm guessing that some of what I just shared is familiar to you. Maybe you too have found yourself at an intersection of life where you never expected to be standing. Perhaps you also made light of homeschooling because you couldn't understand the "why" of it. Maybe you've felt the call to homeschool but ignored it and pushed it down, hoping it would go away. Maybe you knew it would mean certain sacrifices that you never really wanted to make.

Or maybe you're experiencing emptiness in your



relationships with your children. You have given them everything—toys, trips, trivia, teams—but you've given them no target, no testimony, no Teacher. You may have met the legal requirements and cultural standards for educating your kids but have yet to give them your heart.

Do you want to reclaim your God-assigned place in raising your kids? Do you want them to have a heart for others and for the Lord? Do you want to build a growing relationship with them that will transcend every challenge you might face as a family? Do you want to get started today? Are you ready to navigate new terrain and take some practical steps toward heart recovery? Yes? Then let's get started!