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When You Check the Wrong Box

In the next few years, I'd like to see you transition her to public school. Kudos to you for homeschooling during those early years, but she's in seventh grade now and needs to have some experience in a *real* school," she said, punctuating the word *real* with an empathetic smile toward my daughter. "We're finding that homeschooled kids just don't transition to college well. In fact, most colleges refuse to enroll them. You understand, don't you? It's for her own good."

For her own good.

With those four little words, all my anxiety—all the fears of failure that I thought I had packaged up and tucked away years ago—began to resurface. As the doctor stared at me in her crisp white lab coat surrounded by several neatly framed diplomas all touting golden seals of approval, I could feel the tension begin to build, twisting my stomach into knots as hot tears of disappointment filled my eyes, threatening to fall unbidden down my cheeks.

I began to scramble for any scrap of courage—any words of response I could muster. But nothing came. I just sat there, beaten by her hidden accusations and verbal professional punches.

I had brought my daughter, Maddie, into the clinic that morning for her annual check-up. Now in seventh grade, she

was at an age when seeing her male pediatrician, whom we had known and loved for years, was beginning to make her feel slightly awkward. In a desperate attempt to help her feel confident in talking about all the big body changes on the horizon, I decided to take her to a female doctor. I had asked around for recommendations of potential physicians from friends, but none were given. So in a fine moment of mothering, I eenie-meenie-minie-moed my way through the phone book and landed on a doctor's name that sounded promising, as if one can tell anything about a person from her last name. It seemed like a good idea at the time.

What started as an appointment meant to help my daughter feel brave about her body ended up leaving me in fear. What was supposed to be half an hour of physical examination turned into thirty minutes of emotional and social assessment. The doctor held Maddie's new patient forms in hand, casually glanced at the pages of health history, and began tapping her pen on the clipboard in a methodical rhythm. Her eyes were fixed. Her brow was furrowed. I followed her gaze down to the stack of papers—a black and white resume of the past twelve years of my daughter's life written in my own hand. She seemed to be focused on one particular question on the form: *Does your child currently attend school? If so, please check the box indicating whether the school is public, private, or other.*

Naturally, I had checked *other*.

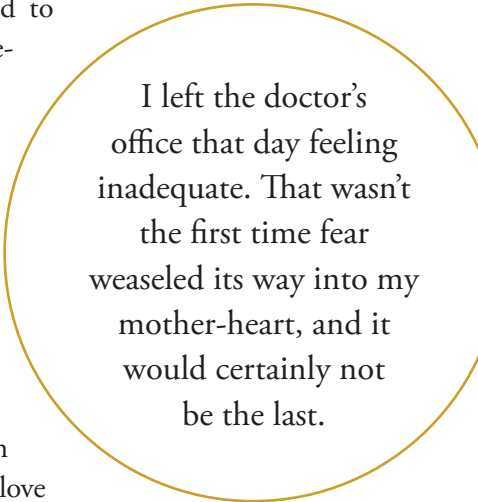
“Does she have any friends—any peers that she can confide in?” the doctor questioned. “What is your plan in the coming years to transition her to normal life? Homeschooling was fine for those early days, but don't you think she needs to begin learning how to function independently from you? She's almost in high school, after all.”

Poor Maddie tucked her hands under her legs and scrunched down deep in her chair, desperate to somehow disappear beneath its cold vinyl. She looked so small and a little embarrassed, sitting

in awkward silence, trapped between opposing viewpoints. Before I could offer my daughter a few reassuring words, the doctor clucked her tongue in obvious disapproval and continued with her questions. It was an inquisition—a battle—and I was on the losing side. I had clearly checked the “wrong” box. I internally curled myself up into a protective shell, a mental paralysis, and could not seem to form any kind of verbal response or defense.

Even though as a certified, trained teacher I had spent years in a traditional school teaching other people’s children how to be “normal” (whatever that means), even though I had launched and led a monthly homeschool mothers’ group in the past, even though I had contributed to not one but three books on homeschooling well, and even though I made my living writing a blog dedicated to encouraging and equipping homeschool mothers, I left the doctor’s office that day feeling inadequate. That wasn’t the first time fear weaseled its way into my mother-heart, and it would certainly not be the last.

Most mothers, myself included, live in a committed, life-long relationship with self-doubt. Fear, anxiety, and tension seem always to be the by-products of our love and investment. We hear the gentle whispers of worry and wonder if we can raise our children right, raise them well, raise them at all. For the homeschool mother, that self-doubt is magnified by the full weight of her child’s education. She feels the burden of proof: that her children will learn all they need to know and be as good if not better than those being taught by the other guys. And if they don’t? Well, the blame must surely fall to her. She spends her days in mental and emotional



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apathy, convinced that she's somehow going to ruin her kids.

Over the last five years since I began *The Unlikely Homeschool* blog, I've received thousands of messages from mothers secretly suffocating in fear, all questioning their decision to combine home and school. These are the kinds of anxiety-filled ramblings I've heard again and again (perhaps you've rehearsed a few of them yourself):

- “The public schools have billions of dollars at their disposal to educate the masses. I can barely afford any curriculum, let alone, the right one.”
- “Would switching curriculums help my struggling learner? And if I switch, what if I leave learning gaps? What if I don't cover all that needs to be covered? What if I miss something?”
- “What about my strong-willed child? My special-needs child? My just-like-me child? I don't know if I can spend another waking minute teaching my difficult one.”
- “Perhaps I'm failing because I'm not organized enough. Patient enough. Creative enough. Maybe I'm just not enough.”
- “What if my kids end up blaming me for my decision to keep them at home?”
- “In the busyness of the homeschool day, I feel like I'm completely neglecting my baby, my toddler, and even myself. How can I continue being a mother and a teacher without losing my mind?”
- “The day-in and day-out is so monotonous. My kids don't ever seem to get along. I spend most of my days settling one sibling squabble after another. I thought homeschooling was supposed to build family bonds.”
- “My extended family has never been on board. I'm tired of facing the firing squad at every holiday and family get-together. How can I convince them that my choice to homeschool was the right one if I'm not so sure myself?”

Perhaps you feel like someone else could do a better job teaching your kids than you can. Maybe you see the lack of letters behind your name as concrete proof that you are unqualified to teach and that it's no wonder your eight-year-old still can't read at grade level. It's possible you're panicking over the social well-being of your child—you don't know any other homeschoolers and don't want your kids to continue in isolation. Perhaps you are tapped out, emotionally and physically drained from years of just slogging through. You're tired of having to play the Enforcer when your teenager refuses to do his work each day. Homeschooling has not lived up to your expectations, and you're wondering if spinning all these plates is even worth it—wondering if you made the wrong choice. Collectively, these concerns combine to make an unhealthy and unhelpful personal narrative all too common for those of us who have chosen the path less taken.

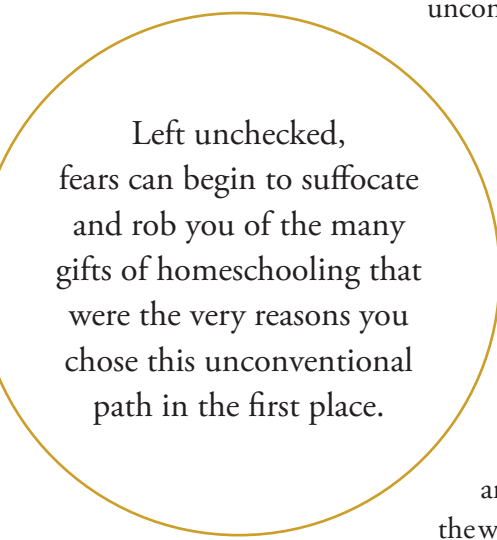
You see, when you stepped through door number three and checked the “other” box, you opted to swim upstream, joining a group of people who have decided to go in a different educational direction from the rest of the world. And different is always a little bit scary, especially as it relates to your kids.

The “normal” school down the street has decades of graduates with which to validate their way of educating. And while homeschooling has reached second-generation status, it boasts a far fewer number of graduates. It's not as easy to confirm the success of the *different* way because its verdict is still out. It seems more natural to trust the public (or private) school treadmill because it has formulas, experts, and billions of dollars at its disposal. As a mom, you have no twelve-step plans, no formulas for success; and you certainly don't have a billion-dollar budget. So how can you ever hope to educate your kids *the right way*? (As if there even is a one-size-fits-all *right way* to teach that works for every child.)

It would be so much easier if homeschooling came with a just-add-water-and-stir tag, but it doesn't. It comes with a lot

of questions. It comes with a lot of unknowns. Consequently, it often comes with a lot of fears. If left unchecked, those fears can begin to suffocate and rob you of the many gifts of homeschooling that were the very reasons you chose this unconventional path in the first place.

It's time to end the fear. It's time to stand tall and be brave.



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Since you've picked up this book amidst a sea of homeschooling how-to books, I can only imagine the word *bravely* caught your attention because brave is the very opposite of how you are feeling right now. Maybe you're only a few months in, have hit a hurdle, and are wondering if you've made the wrong choice. Perhaps you've already begun looking for the nearest exit ramp. Maybe

you've been homeschooling for a while, you're trapped somewhere in the messy middle, and you're beginning to doubt whether you can continue plodding along. You're not alone. In fact, without support, more than a third of homeschool moms quit within the first year.¹ Something tells me you don't want to join those ranks, however. You're fearful, but you're also in search of help.

For whatever reason, the weight of fear has pulled you toward these pages. But that kind of neurosis is too heavy to hold. To be honest, it wasn't yours to carry in the first place. What you need is anxiety-free homeschooling. What you need is a re-focused vision for the story God has uniquely written for you and yours—a homeschooling manifesto. What you need is the courage to check the “wrong” box with bravery.

The normal path to courageous homeschooling is a never-

ending, winding journey that will eventually lead to brave. But like most of life's worthwhile adventures, it's usually a two steps forward, one step back sort of shuffle. I don't tell you that to discourage you or make you throw in the towel. I'm only attempting to be transparent and honest with you so that you don't see your fear as a personal failure or a lack of commitment, but instead as a natural part of your progression—one of the many necessary steps you'll take in order to go from where you are now on the journey to where you want to be in the end.

That day in the doctor's office, my fear came marching in, hoping to fill in all the spaces of my heart. I sat there with quotations, statistics, and proofs that homeschooling not only works, but that it works better; and yet I couldn't seem to formulate one word of rebuttal to the doctor's misguided accusations. Not one. When the visit was done, I gathered my daughter and what little self-respect I had left, squared my shoulders in feigned resolve, and walked out feeling anything but brave.

"It's for her own good," replayed in a permanent loop in my head on the drive home. I just couldn't seem to shake it. *Am I really failing her? Have I ruined Maddie and any chance she might have at success in college? On the job? In relationships? Have I been checking the wrong box all along?* These needless and irrational thoughts began swimming around in my brain as they had done so often in the past. I glanced up in the rearview mirror, but when I did, I didn't see the mother who had been teaching her daughter since the very beginning. I didn't see the many countless hours I had spent planning and preparing each and every year. All I saw was *lesser than*. I saw *ill-equipped* and *unable*.

I nearly caved to all my insecurities and misgivings about my abilities to homeschool. Then one verse in Philippians snapped me back to my senses—reminded me of what I already knew. "And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6).

It was *He* who began this work in my daughter, *He* who had



Increasingly high profile universities are actively recruiting homeschooling graduates because they recognize traits they believe will make successful students—highly motivated, self-starters, determined, and with a strong, supportive family backing.²

JAMIE C. MARTIN

author of *Give Your Child the World: Raising Globally Minded Kids One Book at a Time*

called me to homeschool, *He* who ordered her days from the very beginning, and *He* who would see it through to completion. It was God who placed the call on my heart when I began feeling a tug toward home education. He later affirmed that call through His Word, through the specific life circumstances He had given me, and through the wisdom and counsel of many other Christians He had placed around me. I was just following in obedience. In my own might, I would fail her; that's true. I'm only human, after all. But He would never fail her. He would always have a better view of "her own good" than I ever could, than that doctor ever could, than every college board ever could.

I began replaying those words from Philippians over and over again in my head, replacing the doctor's indictment, until my heart settled on the Truth and I became brave once again. I hadn't checked the wrong box! If you're homeschooling, neither have you.

I invite you to join me on this path to bravery. I hold out my hand to you, not as one who has planted a victory flag on the top of Mt. Brave, but as a fellow traveler who still has to daily fix her eyes on Jesus for the courage to obey. My bravery is a work in progress. That notorious day at the doctor's proved nothing if not *that*. But, after many years of doing the fearful shuffle—two steps forward, one step back—I've learned a few things about checking the "wrong" box with bravery.