

SELECTIONS FROM THE BRAVE LEARNER

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INTRODUCTION
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The whole world is a series of miracles, but we are so used to them we call them ordinary things.

—HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN

Before we begin, pour yourself a cup of coffee or tea. Adjust the reading lamp. Arrange yourself comfortably. I'll wait. Ready?

Let's face the daunting task of educating your children in the glow of soft light and warmth. I invite you to join me on a scavenger hunt for the ordinary magic already at work in your family. In this book, I offer you a kind, gentle approach to parenting and homeschooling your young charges—a plan that facilitates your dreams. Picture your child taking the initiative to study ancient history or Latin grammar or composting a garden. What would it be like not to worry about video games or too much television? Imagine knowing how to turn around a day gone wrong. Pause—see in your mind's eye an eager face, excited to share writing with you; see another face enjoying the effort it takes to master an algebraic equation. Pretend it's the end of a school year—you and your children share happy memories, love being together; academic progress is clear. Wouldn't that feel great?

It's possible to feel this good about your children's education.

I'm here to help you get more of *that* into your daily experience.

Every home educator and parent I've met offers me the same mission statement: "I just want my children to *love* learning." Me too. I have five adult kids I homeschooled for seventeen years with the same fragile aspiration. I felt batted back and forth between curricula, education theo-

ries, and homeschool philosophies. I felt too late to every party—as though I would never catch up.

At the heart of each belief system, a love of learning was considered the magical key to unlock the riches of a valuable education. Yet who would define it in a way I could apply it? When I began my homeschooling odyssey, I imagined my “in love with learning kids” would wake up, tumble down the stairs, and dive at the math book, declaring: “I can’t wait to work on fractions today!” I bet you’re ahead of me—that never happened. Not once.

Over my years of homeschooling, the glittering vision of a “love of learning” shape-shifted multiple times—perhaps it meant that my children’s passions would magically teach them grammar; maybe it meant I’d find a trick to get my kids to fall in love with geometry; maybe we needed to start in ancient Greece and work forward until my children became consumed with self-education. I wondered if classical educators had it right or if I ought to go all-in on unschooling (that tempting idea that children can learn all they need to know without formal instruction). I asked myself: what causes kids to put in the hard work of learning what they don’t know, because they *want* to know?

Love and learning seem unrelated when we look at traditional school subjects. Exhausted parents living the day-to-day grind of instructing and homework frequently give up trying to make lessons “fun” or “interesting.” Education becomes a juggling act: supervising workbook pages by multiple kids at multiple levels while a toddler scrawls permanent marker on the kitchen wall and a baby spits up.

The core idea behind “a love of learning” is that a child will find the challenge of a task interesting enough to persist at it until mastery. The obvious question: How do we get there from here? Can a love of learning thrive amid childish chaos, parental self-doubt, the flu, and state academic standards? Yes, it can.

At the heart of the *homeschooling* enterprise is the faith that the parent is enough—that *your* energy, resourcefulness, creativity, and passion will be sufficient for *your* children. I’ve had the privilege of working directly with thousands of homeschooling families for more than twenty

years. I admire their courage, conscientiousness, and perseverance. I coach them to teach writing (through my company, Brave Writer) and in home education (through my coaching community, the Homeschool Alliance).

I've discovered that parents are hard on themselves. Even the ones who look competent to others, worry. A merry-go-round of "more, different, better" ensues. Homeschool parents keep worry at bay by spending *more* money, changing to *different* curricula, and applying a *better* philosophy of education. Then they evaluate the results using the same criteria as before, and wind up as worried as ever—prompting another spin through the "more, different, better" cycle.

The solution doesn't lie in materials or ideology. Rather, to experience joy, peace, and progress in home education requires a paradigm shift—a change in the criteria for how we *see* and *stage* our homeschools. I've spent the last several decades immersed in theories of learning, testing them on my kids, seeing them tested by other homeschooling families from around the world. In this book, I offer principles and practices embraced by my family and thousands of others that will help you get a little more love into that learning and a little more charity toward yourself in that effort.

The key to a kinder and gentler homeschool is attending to the details we overlook—the coziness of our homes, the principles of natural learning, and the tenderness of our intimate relationships. It takes courage to move away from traditional methods of measurement: grade level, scope and sequence, the Common Core. Our kids naturally lead the way, diving into whatever subject matter draws them, fearless in their belief that they can learn anything they *want* to learn. Yet parents waver. I did too. I wanted to know: how can I ensure that my children are learning all they *should*? You have to be brave to learn a new way to see education and to execute it, trusting that your kids will arrive on the shores of adulthood, prepared to tackle their futures.

Several years ago, at the dawn of live-stream broadcasting, I gave a little lecture I titled "The Enchanted Education." I spoke about candles and trust, eye contact and a sense of humor, predictable routines and

splendid surprises, finding the school subjects hiding in a child's passions and interests, having the courage to reimagine education. I explained what the research shows: children are already engaged in learning—parents are the ones who can most effectively coax and expand a child's natural inclination to learn. The principles of enchantment—seeing the magic in the learning transaction—caught the imaginations of thousands of home educators.

I reasoned: enchantment bathes all sorts of learning—traditional subjects like math and history as well as personal passions like karate and board games—in curiosity, delight, and connection. An enchanted education makes a simple claim: learning thrives when our families thrive. That claim is complicated when what enables a parent to thrive is at odds with what allows a child to thrive. Into this quixotic mix, we thrust the responsibility to provide a college-ready education to our kids. No wonder the task feels formidable.

And yet—a few well-placed tweaks to how we view learning, relate to our children, and manifest an inviting context in our homes can utterly transform our children's educations and our experience of parenting. The reason these principles bring relief is that they are tailored to the rhythm and personality of your unique family. You are free to shed strict adherence to an ideology. Please do. Instead, sample and taste, explore and experiment, apply and discard suggestions in this book. Allow yourself the joy of discovery—how one idea will spark another and lead to a brand-new vista!

To maximize the value of the practices and attitudes I share, I invite you to be a brave learner yourself. Pay attention to your journey—to what incites your enthusiasm and provokes your skepticism. Be interested in your reactions. Journal. Jot questions in the margins. Recognize the child in *you* longing for both freedom and support. Translate those experiences into empathy for your children's learning adventure.

Families who've adopted many of these strategies in their homeschools write to me. They suddenly see their happy, eager-to-learn children who have been hiding in plain sight. Parents tap into their own natural creativity and compassion; they discover how to unlock the

magic of learning no matter the subject; they build momentum in their children's educations; they stop harshly judging themselves for failure to live up to a fantasy. Children in traditional school environments whose parents embrace the principles of brave learning and family connection enrich their children's school experiences naturally too.

Most homeschooling parents would love to live in harmony with their children, sharing the wonder of this big bold universe that invites us to know it better. There's no reason that can't be your experience right now. Once you apply the properties of enchantment and connect to the hearts and minds of your kids, the world will open to you as a "write your own adventure" book. Learning will be pleasurable, and enjoyment of your children—natural. You don't have to apply these ideas and insights perfectly, either. Allow the transformation to come to you. Inhale, exhale. Be brave. Keep reading. Grab a cookie.

Let's get started.

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CHAPTER 1
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ENCHANTED LIVING

Creating the Context for Magic in Our Homes

After all we *are* an art form . . . We produce an environment other people have to live in. We should be conscious of the fact that this environment which we produce by our very “being” can affect the people who live with us.

—EDITH SCHAEFFER, *HIDDEN ART OF HOMEMAKING*

My neighbor and coconspirator in all things homeschool, Dotty, swooped to pluck a dead branch from the sidewalk—a stroller-wheel landmine right in front of me. I stopped short: a panicked vision of my baby flung to the concrete evaporated. I sighed in relief, assuming Dotty was clearing my path, and felt grateful she had. Two hours later, I entered her apartment and there, nailed to the living room wall, was the very same scraggly branch—artfully hung, creating a *je ne sais quoi* feel in the room—surprise, delight. Of course. Dotty hadn’t worried about my stroller. Her enchanted eye had spotted a wall hanging!

I owe my introduction to enchanted living to Dotty. She sees the world through a different lens than most of us. Dotty’s hand-me-down furniture didn’t match, yet it invited and warmed guests anyway. She laid a sunny kitchen rug on the back of the dull sofa smothered in plump pillows. She arranged futons into cozy nooks next to baskets brimming with puzzles, blocks, felt dolls, and a cassette player at the ready. She

turned a hideous Jetsons-style mustard-colored armchair into that perfect accent in a room of drab gray and stocked it with fuzzy blankets, a stuffed animal, and warm lighting. Little kids, engulfed in a glow of yellow vinyl, cuddled a bear and paged through picture books.

In the center of the small living room (you know, that space into which you invite guests) stood a large sturdy table jam-packed with art supplies—paintbrushes of varying sizes in tin cans, glass baby food jars to hold water, googly eyes, pipe cleaners, glitter, all varieties of glue, colored and butcher paper, paints and modeling clay, pastels and markers, and scissors for lefties and righties. Overhead a clothesline hung art projects to drip-dry.

Her seven-hundred-square-foot home was interesting, alive—not just “cute” or “well decorated.” And it was a glorious, inviting mess! Unkempt. Not unsanitary. An artist’s invitation to possibilities and projects in process at all times. You knew you could take risks in Dotty’s house—it had room for mistakes and flops. No one would mind.

My family lived a balcony away, and we visited Dotty’s place nearly every day for five years. One afternoon, Dotty waved us in, wielding a glue gun in one hand and acorn caps in the other: “We’re making fairy houses! Pull up a chair.” Cookies, twigs, moss, pinecones, dried flowers, and half-empty glasses of juice littered the table. I noticed a sink full of dishes behind her. Two of her kids, heads down, didn’t look up, engrossed with dangerous hot glue. Eva, Dotty’s youngest, who appeared as if out of nowhere with a box of face paints, turned her cheek to her mother. Without missing a beat, Dotty drew tiger stripes as she explained to my family how to build structurally sound twig houses.

My children scattered through the tiny apartment—some making stick cabins, others disappearing to the big dress-up clothes basket in the back room. Moments later, four kids returned with a stack of hats and a book in hand: *Caps for Sale*. Brooke, Dotty’s oldest, announced, “We want to perform a play for you!”

Four children lined up in a row—dressed in dad shirts usually reserved as painting smocks. Brooke read aloud as children marched into the room stacking hats and acting scenes. There were miscues and silli-

ness, children too shy to speak up and others too free to shut up! Directing, shushing, and laughing continued until the end of the book.

The crew dispersed; several returned to the art table to join the fairy-house-making fun. Dotty vanished and magically reappeared with slices of homemade bread, jam, and lemonade on a bright blue tray. Everyone ate and drank, starved from so much creative exertion. A day in the life—with Dotty.

The first thing I did after meeting Dotty was set up my own “always open for business” art table. You can too!

Dotty's Enchanted Art Table

To bring enchantment right into your family room, amply supply a table with art materials for use at any time.

Requirements to Preserve Your Sanity, Carpet, and Walls

- 1. Table:** Not precious, stable (card tables are rickety), and able to withstand hot glue, paint, and permanent markers. Can be covered with clear plastic. Tuck the plastic under the table and duct tape it in place so it doesn't move when kids are working. The height of the table depends on the age of the kids: low for young kids, regular height for older kids.
- 2. Chairs:** Appropriate to the table height, back support, not easily tipped, not precious (they will be decorated in color and glue).
- 3. Floor:** Set the table on top of an old rug or scrap of carpet/vinyl.
- 4. Children:** Hang men's button-down short-sleeved shirts (bought at a thrift store) on a coat rack or hooks on a wall near the table. These can be donned backwards (buttons down the back) as smocks to protect clothes.

5. Walls: If the table butts up against a wall, affix a long strip of butcher paper about a foot high.

A Glorious Array of Supplies

1. Painting: Tempera, watercolors, acrylics, puff paints, finger paints, fat brushes, thin brushes, foam brushes, sponges cut into stamps for printing.

2. Writing: Washable markers (Crayola makes inexpensive ones), oil pastels, Prismacolor colored pencils, charcoal, Flair black pens for outlining, highlighters, Sharpies in all colors (careful: these markers are permanent), chalk, drawing pencils, whiteboard markers (Pro tip: put colored electrical tape on whiteboard markers to make it clear they are not meant for paper), regular number 2 pencils, and gel pens for black paper.

3. Surfaces: Colored and white paper, stationery with pretty borders, brown paper bags, butcher paper, sticky notes, note-cards, cardboard, wrapping paper, aluminum foil, poster board, cardstock, envelopes, canvas, wooden blocks, river stones, a mirror, a whiteboard, glass votive candleholders, scraps of fabric, sand paper, coloring books, felt, black paper for gel pens, small journals and notebooks.

4. Fasteners: Lots of glue sticks, Elmer's white glue, hot glue guns and crazy glue (used with supervision), fabric glue, stapler, brads, hole punch and rings, Scotch tape, double-sided tape, masking tape, clear packaging tape, duct tape, electrical tape in multiple colors.

5. Accessories: Googly eyes, pipe cleaners, glitter (careful!), confetti (careful times two!), stickers, rubber stamps, stencils, yarn, string, embroidery floss, modeling clay, Sculpey baking clay, fabric scraps, catalogs, magazines, pompoms, rickrack, Popsicle sticks.

6. Storage: Washed empty tin cans make great holders for paintbrushes and writing utensils. A shower caddy holds packages of googly eyes, pipe cleaners, glue sticks, and glitter. Hang a laundry line nearby with clothespins to display artwork and to get it *off* the table. A bulletin board mounted on a wall can serve a similar purpose (cover it in colorful wrapping paper to go with decor, if you'd like). Keep a shelf free on a bookcase to display projects that can't be hung. Use heavy-bottomed glasses (the short kind for cocktails) to hold water for cleaning paintbrushes between colors. These tip less often than tin cans. Modeling clay can be kept on small cookie sheets under the table and then lifted to the top when in use.

7. Location: Put the table in your way—underfoot and near you. Tables in basements and bedrooms are lonely.

Time to play!

The magic of the table is that it's ready to use any time. Begin with a few supplies: perhaps the paints, markers, clean white paper, glue, and googly eyes. Add fresh items (each week or every few days). Rotate old, crusted materials off the table to be replaced by fresh, new ones.

Surprise your kids! Let kids awaken to a table of twigs, bark, moss, and acorns. They might discover you already at work making fairy houses. Will they join you? Find out. Bring home smooth stones from the creek and paint them to make paperweights or stack them and glue them together to create sculptures.

Add quill pens and ink wells—write by candlelight.

A table reset is appropriate once a month. A time may come when the table becomes “wallpaper” and no one notices it anymore. Clear it up and try a different idea in this book.

Modification: For crowded homes that can't support a dedicated art table, stock a cabinet with lots of hidey-holes, drawers, and cupboards near the kitchen table.

The fairy house and *Caps for Sale* experience is one of many that Dotty and I created with ease and pleasure over the five years that we homeschooled together. Here are a few others:

- * Beachside picnics with scrambled eggs over a driftwood fire
- * Exploring tide pools at the beach
- * Birding
- * California Gold Rush-themed party
- * Experiments with tubs of lard
- * Borax turned to slime
- * Face paint and dress-up clothes
- * Moroccan tea with homemade bread, and henna painted on our hands
- * Late-night solar system party with poetry about the stars and planets
- * Seasonal nature tables
- * Making pies from the wild blackberries picked on a hike
- * Quilting
- * *Farmer Boy* breakfast complete with ham, pancakes, apple pie, and hunks of cheese
- * Field trips to the farmers' market and Little Saigon
- * Flashlight tag

Lest you think life was perfect—it wasn't. Math facts and phonics snuck into our lives too, as did guilt, tantrums, births, doubt, boredom, bed-wetting, speech impediments, pressure, poverty, pregnancy, pinworms and lice, language impairments, loneliness, and exhaustion.

Despite the adult challenge of raising children, managing our marriages, and growing into competent grown-ups ourselves, a thread of surprise, mystery, risk, and adventure carried us too. In hindsight, we were led and nourished by the power of *enchantment*.

* WHAT IS ENCHANTMENT? *

Enchantment is about ease, not striving. Good news, right? It's the hard work of enforcing "school" or "homework" that saps your strength and bugs your kids. I discovered that being open to and using the properties of enchantment release energy—the good kind that moves learning forward naturally, effortlessly. Enchanted education and living are all about *small* surprises of happy—scattered, littered, peppered throughout garden-variety days. These *en-magicked* moments act as turbo boosts in the same way a moving sidewalk gets you through the airport more quickly.¹ You're still walking in an airport—but it's easier, faster, better somehow. The whole time, you feel competent—smooth, powerful, liberated—headed right where you need to go. In education, when we create space for enchantment, we put ourselves on a moving sidewalk of happy.

That said, enchantment is not a synonym for happiness. Enchantment is a flirt! It flatters and woos, until whoops! You're all in—lovestruck—and passion flows. Enchantment gets to happy through a surprising array of emotions and experiences too: excitement, fear, anticipation, intimacy, exhilaration, suspense, color, contentment, whimsy, flavor, cuddles, eye contact, perseverance, tenderness, romance, admiration, and comfort, to name a slew!

The thrill of Halloween is more than joy at devouring free candy. Hiding in a costume, knocking on a stranger's door, moving about the neighborhood in the dark, the possibility of ghosts, jack-o'-lanterns, and creepy music . . . These happy moments are prepared by the properties of enchantment—even deliberately choosing to be frightened!

To me, an enchanted *life* is living in my ordinary circumstances with heightened awareness—being on the lookout for "a surprise of happy." When we tune into the enchanted wavelength, it's as if we put on special goggles and now see that a dead tree branch in the middle of the sidewalk would make a lovely wall hanging. Happiness flows toward us, rather than rushing away from us.

Why is a table overstocked with art supplies and available any time

of day more inviting to a child than a scripted art project in a classroom? What are the magical properties in the first and the disenchantments in the second?

* EVERYDAY MAGIC FOR LEARNING AND LIFE *

When I began this homeschooling-parenting gig, I wanted to create a warm memorable *life* for my kids and myself, not *just* an education. We're not only preparing our children to get a job someday in the future. The education of my kids had to make the present moment memorable and good. Happiness shouldn't be something to end up with; it ought to be the by-product of a whole-hearted, fully lived life.

I figured that if we liked our lives, we'd get education thrown into the bargain. I didn't believe that learning was drudgery or something to be *done* to children. I wanted my family to love learning—together—in our “feels.”

I watched what happened to my kids when they were spontaneously drawn to any subject from pill bugs to the American crow, baking soda volcanoes to the Greek alphabet. I saw the power of staging a Japanese meal complete with low tables, pillows, tempura, chopsticks, tissue paper cherry blossoms, origami cranes, and kimonos. The study of Japan for a test could never leave the imprint that our humble attempt to experience Japan did.

That said: it can be taxing to throw parties and build twig fairy houses every ding-danged day! What if you don't feel creative? I didn't all the time. “Keep 'em busy, keep 'em alive” was my motto. No matter how many children you have—one to fifteen—it takes all your energy to do those two things! I imagine you now muttering under your breath: “Do I have to conjure endless parties too—in addition to teaching fractions, spelling, and using the potty?”

I hear you loud and clear. If “enchanting” an education means hours of preparation for every ten minutes of cooperation, why bother? Fortunately, an enchanted education is like kindling a fire. All you need is a book of matches.

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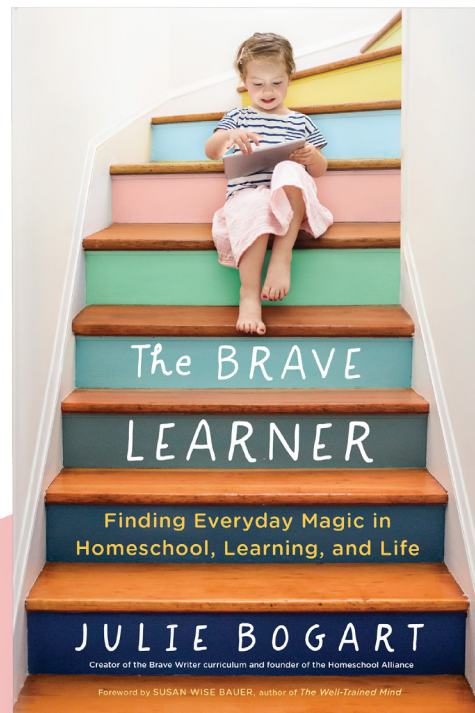
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