

ECHO IN CELEBRATION:

*A Call To Home-
Centered Education*

LEIGH
BORTINS

CLASSICAL CONVERSATIONS
MULTI-MEDIA

Echo in Celebration
A Call to Home-Centered Education

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Dedicated to my husband, Robert,
who thought it was a good book.

Echo In Celebration

Contents

The Passion: Loving Life and Learning	1
The Cornerstone: Considering Home-Centered Education.....	11
The History: Pondering Literacy and Education	25
The Tools: Recovering the Classical Model.....	41
The Student: Learning for Life.....	53
The Parent: Committing To Basic Principles	65
The Purpose: Studying to Glorify God.....	85
The Priority: Preparing for Opportunities.....	99
The Offering: Discipling the Human Heart.....	107
The Call: Living and Learning In Celebration	115
Appendix	121
Further Resources.....	123

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I would never have written this book if my boys hadn't asked me the same questions over and over, proving to me that classical education is God's method of instruction.

I could never have written this book without repeatedly watching Andrew Pudewa's "Student Writing Intensive" videos.

If this book is of any value, it is because thousands of parents have asked me the same questions over and over again. You challenge me to think clearly and articulately. I'm not sure if I actually do think clearly and articulately, but you make me try. The learning comes from the trying.

Thank you to my family for giving me up each summer as I speak and write.

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The Passion: Loving Life and Learning

“It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly... who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold timid souls who have... known neither victory nor defeat.”

—Theodore Roosevelt, Sorbonne lecture, 1910

One of my favorite books is *Exuberance: The Passion for Life*, by Kay Redfield Jamison. The first chapter, read in a restaurant, inspired me to walk a mile in 35-degree weather past a windy New England waterfront, rather than take a taxi, just so I could feel more of life. I was very cold, but I spent 30 minutes reveling in a fisherman in a bright yellow dory, the song of automobile wheels on a 100-year-old bridge, a set of armor on a porch, lace curtains in a Colonial window, and lots of “hellos” to bundled up strangers.

I live and breathe life and learning. Jamison's book made me want to share, with anyone who would listen, the joy and enthusiasm that results from living a life grounded in the exuberant love of learning — or rather, playing hide and seek with God as He reveals His creation (Prov. 25:2). Life may often be very hard, but it should never be really boring.

Consider Jamison's words:

"...it is the infectious energies of exuberance that proclaim and disperse much of what is marvelous in life. Exuberance carries us places we would not otherwise go — across the savannah, to the moon, into the imagination — and if we ourselves are not so exuberant we will, caught up in the contagious joy of those who are, be collectively inclined to go yonder. By its pleasures, exuberance lures us from our common places and quieter moods; and — after the victory, the harvest, the discovery of a new idea or an unfamiliar place — it gives ascendant reason to venture forth all over again. Delight is its own reward, adventure its own pleasure" (p.4) ¹.

As I study the words of Francis Bacon, Teddy Roosevelt, Augustine, and others that loved, tackled, and savored life; it makes me want to encourage others to inspire that same hunger in our youngest citizens — our children. I have been led, no — impelled, to teach my four children with our home as their 'base camp' since 1983, and I plan to continue until our youngest, David, is launched in 2015. My husband I plan to home school 32 years.

I take seriously the injunction of Jesus that if I cause my children harm I may as well hang a millstone around my neck and jump in a lake (Mark 9:42). For His sake, I'm driven to inspire my children with a love of life and learning that overflows from their spirits even in the most difficult of situ-

ations. I'm compelled to "ride horses up the White House stairs" as Teddy Roosevelt did with his children, and I want to share with them the deep sorrow rather than self-righteousness that comes from the ugliness of sin. I want them to work so hard and to have fun so physical each day that they can't wait to climb into bed each night. I want them to know that everyone they encounter can be their teacher, and that they are to inspire each person they meet to draw a little closer to our Father in heaven. Life is but a vapor, and yet it's also a divine journey — a journey that can result in unspeakable joy and heart-satisfying peace that passes all understanding.

Our Family's Journey

Our journey as a family began in 1983 when my husband, Rob, and I were married while we were students at the University of Michigan studying aerospace engineering. He is very quiet. I was introduced to him as "Bob" Bortins and proceeded to call him that until our wedding day. My mom and my aunts arranged for all the pertinent wedding apparatus to be engraved with "Bob and Leigh." Toward the end of our wedding reception, Rob just leaned in to my ear and whispered, "My name is Rob. I don't like Bob." I still chuckle whenever I see the wedding knife in the kitchen drawer. And I am still trying to get to know this quiet, humble man.

When I graduated from Michigan, I found myself with a husband and baby Robert and some hard choices to make. When I was a new mom, I wanted everything to be just right for my baby and I, which I know now is a definite contradiction! I wanted to work at the career I had studied so hard to prepare for, and I wanted to be home full-time with Robert. Well, selfishness won, and I went to work at Boeing Military Airplane Company. Then a funny thing happened — I saw a talk show called "Donahue" (revealing my age) where

they interviewed a strange looking family concerning their choice to home school their children. I thought the family was incredibly peculiar, yet they inspired me to want to home school. In my confused mind, I was going to home school while I worked full-time. Amazing how inconsistent I can be! Anyway, for the first time in my life, I was a lousy employee because all I could think about was Robert at home without me.

I became pregnant with John and quit working the very day my Boeing contract ended. I worried about what my parents would think. After all, they were the ones that said, “Don’t be the nurse, be the doctor. Don’t be the secretary, be the CEO. Don’t be the stewardess, be the pilot.” And they were the ones who had been proactively directing my education all along. When I called to tell them the changes, they surprised me by being very proud of my decision to be a full-time mother. They had worried about Robert being raised by someone else. My mom said, “I stayed home with you guys when you were little, and I have a great career now. Work can wait. Robert can’t.” And so, for me, the hard work of guiding a young child to passionately love life and learning began.

Rob and I have raised four sons together in a variety of states and homes. All of our boys have had their education centered in our home so we could share with them our love of life and learning. Our eldest son has graduated from college with an engineering degree, and our second son is studying at a Appalachian State University for a bachelor’s degree in construction management. We had a 10-year gap where several pregnancies weren’t carried to term until we were finally blessed with two more healthy boys whom we continue to teach and encourage from our home.

Currently, Rob and I both work from our home, though we have had a myriad of job situations over the years in order to keep us fed and still have someone home to teach

our boys to love life. We have both worked full-time away from home, full-time in the home, and part-time out of the home. Has it been easy? No, but we know we are accountable should our boys become part of the 40 percent of U.S. high school students who graduate each year unable to read simple books like *The Hardy Boys* series. We are accountable should they become part of the 40 percent of all Americans who don't even graduate from high school (See appendix.).

We want our children to spend the bulk of their formative years observing responsible behavior modeled by adults and children who like to serve God with their families.

Home-Centered, not Home-Shackled

Though our schooling has been home-centered, we definitely haven't spent much time at home. We were blessed to have my husband work for an airline when it was still easy for employees to travel for free. So Robert and John, my older two boys, have camped in the Olympic Rain Forest, climbed Mt. St. Helens and Mt. Rainier, stood in the Mississippi River, and swum in almost every major body of water in and along the United States. They've been to a number of foreign countries on mission trips and have had lots of fun visiting friends and relatives. Travel would have been limited if they had had to follow someone else's academic calendar.

William and David, our younger two, haven't had the benefit of free airfare, yet we've still managed to hike in the Rockies a few times and travel up and down the East Coast. One winter, we snow skied on Thursdays since lift tickets were free. During the three-hour drive to the

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slopes, the boys worked on school assignments. When we arrived, their brother John would join us since he attended college nearby. I told John he didn't have to ski with us since he could go anytime, but he just said, "It's fun!" John is an excellent skier and blessed his brothers by teaching them to ski. He had David jumping little ramps on his second day of skiing. When the slopes closed, we would eat dinner, buy John and his roommate some groceries, and sleep at their apartment.

Notice the "high" cost — free lift tickets and no hotel. We couldn't have afforded skiing if we had had to pay exorbitant weekend and holiday prices. Through the years, we have found evenings, weekends, and holidays a great time to work on academic assignments. Often, adventures and memorable activities have been available to us mid-week for a discount.

The most important thing I hope you glean from our story is that we love life and are passionate about living it with our children. Many years ago, a friend who is equally active with her seven children taught from the home told me a secret for enjoying my kids. She said, "I like being with my children because they obey me the first time I give an instruction."

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Our boys also are quick to obey. It only takes a hard look from their dad to let them know they are in trouble. Rob has never spanked them, but somehow they know he will if it serves their best interests. They know we want the best for them because we are always working together. Our children know our struggles, and we

participate in their victories. We are there to support one another through life. We are not off in different directions for the better part of their childhood.

It is fun to see how quickly children grow from being hard work to helping hands. William wakes up and takes care of the dog and makes the family breakfast and lunch. Then he waters the plants. David cleans their bedroom, the bathrooms, and manages the trash. John comes home from his summer class at the community college and cleans the kitchen before working on the new addition to our house. Rob comes home from golfing and does laundry and makes a grocery list. I buy the groceries and put supper on the table. Many hands make light work.

For family recreation, we choose to do physical labor. In one summer, John and William trimmed out the garage door and painted it. The five of us worked on digging out a 20-by-12-by-1-foot pit, laying railroad ties, and hauling five cubic yards of sand to make a beach for our lake house. We eat each day in the sunroom addition John built with William and his dad as his helpers. David helped John build a garden wall. William helped me transform a rusted wrought iron table set into a beautifully sanded and painted piece of art. We end our days by fishing and swimming together. A full moon in winter signifies a picnic dinner in the dark followed by marshmallows and campfires.

For community outreach, we have lots of parties. It is so unfair that we get to live on our beautiful lake without you. So we have neighbors, church members, and home schooling families over just about every week during the summer. God has given us a fleet of small boats for free, and our off-lake neighbors are welcome to leave their boats tied to our bulkhead. Our backyard looks like a marina. When we first moved in, I was worried our retired neighbors with their pristine yards and empty docks would be angry with us. But each has made a point to come over and tell me how much they delight in seeing all the children use the lake.

For school, we spend a lot of time talking and thinking together. We wake up reading the Bible and go to bed reading good books. We get excited by the turtles that eat our fish bait, the frogs that live on our patio, and the antics of our crazy dog. Our newest adventure is learning to make videos of the boys' academic recitations to place on the Internet. William can produce an entire segment by himself now. An hour of math studies each day (two in the summer) keeps us moving ahead in a much-needed discipline.

The rewards of our passion for loving life and learning are many. A few come to mind. One night when John was 17 years old, I picked him up from work knowing he was anxious to go out with some friends. When he jumped into the car he said, "Mom, let's drive towards town. I want to take you to see the fireworks over the baseball stadium." He told me his friends could wait. Another time I was driving in the car when John yelled, "Stop! Pull over!" He proceeded to jump onto the hood with his cell phone so he could take a picture of a beautiful sunset. Currently, when he comes in from fishing at night, he brings his catch to show the family before he releases it. Our life is beautiful because of John.

Robert brings adventure. Due to his work, his travels as a rugby player, his enormously devoted friends around the country, and his desire to be an investor, we never know where he will be or what new thing he'll be involved in. Although he is grown, he always phones home to get our opinion first. I remember one time he called to tell me he had just made the winning "try" (rugby word for point) and his team was moving on to some higher level. It was very noisy, so I asked where he was. He said, "I'm standing in the end zone!" He had all of his college teammates jumping around and screaming, yet he called home to share the good news.

Unlike the media portrayal of rebellious teens, our two older boys actually liked being with their parents. Now as

men, they choose to remain in close contact with us. We have moved from parents, to advisors, to friends that share in the passions of our grown children's lives. If you are considering teaching your children from home, it will not make your days any easier, but it could allow more of God's laughter to permeate your family's passion to love life and learning together. The passion to learn all God has revealed (and hidden) in His creation keeps the joy of living and learning alive in our home.

¹ Jamison, Kay Redfield 2005 *Exuberance: The Passion for Life* Vintage