

A Balanced Classical Model: TOS Talks with Susan Wise Bauer

Diane Wheeler

Most people know Susan Wise Bauer as the co-author of *The Well-Trained Mind: A Guide to Classical Education at Home*. She has more recently published *The Well-Educated Mind*, a book on self-education for adults, and *The Story of the World* history series, published by Peace Hill Press. As an author, speaker, college professor, and home educating mother of four, Susan has a broad and enlightening perspective on home education, offering both encouragement and critique. It is always a pleasure to speak with Susan, as it promises to be an opportunity to laugh and learn. Please welcome her back for another TOS visit.

TOS: It has been five years since *The Well-Trained Mind* was published, with the second edition published this year. What changes were made? Were the changes about resources or philosophy?

SWB: The main reason for the new edition was to update the resources. Also, in 1998, few curriculum providers had a web address or online store, so we provided those. I wouldn't say there were any major changes in philosophy, but we took the opportunity to make some changes that we had wanted all along. We took out the rigid schedules, which we hadn't wanted to include in the first place (that was the publisher's idea). Instead of the schedules, I put in copies of the checklists that my children actually use. We thought that might be a little more helpful. The preparing for college section is a little more extensive, and so is the testing section.

The most important addition is that we say, frequently, "No one does every single academic subject listed in this book. And you should alter our recommendations to suit your family." We said this in the first edition as well, but I think a lot of people missed it. So in the new edition, we try to say it once per chapter.

TOS: You speak across the country at conferences and conventions. Is there a particular question or concern that you answer most often?

SWB: The truth is that what most people want is something intangible; they want reassurance. I have been struck again this year how desperately so many people want to do a good job of homeschooling. Probably 60 percent of the questions I get are, essentially, requests for reassurance.

I suspect many parents think that worry is a signal that they're doing something wrong. Actually, I think all parents worry. I worry all the time, too. In my rational moments, I look at my kids and think, "I have four normal children." I don't think of them as extraordinarily gifted; they are just good, happy, well-educated kids. That is probably 90 percent of the time. The other 10 percent of the time, usually after I come back from a conference, I think, "I am not doing enough! I'm missing something!" and "What is going to happen to my children?" I go down to my mother's house once, twice a week, sometimes more if I am having a bad week, and say, "Here's what I'm doing. Is this right?" And she says, "Yeah. You're doing great." I have started to accept this as a normal part of homeschooling, as it is a normal part of parenting, this sense that maybe you

aren't quite doing it right. The worry is simply recognition of how important the task is. You feel a certain level of discomfort with it at times because it matters so much.

TOS: What academic concerns do you have?

SWB: There are two academic areas that bug me. If 60 percent of people need reassurance, the other 40 percent want to know about writing. People come up to me and say either, "Well, my 12-year-old really hates to write so we just let it go for the past four years" or, "My 8-year-old is writing two pages a day, but he is crying all the time. What do I do about it?" Both of those are genuine attempts to deal with a difficult subject. But in the first case, not enough is being done; in the second case, way too much writing is being forced on an unready child. There's very little comprehension among homeschoolers of the gradual, step-by-step process necessary to build good writers.

The other thing that I am getting increasingly irritated about is the focus on early college admission. Sending your child off to school at 16 (or earlier) is becoming a mark of prestige. Too many parents are using early college admissions to reassure themselves that they've done a good job. "I must have done something right-my kid is 16 and ready to go to college." I really hate this increasing tendency to use early college admissions as a status symbol. I would like to see homeschoolers move more towards taking a gap year, a year off before college. We have this enormous flexibility; why don't we take advantage of it? I have taught college freshmen for almost ten years now, and I can tell which ones are 18 and which ones are 19 without even asking. My 19-year-old freshmen are better organized, they get more sleep, and they are happier. Most of all, they know what they are trying to get out of the experience. Emotional maturity can't be rushed; you simply have to live a certain number of years before you develop it.

I am not saying that no one is ready to go to college at 18. Sure, some kids are ready. But many, many kids would benefit from a year off. Taking a "gap" year before college is much more common in Europe than it is here.

TOS: What projects are you currently working on? What projects are in the works for Peace Hill Press?

SWB: I am finishing the fourth volume of *Story of the World*, and I am doing a four-volume world history series for W.W. Norton-this is a "Story of the World" for adults, and it is a wonderful project. I am finding a narrative thread in history and not having to cut out all the difficult and dangerous bits.

TOS: You get to include the blood and the bad behavior.

SWB: Yes, and the big complex ideas as well. I have started to feel a little mental claustrophobia with the *Story of the World* series, and I am glad that it is almost over. The constant need to simplify, simplify has stared to wear on me. It is a lot of fun to turn to something more complex. With four volumes, I have deadlines spread out over nine years, I think, so that will be in my future for some time.

Peace Hill Press has turned into something more than we expected. Right now, we are typesetting the first two winners of our biography series, with four more coming. We are really hoping to do a science program. We are working with college professors in chemistry, physics, and computational biology, and with my brother, who is a computer scientist. The tricky thing has been that before we start putting science books out there, we need an overall plan for K-12. What skills are we trying to develop here? What are the component parts of those skills? How do we build them, step by step, while also giving appropriate content? The fun part has been sitting these college professors down and asking them, "What is it that you wish your freshmen had done before they get in your class? What should they have learned in secondary school?" That has been the most illuminating set of discussions. Our science professors say that students need to have been taught how to observe, and how to formulate questions about what they are seeing. They also need to be able to integrate math with science. So we have worked out sort of an overall plan, and we are working on the specifics for the first two years of it. It is going to take time to produce something really good and distinctive, but that is our long-term project.

We just finished *The Ordinary Parent's Guide to Reading*, and we like the *Ordinary Parent's Guide* format. Eventually, once I get done with *Story of the World*, I want to work on *The Ordinary Parent's Guide to Writing*.

TOS: More and more families are continuing to homeschool through the high school years. What do you have to say to parents and students that are in this season of homeschooling?

SWB: If you're hurrying through the high school years, ask yourself, "Why the rush?" What do you think you are gaining by hurrying? When I am forcing my 11-year-old to write his two sentences a day and I ask myself, "What am I gaining?" I can find a very clear answer. I am building my child's confidence in his writing, and I am building one stage of one of the skills that he is going to use for the rest of his life. But if I ask, "What am I gaining?" by sending my child to college at 15 or 16-or, for that matter, pushing difficult mathematics and literature assignments down into younger and younger grades, I find myself without a good answer. In my opinion, too many people practicing classical education are suggesting that academic rigor means asking children to do difficult thinking earlier and earlier.

One thing classical homeschoolers really need to guard against is a devastating level of elitism: "We are doing the best homeschooling because our young children are doing such advanced work." This kind of elitism is non-Christian, it is unloving, and it is unproductive. I was recently asked, "What do you think of third-graders doing Saxon 5/4?" I said, "I can't think of a single thing you would gain by that. Some of them will be able to do it, but a lot of them aren't developmentally ready for it. You are going to finish advanced mathematics by the end of high school if you keep them on the normal schedule. What's the rush?" What do you gain by asking a seventh-grader to read the Iliad if that seventh-grader hasn't developed the maturity to understand and appreciate what he's reading? Nothing at all. You gain nothing in the way of emotional and mental development by pushing difficult tasks down to earlier grades.

I am not talking about the lowering of academic standards. I don't want them lowered; I am just talking about extending the time needed for children to meet those standards. Children move from grammar to logic stage thinking, and from logic to rhetoric stage thinking, at different times

in different subjects. We should focus on this, rather than focusing on age or grade level. And I hope that classical schools will also begin to think seriously about what is being gained in the classroom if immature students are being asked to do work that continually frustrates them. Is our goal to educate as many students as possible, or to identify a small, advanced, elite core of classical scholars? I hope it's the first, and not the second. I think there is a very high level of achievement that all children can reach, given the appropriate amount of time. Keep the standards high, but give each child the appropriate amount of time for those achievements.

TOS: Thank you, Susan, for sharing your thoughts on classical education.

As a classical home educator, I have learned much from talking with Susan. May her words bring you the encouragement you need to keep doing an excellent job.

Biographical Information

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Diane Wheeler is the senior staff writer for The Old Schoolhouse. She and her husband John live in Placerville, California.

Susan Wise Bauer has published numerous books, including The Well-Educated Mind (Norton, 2003), The Well-Trained Mind (Norton, 2004), and the Story of the World series (Peace Hill Press). Publishers Weekly described The Well-Educated Mind as a "brilliant guide" and "a timeless, intelligent book." She is currently at work on a four volume history of the world for [W. Norton](#). The first volume is [now available](#). You can track the progress of her writing at her blog, www.susanwisebauer.com/blog. Susan teaches English at the College of William & Mary, and lives in Virginia with her husband and four children.