

A Chat with Barbara Shelton
A Form+U+la for Real-Life Homeschooling

Kim Wolf

One of my favorite homeschool quotes has come from homeschool mom, author, and speaker Barbara Shelton: “Real-life learning is any learning that happens in a real-life setting, for real-life purposes, in a real life manner.” Isn’t that liberating? Haven’t you always known that to be true?

In states that have a set number of required hours to account for, many parents worry about what in the world they are going to do to fill up all those hours when, on many days and depending on the ages of their children, academics may be completed in 2-3 hours. Doesn’t real life count for something? If only we could get it through our poor public-school-saturated brains that life is the major portion of homeschooling, wouldn’t we be much more relaxed and confident? We would enjoy the freedom to branch out and learn, as a family, a far more varied and creative way to incorporate the subjects into our real-life education.

Then there are the worries of moving from the elementary years into the junior and senior high school years. Isn’t there a difference in how we must instruct our students? Shouldn’t our students be much more concerned about being “serious” in their studies and leave all the creative, fun ways to learn behind?

Not according to Barb.

Let’s sit back and take the time to listen to a seasoned (since 1982) homeschool mom who has mastered real-life homeschooling and learn a few things ourselves.

TOS: Barb, what brought you to the decision to chuck the “norm” of what most folks think education should be and develop your High School Form+U+la?

BARB: It was actually a many-year trial-and-error process, not a conviction I started out with. So I never really “chucked” it; I just saw other homeschoolers who were doing the whole “school at home” thing and knew I did not want that. Actually, it was more like I knew I could not do that and live! I looked at some of the children—the “victims” in a very real way—saw the sadness and dullness in their eyes, their lack of zeal for life and learning, and felt so sorry for them! I had tried a bit of that route (with a homeschool curriculum I had gotten for my kindergartener) and just couldn’t do it. I just always ended up doing fun things with my kids, incorporating real-life ways of learning into our day, mostly just capitalizing on opportunities as God brought them our way—though I often didn’t realize it was Him at the time!

I eventually—and slowly—began realizing they were learning not only “just as much” as they would have had I used a prepared curriculum, but MORE!—and in ways that were so much more enjoyable, productive, and conducive to retaining and internalizing what they were learning! SO much STUFF is poured into children’s heads that will never be used, never associated with anything in their real life, and therefore not retained, even if it IS valuable. (And much that’s taught in school is NOT!) As parents, we need to trust the God-given ability—buried alive in

most parents—to determine what is valuable and needful for our child and what is not. I call this a God-ordained “scope and sequence.” ...

As time went on and I saw the “fruit” of how we were approaching learning—that my kids were not getting burned out—I started realizing that my “failure” was not just an accident; that because God was not calling me to do the “school at home” thing, He was therefore not giving me the grace to do it! This was both a revelation AND a relief to me!

TOS: The elementary homeschool years are so conducive to fun field trips, creative art and craft activities, and hands-on projects. Are those days really gone forever? How can we keep the joy of homeschooling that we experienced during those elementary years while teaching the junior high and senior high years?

BARB: By just continuing to do it. But at the high school level you may want to (not that you have to!) start forming all of this learning, in its MANY different creative forms and avenues, into high school classes. Yes, everything of value in a child’s “real life” can count toward high school credit! How to do this is exactly why I ended up writing *Senior High: A Home-Designed Form+U+la*. Not only is it “not that hard,” [but] it can actually be an absolute blast to get your framework set up, a high school notebook for your student, and another notebook (or files) for yourself, and then start pulling everything God is bringing your family’s and your child’s way into your child’s own unique high school experience!

And here is a huge KEY: It will look different in every family, and even with every child! If we think we need to “do school” exactly like the schools are doing it, and jump through every possible hoop to fulfill every requirement we come across, we will only burn out and never see the wonderful fruit in our children’s lives and hearts and characters that we so desire to see. This is because we will have placed “the system” as our master, and, as we know, man cannot serve two masters. And “the system” is a hard taskmaster that will only keep us out of the “Promised Land” that God uniquely designed for each family! Here is what one homeschool mom just wrote to me: “I have just recently become acquainted with your work. It is revolutionizing our home!”

And, in case you have a child in a private school and think, therefore, that none of this is applying to you, think again. “The system” is exactly the same. The only difference is that the curriculum has been, for the most part, “Christianized.” And it’s possible that the peer influence is even worse, as often the kids in the public schools who are the most incorrigible are sent to private school as a last-ditch effort. The external rules are tighter, but that doesn’t change a child’s internal nature, his heart, as “the law” simply has no power to do so! And so, when the teacher is not nearby, the values of the children are still continually seeping to and through each other.

TOS: You talk a lot about “the system”; how would you summarize your view of this?

BARB: Every child has different “bents”—different purposes for having been placed here on Earth, in the particular families they were placed in, at the particular time in history. Each child—each one of us, really—has a unique, God-designed future. To me, the heart of (true) education is cooperating with God to prepare our children for the future works He has prepared beforehand that we may “walk in them”! [That] future ... is NOT going to be best facilitated and

prepared for by a “one size fits all” education. ... Yes, there are certain things—certain skills and knowledge—that all of us need in life. We all need a good grasp of true history; we all need a basic foundation in math and science and the English language, both in writing and oral. But we do NOT all need all the “stuff” that is poured into our poor children’s heads from morning to night in the traditional school system. Night, you say? I thought they were out of school by mid-afternoon! Yes, but then they have to bring “the system” into their very homes by doing its HOMEWORK!

TOS: Speaking of which, let’s take a quick detour to your thoughts regarding “homework.” I understand this word is on your black list. Can you explain why— without your blood pressure being too affected?

BARB: I sure can, but not without my blood pressure rising! This whole area of “homework” is one of my deepest concerns about “the system,” aside from the anti-God philosophy and the extremely negative values found at school. Families already separated from each other all day long because the kids are in school and most parents are at work are even further separated by this insidious practice of homework! ... One mom with children in public school got fed up with it and went in to talk to her child’s teacher. She told her: “You have my children for six hours a day! If you cannot finish what you need to in that amount of time, it is your problem; do not send it home for them to do. I only have my children for a few hours a day, after they are already tired from being here; you do not get that time!” To which the teacher replied, “Then your child will fail!” To which the mom replied, “Then I am taking him out, and we are going to homeschool!” And she did! (I know of this story because she took my homeschool course!)

TOS: What are your recommendations for a parent who is teaching two or more children, close in age, with very different tastes and learning styles? Is it still possible to educate them together as in the early years?

BARB: Sure is! Sharnessa and Tory (our children) were—still are—1½ years apart, and VERY different in every way! Sharnessa was (still is) a “go getter,” highly motivated, always looking for something to learn in every situation, loved reading, learning, LIFE. Tory was much more laid back, but there were still many things they could do together, regardless of “style”—books that I read to them, science experiments and activities, learning the multiplication tables (quizzing each other), field trips, presentations for our homeschool group, etc. There wasn’t much out there on “learning styles” in the early days of homeschooling, so I wasn’t really tuned in to that. And just because something isn’t their “taste” doesn’t mean we don’t do it.

TOS: How can we get past the fear of not “measuring up” to state requirements or leaving gaps in our children’s education?

BARB: The first step is to realize that, indeed, you WILL leave gaps! So, as they say, “just get over it”! I wish it were that simple, but, of course, it’s not. Again, it is a work of the Lord within us. What we have to also look at is that any public school will also leave gaps—in the most vitally important, life-affecting area of all: spiritual growth and training! And this “area” is not just an elective or a “side dish” but is the most basic and important foundation of a person’s life and of their entire education! How we live our lives around and through homeschooling is a huge and integral part of the spiritual training. That’s why “spiritual training” outside the context of “real life” is much less effective, much less “real” and “whole,” [and] much more likely to be

spurned in later years. Besides, public schools are filling other gaps, but in ways that are ungodly and destructive to faith—to believing and walking with God! You may end up with a great deal of “undoing” to do, as I have heard from friends who have done this. There are many things I believe God never intended our kids to be exposed to at this age, not until they are ready, mature, with their “faculties trained”—which may even be never.

Or worse, because kids often are not able to verbalize or even recognize the dangers of some of the things they are hearing, you may not even be aware of the underground roots of deception and unbelief that are slowly, insidiously entwining their way around and taking root in your child’s heart. ...

If you are still feeling unsure about this, John Taylor Gatto, New York State Teacher of the Year in 1991, said something very profound about this:

Don’t be fooled into thinking that good curriculum or good equipment or good teachers are the critical determinants of your son’s or daughter’s education. All the pathologies we’ve considered come about in large measure because the lessons of school prevent children from keeping important appointments with themselves and with their families to learn lessons in self-motivation, perseverance, self-reliance, courage, dignity, and love—and lessons in service to others, too, which are among the key lessons of home and community life.

Are you seeing that, no matter where you are, gaps will be left? YOU, the parent, have been given the authority to decide, as you follow the direction of the Lord, which gaps are the most important, and which gaps will be left!

It’s highly likely that much of the education your child would receive in a public or even the best private school would leave many gaps that will be needed for the future God has in mind for your child. And that is because “real life” is a major gap the schools have no way of filling. ...

TOS: So how do you feel about homeschoolers connecting with the public schools for classes offered to homeschoolers?

BARB: The fact that public schools are filling gaps—and presenting “supposedly” generic subjects in ungodly ways—is one reason I am very hesitant to condone working within the system’s “Home Link” type programs. But there are two other reasons I discourage use of these services.

One is that these programs tend to get us dependent upon the school system for the education of our kids. When we are connected with them at all, we tend to see them as “the authority” and see our own role as greatly diminished.

A second reason is it also creates dissatisfaction in children with their learning at home, since there is a continual contrast, and the public school setting naturally has an abundance of glitzy, “pleasing-to-the-flesh” features, not to mention an abundance of kids—which may or may not be pleasing to our flesh, but commonly is to kids. The “social butterfly” type loves all the choices for friends; the “class clowns” love the large audience; the quieter types like the opportunity to be invisible and “blend in” and just observe the whole scene.

There just really isn’t anything—in my very biased opinion—that can be better done in the classroom than at home! “Real life”—based at home—is the original and best place to learn.

School is a “cheap imitation.” So when we imitate school, we are really just imitating the imitation!

TOS: How do you think parents should regard the “experts” in education? Can they glean something from them?

BARB: First, we have to realize that “education” as it exists in the schools is nothing God EVER intended. Everything about it is anti-the-way-God-does-things. John Taylor Gatto said this about the system—in which he had taught for 26 years:

I don’t think we’ll get rid of schools any time soon, certainly not in my lifetime, but if we’re going to change what’s rapidly becoming a disaster of ignorance, we need to realize that the school institution “schools” very well, though it does not “educate”; that’s inherent in the design of the thing. It’s not the fault of bad teachers or too little money spent. It’s just impossible for education and schooling ever to be the same thing.

It saddens me to see parents who feel confined to an educational experience that is less than God desires for them simply because they believe the “experts” have more authority over their child’s education than they do! I want to quote what our daughter, Sharnessa, had to say a few years ago about her high school education:

It feels so good to be getting freed up from the idea that education always has to look like school. I used to look at what my friends in public school were learning and felt intimidated because I wasn’t doing the same workbook-type stuff. But now I’ve discovered that I can learn the same things—and more—in much more creative ways. ... The more I’ve gotten into it, the more the fear of not learning enough goes away.

But, of course, she was just brainwashed.

TOS: Do you think that real-life homeschooling could help a burned out or disillusioned mom?

BARB: It will not only “help” her; it will totally transform her! But actually it will not be “real-life homeschooling” that will do this work, but the Lord, by transforming her mind and thinking, and conforming them to His! Without this, “real-life homeschooling” will be just another “system” for her to cling to and be bound by. There MUST be renewed thinking about what education is in God’s eyes before true freedom can begin to happen. Freedom is not something you “do” or “get”; it is a by-product of a surrendered-to-and-transformed- by-God heart and mind! This implies and, indeed, is based on, relationship with Him! This is at the very heart of Marilyn Howshall’s *Lifestyle of Learning* message. ... For more of her message, which I see as the most important message in the homeschooling arena, go to the Lifestyle of Learning area of my website [www.homeschooloasis.com].

TOS: Does our walk with the Lord have any effect on our homeschool? How does walking in faith really apply to our educational decisions?

BARB: To answer this, I’d like to revert to an analogy. Your first question: “Does our walk with the Lord have any effect on our homeschool?” is akin to asking, “Does the ground you build your house on have any effect on the house?” ... Our walk with the Lord is the foundation—the “Spring of Life”—of our homeschool. ... Every thought, plan, and desire must be under His lordship, placed in His gentle care, led along through the day by His loving wisdom. In fact, we

will not be able to serve God—or homeschool our children—the way HE would have us do, ... if we have not received our “daily assignments” from Him, and if our connection to “the Vine” is not a strong, fresh, healthy one.

TOS: Barb, thank you so much for offering hope and support through your experience to moms who may be fearful of the junior and senior high school years and to all the rest of us who needed your encouragement.

Biographical Information

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Barb and Dave Shelton operate “Homeschool Oasis” from their Washington state home. Barb speaks around the country and has written eight homeschooling books, which Dave publishes and distributes, that free homeschoolers to turn to God to learn what “true education” is, and to follow His unique plan for their family.

Kim Wolf loves living in a small Ohio town with her husband of 21 years and their two teen daughters. They have homeschooled since 1993 and are very active in the music ministry of their church. She is a Miami County homeschool coordinator, a freelance writer, speaker, and Ohio coordinator for TOS. For more information, visit Kim at: www.HomeschoolBlogger.com/BuckeyeBlog