Rhythm Redo

The freedom to explore and discover, to ask our own questions, to pursue a deeper study of that which has sparked an interest is a vital part of educating hearts. I have likened it to the experience of the Escape Room—what joy is there in simply carrying out someone else’s instructions? Sure—everyone would escape if you were told just what to do, --there would be no child left behind-- but who cares?

Like Abraham Lincoln suggested—require a man to produce a bale of hay, and he will produce one bale of hay. Show him the whole field and tell him he can keep the profit of his own work, and he will produce ten bales.

The spirit of compulsion stifles progress and joy.

Yet, the idea of allowing that kind of freedom to learn is scary to a lot of moms. I have heard from many moms that if they don’t carefully plan their days, they lose control and their house becomes chaotic. Or they tell me if they give their children the freedom, their kids won’t do anything. Their kids aren’t going to spontaneously do their chores or practice their musical instrument or learn grammar. They have to require these things of them; they say that their children rise to the expectations placed upon them. Others say that when they try to allow that much freedom, they feel like they aren’t accomplishing anything. It’s hard to trust the process when the progress isn’t measurable.

There has been quite a bit of discussion on the topic of inspiring vs. requiring in our Facebook group with strong arguments on both sides. I have thought about it a lot and would like to offer some thoughts to consider.

Music provided the clear answer to me.

There’s a catch little song from an old musical, Sweet Charity, that makes me so happy, for awhile I made it the ring tone on my phone. I’ll link you to a high school choir version so you can listen. Part of the lyrics are:

The rhythm of life; it’s a powerful beat.

Music is made up of melody—that’s the part we hum—the rhythm or the beat and harmony. The deepest feelings in music are stirred by the harmony which is what happens when more than one note is played at the same time. The rhythm is what keeps the music moving forward. It’s the order and control part of the music, much like the laws are what keeps order in a free society.

Keeping rhythm in its proper place is how you’ll feel like you are progressing and will also help you to relax so that you can trust the process that requires the atmosphere of freedom and choice.

Let’s first explore the power of rhythm, and then I’ll offer some practical ideas and cautions for implementing it.

Pause this audio for minute, stand up and try to walk across the room out of rhythm. Or say this little phrase out of rhythm: “I haven’t got a musical bone in my body.”

Unless you have some kind of neurological disorder—there’s an interesting word for this—disorder—it is going to be practically impossible for you to do either of these seemingly simple tasks.

We are designed as rhythmical human beings. Have you ever noticed how, when you are in a large group of people and you start applauding, if you do it long enough, you start clapping together in sync?

 We breathe in and breathe out in rhythm. Our hearts beat in rhythm. In fact when my heart started skipping beats, my doctor put me in an ambulance and sent me to the hospital. An out of rhythm heart beat is not something you mess around with. But the interesting thing is so long as it does its work in rhythm, we don’t have to give breathing or beating hearts a single thought. They just do their thing automatically and we can go about doing our thing. On the other hand, If they stop doing their thing, we die.

The sun rises and sets in rhythm. The seasons cycle—Spring Summer Fall Winter in rhythm. The planets orbit in rhythm. The majesty of the universe and its perfect order is tied into its rhythm.

Rhythm or the beat in music not only maintains order, it’s what keeps the music moving along.

It is that inclination towards rhythm that makes buying a curriculum so appealing. Everyday, everything is carefully laid out for us and we just have to move through what is set before us. I hear it all the time—“I need to stay in control or everything will fall apart”. So moms make careful lesson plans so that their days can unfold somewhat automatically. They don’t have to think about what they’re doing. It’s all planned out in the rhythm of the day. And often kids will settle into the routine. Rhythm gives you a sense of order and control and keeps things moving along..

I had an interesting experience during the covid lockdown. Maybe I should say a revelatory experience. Every Sunday for my whole life, I’ve put on a Sunday dress and have gone to church. It’s part of the rhythm of my life. As part of that worship service, I partake of the Sacrament. Singing hymns is part of that worship experience.

For several months during the covid lockdown, that Sabbath rhythm was disrupted. Church was canceled. Sunday grew to look like every other day of the week. And something strange happened-- I started to question things in my faith I had never questioned before. And I noticed people who I knew well were doing the same thing and I watched a number of them leave the faith of their childhoods—something I couldn’t have imagined of them.

And I prayed—Heavenly Father, what is going on? With that prayer in my heart, I was downstairs by my bookshelves and was drawn to a book I didn’t even know I owned. It was a book written about the early Christian church after the time of the Apostles. It says the Christian church was divided into two camps—there was the one side heavily influenced by Jewish tradition that held fast to the idea that rites and rituals and traditions and ordinances were vital to the faith. They loved to adhere to the letter of the law. The other group was more the let’s just go meet together out in the fields and love God and love each other. And I thought—well that’s really me. That sounds good to me.

But the next morning when I woke up, the thought came to go back and read what happened to the two groups.

Which group do you think lasted?

It was the first group that eventually grew to be the Catholic Church which is still going strong after 2000 years. The Catholic Church leans heavily on rites and traditions. The other group died away after about 200 years, and in other research, I found they actually adopted beliefs that were contrary to their original beliefs. For example, Luciferianism traces its roots to this group of believers.

My thoughts then turned to the Jews. It’s remarkable to think that this group of people has maintained its identity for thousands of years even in a scattered and persecuted condition. And that hunger to return to their homeland has never left them. That’s miraculous! I think we can safely say they owe it to the rhythm of their faith—their traditions, their holidays, their daily readings of the Torah.

As restrictions were lifted and I returned to weekly church attendance and weekly partaking of the Sacrament, I noticed how it anchored my soul. I still have many questions, but I am able to pursue the answers without feeling like I’m freefalling through space.

The rhythm of life is most certainly a powerful beat. It sustains and grounds us. It helps us maintain a sense of order and control in our lives.

You might be saying what’s wrong with that?

Well, there’s a problem with strong repetitive beat. It shuts down thinking and feeling. It puts us on auto-pilot mode. Think what happens when you start counting sheep, slowly and rhythmically—we fall asleep. I can put people to sleep with my therapeutic harp by repetitive patterns. I ’ve talked about a young man from Sierra Leone I went to listen to. He had been abducted as a young boy and forced to become a boy soldier. The way they turned them into killers was to blast loud rock music with its repetitive beat day and night until they were so numb they would go out and do horrible deeds.

One of the common complaints about curriculum is that, over time, you burn out. You kind of feel dead inside and just start going throught the motions. Many curriculum users can hardly wait for the school year to end. Curriculum often kills a love of learning precisely because you are on a sort of auto-pilot. Its steady rhythm lulls you to sleep. It crushes the excitement and adventure of learning. There is little freedom for exploration and discovery. You may achieve your objectives, but at what price?

I was talking to my youngest daughter one day and complaining about modern music. I told her it is so repetitive –it’s four chords and a beat played out over and over. I was raised in melodies and key changes and such a variety of chord progressions. I asked her where’s the melody? Where’s the part I’ll go away humming? What can I harmonize?

And she said, Mom, we’re listening for the beat. We want to feel the beat. We’re not listening for melody.

I talked about that with my harp teacher one day who is teaching me to use the harp in healing settings. And she observed that our world has become so chaotic and that we have so lost our moral footing that our young people are trying to anchor themselves somewhere. It’s the repetitive beat of rock music that gives them a sense of order and control. But it’s not without consequence. I added maybe the strong repetitive beat is in a way numbing them; maybe they are rocking themselves to sleep in the face of so many dangers.

So let’s pull this back to you and the learning environment you are trying to create in your home and in your life. I hope you can begin to see that you can use rhythm in your favor to keep things moving along and to keep some kind of order and control in your life. But I also hope you can see the caution—never allow it to dominate and drown out the melody of your learning—the song of the heart. Use it sparingly—just enough to keep things humming along, but not so much that it has a deadening effect. Systems are great for machines. But we aren’t machines. We are artists at heart and artists need the free expression of what is in their hearts.

Establishing rhythm is where requiring is appropriate and in many cases, necessary. So take a look at your day and ask yourself what needs to be on auto-pilot? The habit of making our beds every morning, the habit of brushing our teeth or putting our clothes in the laundry basket. We don’t want to think about those things. We don’t want to wait until we feel like doing them—we just do them.

So yes! Chores and habits are certainly on the list of requirements and expectations. Often chore charts and rewards will help get the habit in place until it becomes an unthinking part of the day.

Routines fall in the same category. Nightime routines of brushing teeth, reading stories, turning on some music to listen to also are very calming and bring a sense of order in our lives and especially in the lives of our children.

I have a routine and a habit of daily scripture reading. I haven’t missed a day in close to 40 years. It’s like a lifeline to God. I don’t always engage in what I’m reading—sometimes I just open my scriptures by the side of my bed and read a random verse. But it’s a habit that has been an anchor to me. Daily scripture reading with your kids can be part of this rhythm of life.

So think of those things that are things that need to be done and work to establish them as habit and routine. This is where requiring is appropriate. Putting dishes in the sink after dinner. Practicing a musical instrument. Memorizing a poem can be made a habit and part of the requirements you establish in your home.

Academic skills like memorizing math facts or practicing handwriting can be made a part of the ‘require’ part of your day. But keep that caution in mind—if you allow the habit to dominate, you may kill a love of the thing that they are doing.

There are a few things you can do to soften the effect. One is to utilize choice whenever possible. For instance, you may require your child to practicing handwriting every day, but you can give him the choice of when to do it, probably not on a daily basis, but let him make the initial decision of where he wants to anchor it. Right after lunch? Right after breakfast? You may have to try out a few spots to see where it works best. If a child is super reluctant, you can even give him the choice of how long. If he says one minute, put the timer on for one minute. One minute is better than no minutes, and it’s the habit you are going for because this is a skill that needs developing.

Another way is to use Art to sweeten it. Put some favorite music on in the background. You may establish a certain time for readaloud, but let your children engage in quiet play or handicrafts while they listen. I hope you get the idea.

And don’t discount the power of love in sweetening the task. You can make chore time a drudge or lighten up by having fun together while working. The chores have to be done, but you don’t have to be miserable while you’re doing them.

In music, there are three anchor tones in every scale. Music is always searching to land on these anchor tones. And then it feels at rest.

A very easy way to add a rhythm to your day is to make sure you have three meals a day. Or if that’s too much, at least try for dinner. And then attach one of these rhythm activities to the meal. Then they are likely to get done.

A little every day is all you need to develop academic skills in younger years. I was told Charlotte Mason taught that 10 minutes of practice in each of the basic academic skills is sufficient. Your children don’t need to spend the hours and hours that most curriculums demand of them.

Neither do they need the hours upon hours of information that is dumped into their brains that they haven’t asked for not do they know what to do with it. Therefore, most of the information delivered through curriculum will just wash away. I believe there are much more important ways to spend our time.

The rotation schedule is also designed to add the necessary rhythm to make progress in learning. Music is divided into measures and within each measure are a certain number of beats, designated at the beginning of the music. But within each measure is a lot of freedom in how those beats are going to be used. So let’s say the music is based on four beats to a measure. You might rest the whole four beats in that measure—not play anything—and then pick up with more notes in the next measure. It didn’t matter that nothing was played—the rhythm of the music keeps the music moving along and doesn’t bring everything to a stand still if you happen to stop playing.

Maybe the next time that particular phrase is played, the measure that rested four counts before will now be filled with 32 32nd notes and even some trills thrown in or a whole glissando. Even if you don’t know musical terms, I hope you can see that you can fit a lot of notes into four beats.

This is how I picture the rotation schedule moving along your study of the whole world and everything in it. Maybe the first time through the rotation, your melody is very simple. Maybe you only get to one story the whole month. And the next month you have a baby and you read no stories. IT’s like a whole note rest. But you keep moving through the rotation—eventually adding in what you can. Maybe you’ll only manage some music or look at some art. It’s OK. The rhythm will keep you moving along and keep you from feeling like you have failed.

I am also encouraging you to add reading the Forgotten Classics Family Library as part of the rhythm of your day. The law of the harvest is in play. You cannot grow a garden from seeds that have never been planted. So you want to make sure you have scheduled seed planting in your day. It doesn’t need to take up a long time—even 20 or 30 minutes a day will yield a large harvest. You can even sow the seeds ten minutes here and ten minutes there. I would place establishing a time for the Forgotten Classics falls in the category of requiring. But definitely soften it by allowing choice and wrapping it with love.

Why do I place such importance on the Forgotten Classics? I’ve likened these stories to the gold nuggets that have remained when the dust of the ages blows away. They can also be likened to heirloom seeds.

Notice the word heirloom—an heir refers to someone who has the rights of inheriting wealth. That is you and me. We are inheriting the riches of the past. Loom refers to a weaving machine; of having something woven into fabric. I would say the living ideas in these stories are being woven into the fabric of our thoughts and our lives and if they are carefully tended and cultivated, they will eventually bear much fruit in our lives.

So what makes heirloom seeds so special?

Better Homes and Gardens has the answer, but as I go through it, change the word ‘seed’ to ‘story’ in your mind and you’ll understand why the Forgotten Classics are worth making the center of your garden.

Growing heirloom seeds in your garden can literally bring the past to life. These are seeds that have been saved for centuries. They've been around for awhile because they have unique and special characteristics people want. They have been saved to make sure desirable plants would be around from year to year--handing down through generations.

They have colorful pasts. For instance, you might trace a seed back to Thomas Jefferson's day and find him planting the same seed as you are.

Heirloom seeds are time-tested. If people bothered to save a particular seed for posterity, you know it was something special.

Heirloom seeds have passed the ultimate quality tests because of their exceptional flavor, beauty or hardiness.

They are prized for their deliciousness and resistance to disease.

Hybrid seeds happen because people get involved. The problem is the seeds of hybrids don't usually produce seeds that will produce a plant with the same characteristic as the original.

These older, tried and true varieties open up a world of rich flavors, unique colors, and other outstanding characteristics that make them the treasure they are.

Some come in packages pretty enough to be considered art. Organizations make sure they are distributed widely.

The Forgotten Classics Family Library provides the spine of learning in the new website. I would recommend setting aside time in the morning when hearts and minds are fresh and open. An ounce of morning is worth a pound of afternoon.

Call it your world adventure time. Make it exciting. Sell your children on the idea of heirloom seeds.

It may seem impossible to make it through the whole library. But I sat down and figured it out one day—if you only spend 20 or 30 minutes a day, 5 days a week, during the normal 12 years of a child’s school days, you will get through all of them. Of course, the older they get, the longer they can read. So it’s really not an impossible undertaking.

And even though you may ‘require’ the time as part of your rhythm, let your children be part of the decision process of what to read as much as you can. The Reading Records we have provided serve as a menu you can reference and see what sparks an interest and you can keep track of where you’ve been. If you have independent readers, you can even set the timer for a set time-20 or 30 minutes—so you are requiring the time, but you are letting them choose how to spend that time.

You will notice that the Forgotten Classics are now arranged developmentally in our site. Which books should you start with? You start at the very beginning and make your way through. No matter how old your kids are. I don’t know how to make it simpler than that. Not that you have to read through the books cover to cover. They’re not designed for that. They are designed for exploration and discovery. Allowing the freedom to choose and the inherent pleasure of stories will keep the rhythmic beat from drowning out the song. If you make your way through the library, you will have made your children familiar with the whole world and everything in it. It lays a foundation for a lifetime of learning.

These small and simple things have now given you just enough rhythm to help you feel that you are making progress and not freefalling. But notice the rhythm takes up only a small amount of time in your day. You have now freed up the bulk of your day for the freedom to explore and discover and ask your own questions and go down your own rabbit holes and grow hobbies and practice musical instruments and read books that grab your interest and visit interesting places and lay out in the backyard and dream while the clouds float overhead and make memories. There’s time for playing and talking to friends and visiting the lonely neighbor down the street. With this simple rhythm in place, you can be more spontaneous and life’s interruptions won’t derail you. The essentials are on auto-pilot and now you can relax because you know the rhythm will keep you moving forward. And you’ll know that you are progressing even when the outside world thinks all you are doing is ‘nothing but play.

It's called the song of life. And you never want the rhythm to drown out its melody. Which brings me to one more lesson from music.

It is the harmony in music that stirs the deepest feelings. Harmony is where two or more notes are played together. You can harmonize a melody, but you cannot harmonize a beat. If the beat of learning is all you have, it is dead. If you have drowned out the song with strong repetitive beat, especially a strong academic beat, you will be left with nothing to harmonize. Even the arts can be delivered on auto-pilot and you can kill the very spirit that is meant to give life. So be careful in your use of rhythm.

Here is an example of harmony in learning. I had a mom tell me her mother read Mother Carey’s Chickens and loved it. She noticed that another book was mentioned several times—a book written by Charles Kingsley called The Water Babies. So she found that book and read it and it expanded and deepened her understanding and appreciation for the first book. The two books in harmony was a much deeper and richer experience than either book alone.

This is the layering experience I keep talking about. This is the harmony of learning and is talked about elsewhere.

Maybe the short answer to all of this is that the heart can only be inspired. It cannot be compelled or forced or required. You cannot require desire or creativity or imagination or love. You can only inspire it. Inspiring hearts is the focus of the Well-Educated Heart We use the Arts to do our work of inspiration.

But the mind with its rules and skills is necessary for order. The mind, as I define it, provides the rhythm for life. And it is a powerful beat. Use it to your advantage. But don’t let it rule your life.