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The Art of Living

A journey of change and growth

At the age of eight, I wrote an article for our community's *HomeWorks* magazine entitled 'My Cool Homeschool Life'. In it, I expounded the virtues of homeschooling. Seeing it now feels really cheesy and ... embarrassing. Nevertheless, it is interesting to see how, 10 years later, what changed for me and what hasn't at all. Consider this an afterthought of that original article.

People sometimes have the misconception that being a homeschooler means transforming into a picture-perfect, all-rounder kind of individual. This might be due to the plethora of images online presenting beautiful homeschool products and moments. While such displays can be inspiring and encouraging, it might give an idealized picture of what homeschooling is. The fact is that homeschooled people have strengths and weaknesses, talents and flaws just like everyone else.

I think that homeschooling itself doesn't necessarily make you a standardized 'brilliant' person – nor is it its ultimate objective! I think that homeschooling develops you as a unique individual and ingrains a certain mindset in you that stays part of who you become.

What made homeschooling such a definitive journey for me? These are a few such things that made it special for me.

Living Books

When I was a child of 6 or 7, I was really, really difficult to teach. I hated reading or writing of any sort and would try to escape any study session as quickly as possible. Getting me to start reading must have been a long (and painful) process for my mom and tutor, but eventually, I did grow to love books - and when I did, I got the book craze really bad!

It was definitely the living books that captured me. Living books are books that are beautifully told and draw readers to learn more about a subject. Usually through a literary and narrative style, these books not only teach, but keep learners engaged. These go beyond the mere facts that you get in textbooks – you get a richer feel and perspective of the subject. You hear about human experiences. You feel the tone, the language and the culture... Living books take you on soul-changing journeys that you will not get with regular textbooks.

Looking back, I realize I can't remember studying a single history textbook. What stands out are Luqman Nagy's beautiful accounts of different nations and periods in Islamic history. I particularly enjoyed his stories of different Muslim villages. My family also read historical novels about the World Wars. Although I am not always able to recount exact dates, the real-life stories

of the people involved in the Partition of our subcontinent, the African-American freedom movement and many others across the globe moved me.

The Freedom to Discover

Living books inspired me to start writing, but the freedom that my parents gave me to make my own mistakes made it my passion. My clumsy first attempts were never made fun of or heavily corrected. I can only remember being encouraged and because there were no set limits or conditions that I had to satisfy, there was so much room for me to learn... and to fail and learn.

Alhamdulillah, this approach enriched me and in my recent two runs of a creative writing workshop (Storywala Secrets), I tried to share and replicate these experiences.

The homebased education helped me discover my artistic side as well. I was never warned to not color "outside the lines". I was never 'taught' to draw or paint anything – both my parents can NOT draw. I didn't attend any art class either, but I experimented with pencils, colors, crayons and paints (also with mud and soap bubbles) for as long as I wanted to and anyhow I wished. When I got interested in this field I had the encouragement of friends and siblings around me who were experimenting with their own artistic talents. That to me is the best, most genuine way to discover creative talent – providing supplies and support and letting the results flow naturally.

Meaningful Ties

It's not just books and paints. Homeschooling has also taught me the value of diverse relationships. My parents are my guardians and friends as well as my teachers; my sisters are my annoying siblings but also trustworthy teammates; and my friends, both young and old, are my mentors and support system, though none of them are my classmates!

I was never given any age bracket to operate within, which is why I'm able to establish rapport with both aunties and little kids. Through these unique companionships, I have learnt how to understand people and find out which friendships are worthwhile. This has stayed with me till now, as I navigate social life in college.

The Compass at the Core

My unconventional learning journey has helped me to be my own person. I was never tested or compared to any golden standard. I was told: *you do you*. I was told that discovering yourself, what you love and how you work is what will make you succeed.

The pressure of societal norms made me hesitant to choose the Arts and Humanities in college, but I was reassured knowing that I had discovered what I wanted to do and could do the best in. My parents and mentors always had my back. I had courage because I was taught to value faith and principles over everything else. I was certain because I was given space to discover myself, and yet guided, so as not to be left wandering without any boundaries or a compass. Quran, Seerah and Aqeedah were always our top priority subjects. I grew up to learn that these were

my reference points. These were what I had to fall back on. Nothing decided what was right or wrong except for the Quran and Sunnah.

I feel that no matter how much more lies ahead, in sha Allah, the soul, the core of me will always have this foundation. I know the value of living books, to which I will be turning to later in life as well. I know about the importance of relationships and how they better me. I know what my passion is and how to pursue it. And although I still struggle with it, I know I do not have to worry about any individual's or institution's standards so long as I fit the standards of my Creator.

That's the art of living I have learnt and will always treasure. I might not have realized this at eight, but I'm realizing it now that it will encompass my whole life. Learning can always happen but the best thing is that you come to **love** to learn. I hope I always will.

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