

A Gracious Space

❧ Daily reflections to sustain your homeschooling commitment ❧

Julie Bogart





A Gracious Space: Winter Edition

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Winter: A Gracious Space

Preface

A Gracious Space is a collection of thoughts and reflections on home education drawn from personal experience and the lives of thousands of Brave Writer families. The winter collection continues the tradition of fall—and is intended to sustain you through the colder, indoor months. The desire to “re-up” your commitment after the holidays is powerful. This volume supports that aspiration and is meant to help you follow through on your best intentions for your family and homeschool.

All of us seek support—whether in the form of in-person cooperatives or online communities. This series of daily readings is drawn from the daily posts I’ve shared on the Brave Writer Facebook page and blog. Apparently they struck a nerve: many of the entries generated hundreds of likes, shares, and comments. We are releasing one volume of these mini-essays per season to support you in your homeschooling vision and practice.

This second volume has 50 entries for winter. Pair one per day with a cup of tea or coffee, and remind yourself of your values and your value. Each entry is accompanied by a comment from a parent like you or notable person and a daily sustaining thought. These thoughts make wonderful source material for your own copywork, which you could do

right alongside your children and a lovely lit candle. Try it. You may find that you are more inclined to enjoy the quiet moments of the day if you write with your children and calm yourself with soothing supportive thoughts that relate to this demanding lifestyle.

Remember to be kind not only to your children, but to yourself. You're learning how to be a home educator even as you educate your children. No two years are alike, and each season of a single year will have its own character. The winter is a time when unit studies, reading aloud, and handcrafts are popular. Take advantage of your fireplace (if you have one). One family I know used to roast marshmallows in the fireplace during read aloud time! The point is that you can enhance the experience of home education when the doors are closed to the cold outside world by attending to the particular nature of winter—a time to pull in and dive deep, to play board games and read books.

The topics included in this volume cover a range of principles and practices that apply to any homeschooling family. Feel free to read them a day at a time, or in a rush all at once. You might also find these readings useful at homeschool support group meetings. Read an entry as your meeting begins and use it as a perspective for discussion or consolation.

It gives me great joy to watch parents free themselves of the external pressure to perform according to someone else's standards or vision for their homeschool. As you develop your own homeschool lifestyle, remember that it will look like you—your particular family. If you need more support on the journey, feel free to check out the

homeschool coaching and mentoring program I offer at: <http://coachjuliebogart.com/>. The Homeschool Alliance is designed to give you additional support and help you explore your vision to tailor-make your homeschool.

Enjoy this volume!

Keep going.

Julie Bogart



Day 1

Throw it at the Wall. See What Sticks!

Let me introduce you to “play.” That is, I’d like you to play with your homeschooling tools. Rather than focusing so much on “getting it right” and “scheduling enough time” and “completing the objectives,” what if you saw your manuals, your books, the pastels for artwork, the piano, your yardsticks and calculators, computers and binoculars, writing prompts, dissection kits, vocabulary cards, and field guides as toys in a big box waiting to be opened and discovered?

What if you skipped chapters and went straight for the single most interesting concept in the entire book (and it turned out to come nearly at the end, rather than at the beginning)? What would happen if you tried to build the catapult before you had learned how to hammer nails? Wouldn’t you find yourself suddenly far more interested in nail-hammering with this fascinating project in front of you that can’t continue until you’ve got the basics mastered for balancing the little nail between your fingers and smashing it with a swing of the hammer? Sometimes the end leads us to the beginning, and that leads us to enthusiasm!

What if when you read a chapter about revision in writing, you scan for the one key idea that stimulates brand new thoughts, and skip all the insipid ones about tightening

your sentences or embellishing skimpy paragraphs with additional detail? What if you simply went for the best, brightest idea, such as: hiding a secret, or foreshadowing a future event within the budding story?

If this grabs hold of your attention, go for it!

Why not?

Why not play with the toys of your curriculum? If you try a little, you might find you develop a taste for it all. These tools are under your command. You get to decide how to use them. It's perfectly fine to throw your attempts at a wall and see what sticks, rather like testing spaghetti noodles for their "doneness."

The most difficult part of being a home educator is that you feel you are flying blindly. As a result, you put far too much trust into the textbooks and materials, as though they hold the keys to educating your young. But they don't. They offer you a possible pathway to mastery—that is it!

As the one in charge, you can determine which pieces actually accomplish that goal!

Not only that—please enjoy the educational process.

If you open *The Writer's Jungle*, for instance, and you find yourself curious about "dumb writing assignments," why wouldn't you skip directly to that chapter and read it!? It might scratch your itch.

It's okay if your child hates the Topic Funnel or resists the study of "literary elements" for today. That's just today. Find

some other tidbit worth enjoying and exploring. You may circle back to the items that were resisted and have more success once a child “buys in” through joy in another aspect of the program (whatever program - not just mine).

I literally have no stake in anyone approving every teaching I offer. I have a huge stake in your happiness at home with your children. I would imagine you do too, or you wouldn't even attempt this slightly demented program of educating your children of multiple grade levels all day every day without a break from your charges.

You can trace the birds in the field guide without ever looking at a real bird, if that is what suits you. You can choose to never read poetry at teatime and instead only read geography terms or watch movies.

Your homeschool is under your control. But even more than that, it is meant to be wonderful. Play with the materials. See what happens when you allow your imagination to fuse with the orderly structure of the texts.

You may find, for instance, that jumping rope while skip counting is more fun than doing it at a table.

You may find that emailing the child's father at work the five amazing facts about his favorite football team is more engaging for your young student than writing a mini report.

Try a little. Test it. See how it feels. Skip what disinterests you. Trust the process, not the product. Trust yourself, not the invisible educator not present in the room.

My goodness! You are all adults. You know what you know and you know how to find out what you don't know and you won't cover it all anyway, and what you do together with your children is going to be enough because you can never do it all.

Anything you miss? I promise, they will meet it again in college or they will never need it again (or they can AskJeeves).

Let loose a little. January is a good time for that.

Quote of the day

I'm just going to apply it to my whole life!

Kim Suzanne Stewart

Sustaining thought

Sometimes the end leads us to the beginning, and that leads us to enthusiasm!

Day 2

Take Pictures of the Daily Stuff!

Our family put together a slide show for Liam (fourth child, before he left for his summer job as an IT guy at camp, and then on to college). I was struck the most by the photos of our ordinary life. Sure, pictures are always a part of vacations and births, holidays and when the relatives come. But the photos I love the most? Two kids lying on their backs, heads touching, on the trampoline; a cup of hot cocoa the size of a small planet sitting in front of a six-year-old's toothless smile; the laptop open with four kids watching the same screen; Kitchen Aid mixing the bread dough for bread bears; snuggling toddlers in the same bed; each kid reading a favorite book . . .

I have so many photos of our homeschool years—priceless now that I can never take them again.

The social media craze gives you occasion to share these daily moments in ways I never imagined when my kids were young. I know most of you are used to taking pictures constantly.

You don't need to miss the event in order to take pictures (I get that that is not useful! Sometimes just being there is enough). But pictures of tying shoes and making grilled cheese sandwiches may be some of your better shots and you can sneak these in when no one is thinking about posing for the camera.

I spent one year taking a picture a day (at least one) and posting it to my blog. That did more to teach me about photography and to pay attention to the small, unnoticed moments than any other photography advice. I still use that year's worth of photos more than any other!

You might try it.

Bottom line: it all goes quickly. I'm really glad I got to spend all those hours admiring my children. I'm equally glad I took pictures of them.

Quote of the day

A good snapshot stops a moment from running away.

Eudora Welty

Sustaining thought

Capture the small everyday stuff on film—the goings-on that you might otherwise miss and then forget later. You'll never regret it.

Day 3

Are Speech and Writing Related?

A debate exists about writing: Is it related to speech? If so, how much? If not, why not?

One camp says that learning to write is akin to learning to speak a foreign language. Writing is as foreign to native speakers of any language as Amharic is to you or me (unless you are Ethiopian!). That's why children struggle to become fluent writers, so the thinking goes. Children are naturally wired for speech and are frustrated trying to translate those words into language suitable for writing (the style of it, the vocabulary of it, the spelling of it, the punctuating of it, the organizing of it, the handwriting or typing of it). Even my guru, Peter Elbow, says that some people feel as if they are translating speech into something else when they write. Have you ever experienced the "Hmmm, how shall I say this?" thought as you sit down to actually write the thought you are having?

That's what this camp is getting at. There's a weird translation process between speech and writing. Because so many of us have experienced that moment, there's a sense in which it must be true: writing must be so different from speech, we are prone to writer's block as a result.

There is a bit of truth in this perspective. The brain is not

wired for writing, like it is for speech. Writing is a learned activity. Speech, however, is hardwired into all human beings.

The other camp sees writing as related to speech. Dr. Peter Elbow, again, recently published an entire book (*Vernacular Eloquence*) that attempts to make this case to a resistant academy. Writing is the extension of speech, he argues. If we can understand speech first, and then see how it informs and creates writing, we will wave a wand of release over thousands of frozen would-be writers. The mechanics are only one aspect of writing—writing actually sits inside each of us as native speakers already.

What is fascinating is that in the world of homeschooling programs, both views rely on copywork, dictation, and two varieties of narration (oral and written) to help students gain fluency in “writing.” But their starting points of view are polar opposites.

What I’ve noticed in my work with thousands of families is that children are more inclined to put in the effort of learning the skills associated with writing when they can see that it relates to a skill they have already mastered: The English language.

When we talk about putting their thoughts into written words, we are asking them to identify thoughts! In *Brave Writer*, I suggest you “catch your child in the act of thinking.” Help your child discover that he or she is having thoughts worthy of record: write them down when they least expect it, when you hear those thoughts tumbling out of their mouths!

Every single day your children are not only thinking thoughts, but using those thoughts to generate oral language. That language can easily become written language when they have a transcriptionist (you!).

Once the connection is made (“What’s inside my head and comes out of my mouth can also be what shows up on paper and is read to others”), teaching the mechanics of writing becomes much more interesting to children. They get it—writing is about their mind lives and they love sharing those thoughts with others.

Are there style differences between writing and speaking? Of course! Are there pesky rules of grammar and syntax that we follow when writing but often break when speaking? Naturally.

But if we start by seeing writing as foreign (a foreign language), if we begin with the assumption that says that writing is “hard work” and that the “discipline” of writing requires rote work with someone else’s words first, if we suggest that what is inside your child will not be suited to the page until some kind of mastery is achieved in handwriting or spelling, we literally alienate the fluent native speaker from writing—from believing in his or her writing voice before it has uttered a written peep!

That alienation, time and again, manifests as writer’s block or not caring. The spark of individuality that is your child is lost in all this “hard work of precision and accuracy.” Accuracy matters, but it is not more important than originality of thought. Accuracy can be added; originality can be lost.

What studies are showing to be true is that children are far more likely to take writing risks when they believe that their content is valuable, and when they trust their thought lives to be adequate to self-expression. They are more likely to work on their mechanics if they experience the mechanics as supporting their original thoughts, rather than having to show perfect mechanics before they are permitted to have original thoughts.

If we value our children's thought lives, help them to express themselves in Big Juicy Conversations, if we transcribe some of their ideas and read them back later to our children, if we ask for expansion of thoughts and show curiosity, if we model language choices that are more likely to be associated with written language models, our children will absolutely discover writing in much the same way they found speech!

They will risk, test, try, show off, back away, make huge silly errors, make leaps of logic, express vocabulary beyond their years, will imitate and create, startle and master, and sometimes mess with you acting like they don't have a thing to say. But they will grow! This is what growth looks like.

The approach we use in Brave Writer does not see writing as a foreign or antagonistic process that requires painful hard work. Rather, we see writing as the opportunity to take speech further—to enhance, expand, and nourish speech (oral language, inner thought), and then to preserve and share it with interested audiences.

Kids respond well to this vision of writing. They love to read, to be read to, to talk and converse. Writing, particularly in today's dialogical world of the Internet, is another conversational tool. We can learn how to wield writing for a variety of audiences, but why not start with the one closest to home? Why not let them write for themselves? Then for you, and then for their friends, and finally for "academic purposes." This is the progression that works.

I hope you feel reassured. You are not teaching Hindi to your kids, with a whole new language structure and vocabulary. Writing in one's native tongue is built from the English already spoken and understood. Writing is simply gaining mechanical skills to transcribe one's own fluent thoughts, and learning how to develop these thoughts into the flow of written language.

Brave Writer has created oodles of tools and tactics to help kids "get it." We've got more in the pipeline.

You can help your kids learn to write well. Start from the idea that your children are writers already, learning mechanical skills, in search of a supportive editor/reader: you.

You can do it!

And so can they!

Quote of the day

Thank you for this. It sums up what I've been doing with my child for the past three years! When I pulled him out of school due to LD, I quickly realized the relationship of writing to speech. We did lots of talking that first year....telling and re-telling of stories. Things are much better now but we still talk it out before each and every writing assignment....well worth the extra few minutes of my time:)

Karen Anne

Sustaining thought

You foster natural growth in writing in a similar way to how you helped your child become a fluent speaker of English: through admiration, modeling, enthusiasm and freedom to take risks.

Day 4

Beware of “Open and Go”

The “resort on a beach” of all curricula is the “Open and Go” variety. You receive the UPS box in the mail, crack the spine of the new workbook or text, and immediately know what to do, right now, with your kids, without any preparation, reading of instructions, or adoption of a particular philosophy.

This magical product teaches the tough subject you have avoided without taxing you, plus your kids like it! What a bargain!

So do these products work for writing? More specifically, does Brave Writer have a product like this? Please, Mother may I?

Writing is unlike content-oriented subject matter. You aren’t exposing your children to a list of facts or details and asking them to memorize or consume them. Writing isn’t a set of formulae to be introduced and practiced. Writing isn’t the coordination of handwriting, punctuation, spelling, and grammar that can be learned in workbook formats. Writing is more than any of these, even if at times it embodies all of them.

Writing—original writing—is created from thoughts. Thoughts are personal to the writer. Thoughts come first.

Everything else is window dressing.

Just as speech required a context for risk and communication with an active partner, so, too, writing requires a witness and compassionate reader. Writing thrives when it becomes a dialogue between the author and his or her audience—particularly the audience of an invested parent.

Scripting that dialogue is not possible. A set of workbook pages doesn't get at the mind life of the child. Writing forms can't instruct the process of self-inquiry (which is the genesis of all good writing). Handing our children a set of instructions to be read alone, and a book with lines on the page to fill in, doesn't help them imagine themselves as writers. Rather they are being taught that writing is external to self, done for that page, according to someone else's ideas of what should go there.

Literally—'open and go' workbook writing programs ask children to think of writing as a task done according to someone else's prescription of what goes "over there" away from self. Children are taught to think that the thoughts for writing exist inside someone else's vision, and their job is to hunt them down (pluck them from the thin air) and hope they've collected enough of them in one place to get a "good grade."

This is not writing. This is puzzle solving—holding the directions in the mind, while wrestling language into the imagined form the assignment creator may have intended.

Yet this "assignment writing in a workbook" is the holy grail of writing instruction! Can't parents hand a book to

their children and ask them to follow the clear instructions? Won't writing grow with practice? What about all those writing assignments in high school and college? Kids don't get to pick their topics or formats then, do they? Why not practice now?

Parents, typically, don't have good memories of writing instruction from their childhoods, and many are not self-confident writers today. Yet many programs expect parents to instruct children in writing using similar methods that didn't work all that well for them. These programs lead to similar results—mediocre, unconfident writing. That's not to say that some kids don't find their way to brilliance and enthusiasm! Writers (kids who love writing) find their way regardless of method, half the time.

Helpful writing instruction requires a philosophy that is a paradigm shift away from how you, the parent, likely learned to write. The shift is in focus—away from form and accuracy as primary, and toward risk and expression as essential. Original writing is about how the mind generates thought—instruction is about how you foster an environment for creative thinking and use of language to grow. It's about recognizing that writing is more than words on a page, but is, rather, the valuing of the writer's own perspective of the world—a writer's personal experiences and values, curiosities, mastery of facts, passionate reads, hopes and aspirations, confusions and frustrations, challenges and arguments, connection to others, and reporting of information.

This is writing. All writing is this—this distillation of an

individual's mind life/thought world. Clarity and accuracy matter, but so do inspiration, imagination, critical thinking, and flexible, expanded vocabulary. Form helps to manage these aspects of the topic for writing, but forms can also stifle original thought. Knowing how to write means knowing how to manage the forms, rather than be managed by them.

All this to say: “open and go” deprives writing of its essential context—space and room to explore. Can you imagine asking for an “open and go” parenting manual? “Open and go” driver's training? “Open and go” sexuality and reproduction workbook?

When we are dealing with danger, complexity, values, intimate relationships, connection, or thought lives, we do our children a disservice to think we can teach them by opting out of the hard work of engaging with them. True partnership and dialogue go more slowly, but so much more richly.

Brave Writer has materials and classes that support the relationship of new writer to parent-coach. We even give you specific words to say, and processes and practices to try together. These are tools that can be used again and again as your young writers learn to internalize the self-inquiry style of writing generation. We give you projects to test together—with week-by-week instructions of what to do. But in each case, all the way until high school, your presence—your appreciation for and understanding of the process, your conversation and modeling—is essential.

Make time and space for writing in your family. It can look like teatime and poetry on some days. It can look like family movie night or read-aloud time or freewriting or riddle creating or limerick reciting. It may be the hard work of jotting down an endless story or the wise support you offer a teen trying to start a blog about recycling. Writing instruction might include the hard work of grammar study or learning to edit for spelling errors. But it isn't essentially that. It is the discovery of what one has to say that is worth preserving and presenting in a cogent manner.

Writing is unlike any other subject in homeschool. In fact, it's not a subject. Writing is about writers. Writers need readers. You are the reader—the partner, coach, and ally your child deserves, as you help your writers discover their voices, their vocabularies, and their powers of refining their messages in the written word.

No “open and go” workbook can show you how to do that. You need to live it alongside your kids, once you've adopted the principles into your heart. It's a privilege to be that person in your child's life. Don't delegate it to a workbook! Yes, it takes time. So do all the things you care most about.

Surprisingly, teaching writing this way is so pleasurable it doesn't feel like work any more. It feels like relationship. A good, rich one. The kind you want with your kids—the kind that lets you into their minds and hearts.

So worth it.

Quote of the day

Boy did I need to hear this. As a mom with three kids and two of which have special needs, we spend much of our time on the go and I was thinking, we need the perfect workbook, this article calmed me. Thank you!

Jen Fischer Midkiff

Sustaining thought

What a privilege it is to be the one that encourages your children to open their minds and hearts in writing and then to share it.

Day 5

Don't Overthink

You want to do a good job of parenting?

Think less about how to shape your kids into world changers and more about how to bring a wide world to your family to shape them.

Think less about turning your kids into responsible mini adults and more about how to ensure they have a childhood.

Think more about how much energy your children invest in what they love and less about what they fail to do.

Think more about each child's natural aptitudes and less about each child's deficiencies.

Think less about the future and more about today—this moment.

Think less about expert advice and more about your hunches.

Think more of your children than the Famous People who Write about Them.

Think less about disciplinary tactics and more about “live and let live.”

Think less of yourself (your power to impact who your

children become) and more about the innate power of genetics, culture, language, and nationality.

Allow yourself to be in awe; disallow anxiety.

Think more about what you can control (your own character and maturity) and less about what you can't (your children's).

Think more of your child's responsibility to grow up to be who he or she is, and less of your ability to make some imagined outcome happen.

Think only of your responsibility to provide possibilities and opportunities, and less of your obligation to guarantee outcomes (to anyone—the state, your spouse, your extended family, yourself).

Let yourself off the hook—you are limited. Celebrate your limits.

Let your kids off the hook—they are limited. Enjoy their limits.

Think about all the signs of maturity, character, intelligence, and heart you do see; think less about the recklessness, slip-shod work ethic, bickering, and lack of academic progress that reminds you they are still minors.

Think more of yourself than you usually do. You are enough, you have the right kids, you know what it means to love and educate them. You do it every day.

Think less of the revered friends and experts. They are not

you. They do what they do. They don't have your kids. They can't parent for you. They shouldn't live in your head.

Think more about developing thinkers (people who engage ideas) and less about getting your kids through an education (people who pass classes).

Think more of home education when you are at home, defending it to yourself, and defend it less to other people.

You do know what you're doing. The tweaks and changes you make are validations of your vision, not invalidations of past choices. You are growing alongside your children, becoming an educator as you go.

Think more of your journey as a homeschooler, and less about what your kids are learning.

If you value your growth, you'll learn to value your kids' growth.

If you love what you are learning about education and learning, your kids will find some version of that lifestyle for themselves. It's contagious.

If you are undistracted by the flaws in your system, personality, finances, and home life and think more about how to become intimate with a subject area that fascinates you, your entire life (including homeschool and children) will flourish.

Don't overthink this one. Stay the course, learn, grow, share, *trust*.

You are less important in the total scheme of things than you realize, and you are far more valuable in the moment-to-moment day-by-day than you appreciate.

Both are true.

Don't overthink it.

Quote of the day

Stop spying on me. Lol. Wow—so timely.

Hall Family

Sustaining thought

Think less. Live more!



If you enjoyed these first five essays from *A Gracious Space: Winter*, you can purchase the entire book of essays (50 in all) from Brave Writer!

Visit our store: BraveWriter.com/gswinter

A Gracious Space, the series, comes in three volumes: one for Fall, one for Winter, and one for Spring. You can purchase them in digital format (to be read on Kindle or smart phone) or in trade paperback from Amazon.

Kindle Format: \$9.95

Paperback: 14.95

Join Julie Bogart in the Homeschool Alliance (a coaching community for home educators) for readings from *A Gracious Space: Winter* starting January 3, 2017. Learn more about the Alliance here: coachjuliebogart.com.



Praise for *A Gracious Space*

“Thank you. I’m on Day 25. Just, thank you. This daily reading has been exactly what I needed this fall. My 9th and 8th graders feel weird as homeschoolers because all their friends went to public school this year. They’ve been “looking into” the possibility of public school next year so that they’ll fit in. My 9-year-old daughter decided to be defiant this year. Life just isn’t turning out the way I thought. Filling my head and heart with your words of grace has brought me to tears many mornings. I am finding hope each morning. Sustaining hope. Thank you.”

—Angel

“Thank you so much for these materials and for helping me to shift my approach to homeschooling from a place where my hands were grasping and fearful to one where an open hand and trust in the process is starting to show up more and more.”

—Valerie

“Just started reading *A Gracious Space* and I love it! Our family just started homeschooling this past winter and we are still discovering what works for us. This book speaks to my heart and reassures me that what we are doing is right for us! Thank you Julie Bogart!”

—Jen

“I love it!! I read an entry or two while I’m having my morning java or in the evenings if the day has been crazy. It’s warm, encouraging and inspirational but not in a super cheesy corny way. I just love it, love it.”

—Nadine