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## My Parents Were Home-Schooling Anarchists

By MARGARET HEIDENRY

Tired of the constraints of the 40-hour workweek, my father, in 1972, quit his job in publishing. My parents were in their early 30s, and they had four children under 7. “But we still wanted to explore the world,” my father recalled recently. They bought six one-way tickets to Europe, leaving only a laughable \$3,000 to subsist on. Young and idealistic, they thought they could easily educate us along the way. “Life itself would become a portable classroom.”

For the next four years, my parents embarked on an uncharted “free-form existence.” We traipsed to Nerja, Spain; Dorset, England; a Midwestern farm; and San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, before settling in St. Louis. My father worked on his novel. The task of teaching the children — Mary, James, John and me — fell to my mother.

For much of this time, I was an educational tag-along. Yet I clearly remember San Miguel, where we spent six months in 1975, when I was 4. Art class was held outside in the *jardin*. When we giggled and chatted among ourselves, Mom never shushed us, but calmly told us to pick a subject. Why not draw idling mariachis, or the dog drooling at a vendor’s feet? she’d suggest. Or maybe the kids our age who sold gum to make ends meet? I’d invariably copy what my brothers drew, usually just a car.

Writing, history and geography were followed by “gym,” a family yoga class led by our father on a terrace. When school ended, we were allowed to wander the dusty cobblestone streets on our own. On one of those afternoon rambles, John and James found three .22 caliber bullets. Another time a pack of teenage boys chanting, “Gringos!” chased us.

How my parents stretched our budget to allow for our far-flung classrooms can be chalked up to several strategies: creativity (my dad sprang an invalid uncle from a nursing home and brought him to Mexico to help pay the rent); making do with very little (we bought a dried-out Christmas tree marked down to \$2 in the waning hours of Christmas Eve); freeloading (the decidedly uninternational destination of St. Louis can be explained by a vacant house offered by a doting aunt). On our family adventure, my parents were consistently inconsistent. There were a few interludes of standardized education, but for the most part, as my mother would later write in this magazine, “during all this time, the children traveled with us and received nothing that remotely resembled formal schooling.”

[“Home Is Where the School Is,”](#) published in the Oct. 19, 1975, issue of The New York Times Magazine, was the first article in a national publication to espouse what was then still a fringe educational choice. This was the curriculum my mother described.

### *Daily Schedule*

9:30: Reading.

10:00: Mathematics.

10:30: Science.

11:00: Yoga (with parents).

Tea break (with parents).

11:30: Drawing, painting.

12:30: Lunch.

1:30: Writing (Monday and Tuesday: Play of the week; Wednesday: Correspondence; Thursday and Friday: Writing and illustrating stories.)

2:30: History and geography.

3:00: Yoga.

6:30: Spanish.

What may now look like the course offerings of a Portland, Ore., prep school was inspired by my mother’s reading. She supplemented this curriculum with simple spelling and math workbooks bought at Woolworth’s and an ever-changing stack of library books. She had little else to go on; this was decades before you could Google a lesson plan or buy a “My Kids ‘Heart’ Home Schooling” bumper sticker. In the ’70s, home schooling was still against the law; it wasn’t until 1993 that it became legal in all 50 states. In her article, my mother laid out the basic tenets of her approach to educating us. “They work at their own pace,” she wrote. “They have no assignments to complete. . . . I am not teaching the children. I am permitting them to learn.”

After Mom’s article appeared, multiple letters to the editor expressed “fear for the Heidenry children.” Readers wondered if we would ever be able to adjust to the “real world” or were destined to be “social

misfits” and underachievers. My siblings and I still hear echoes of this social disapproval. Many to whom we recount our early years seem troubled by our unorthodox upbringing. In the age of Tiger Mothering and helicopter parenting, no one can understand how our parents’ experiment could have been anything but hard on us.

My mother, Pat, a first-generation Irish Catholic from the Bronx, met my father, Jack, a theology major from the Midwest, at Herder & Herder, a small publishing house in New York City, in the mid-1960s. My parents weren’t hippies. They didn’t practice free love — they married in their early 20s, six months after they met, and are still together 47 years later. They didn’t take drugs — the one time my father smoked pot, he rushed to the E.R. because he “felt funny.”

What my parents did embrace were countercultural values. Or, as my father likes to say, quoting Gerard Manley Hopkins, “all things counter, original, spare, strange.” (My dad’s father once grew corn in his backyard for the sole purpose of taking weekend naps among the stalks.) My mom maintains that she didn’t consider herself “an activist or anything like that. I was just part of a current that was happening, fertile ground for all the new ways of thinking.”

At the time, home schooling was almost virgin territory. My dad was attracted to home schooling because he felt “stifled” during his 16 years of formal education. “I was a poor student,” he says. “School was something I endured because I had no choice.” Not wanting his offspring to suffer the same fate, he informed my mom soon after she became pregnant with Mary that none of his children were ever going to school. “We were educational anarchists,” he says.

Mom, a scholarship-winning A-student, formed her opinions more methodically. First she read “Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Child Rearing,” the 1960 classic by the progressive educational theorist A. S. Neill. Neill founded a school where attending classes was optional, trusting that students would become self-motivated. “ ‘Summerhill’ had a profound effect on me,” my mother recalled, “because until then I had never questioned traditional education at all.”

Her curiosity piqued, she picked up “[How Children Learn](#)” (first published in 1967) by the educator John Holt. Holt maintained that forcing children to learn changed their personalities. He advocated providing a stimulating environment so children could follow their own interests and learn at their own pace. Holt called this doctrine “unschooling.”

In her Times article, my mother explained that Neill and Holt made her think differently. “Surely there was a better way for children to learn other than being confined to a large building all day.” After she read Ivan Illich’s “De-Schooling Society,” in which he called for abolishing all schools, her “decision crystallized,” she said. So when it came time for 5-year-old Mary to attend kindergarten, “I didn’t enroll

her. I had taken her to our local public school in New York City for a tour, and it just struck me that it was like a prison.”

**In the '70s**, home schooling still fell under the rubric of “criminal truancy.” In St. Louis, when my siblings didn’t show up for homeroom, a social worker came knocking. As my mother wrote in her article, she and my father told the government agent “that we would refuse to send the children to school if we were ordered to do so and . . . were prepared to go to court.” The social worker, realizing that we weren’t being neglected, recommended to the school principal that we be allowed to remain at home.

Estimates put the number of home-schooled kids during that period between 10,000 and 15,000. It wasn’t until 1977 that the first newsletter about home schooling, “[Growing Without Schooling](#),” by John Holt, was published and a verifiable movement was born. While Holt is referred to as the “father” of home schooling, he was not yet an advocate when my mother made her decision. In fact, Holt contacted her after the Times article appeared, asking if he could pass out copies of it at his lectures.

Home schooling is still embraced by those with progressive ideas (Julian Assange was taught at home), but what was once the province of the bohemian few is now more likely to be embraced by religious conservatives. Today, [according to a poll by the Department of Education](#) (PDF), 83 percent of parents who home-school their children — nearly two million children are now taught at home — do so out of “a desire to provide religious or moral instruction.”

**While my mom** put a lot of thought into the mechanisms of freedom, Dad took a laissez-faire approach. Tea with parents, yoga and Spanish were the only classes my father was in charge of. As my mother put it: “He was busy writing, doing his own thing. My thing gradually became home schooling. He put the idea in my head, and I ran with it.” (That my father was involved at all, before stay-at-home dads blogged about their Jack Spade diaper bags, is not insignificant.) Despite the considerable sacrifice this required — no life outside teaching and caring for a quartet of children — my mother says she enjoyed that time with us.

My dad churned out manuscripts. And we kids chanted “ab-ra-ca-dab-ra” over the thick envelopes before he mailed them off to publishers. Thin rejection letters were all that appeared. One day my father came home from a Vietnam Veterans Against the War auction with \$250 worth of artwork. He was making only a meager income from freelance book-reviewing, and this impulsive purchase left a family of six with \$200 to live on. My mother screamed, yelled and worried — describing her anxiety as “butterflies in my whole body.”

We learned to make do. We had our teeth pulled by student dentists at a free clinic and shopped for bargains at the dented-can outlet. Very briefly, we stood in line for food stamps. When a broken

collarbone demanded a trip to the E.R. during a blizzard, my father took me to the hospital via sporadic bus service — we couldn't afford a car. To ease the pain of my injury (and my recovery), Dad gave me one pack of Juicy Fruit gum, which I was then made to share with my three siblings. It was such a treat that I slept with the remaining two sticks clutched under my pillow. My mother went without haircuts or date nights. As for the \$250 blown at the Vietnam Vets auction, my mother, after what she described as her "initial hysteria," calmed down. "In my heart, I knew your dad's impulse to buy the art sprang from a generosity I loved him for. He wasn't spending money on gambling or drinking but supporting a cause we both believed in."

Home schooling was also a cause they both believed in, and so despite the financial strain, they kept at it. It was especially important to my mother that we have a creative outlet. She devoted an hour each day to art, considered a "frill" by most public-school systems, because, she wrote, "this is where the children can allow their imagination to roam free." It is not surprising then that art — and travel — is what stands out most in our minds when we think back on those years. John, who was especially fond of the time the family spent in Mexico, recalls "third-class bus trips to see the mummies of Guanajuato" and "taking tinware classes at the Bellas Artes." James remembers the tea breaks and exploring medieval English ruins in thick, warm sweaters. "You know what it's like to be a kid and go into a ruined castle?" James says. "England was the best field trip ever." My sister's most vivid memories are also of England. "I remember a moment that has always stayed with me because it was so beautiful — sitting in a field where sheep were grazing and sketching an old gray stone church. Parishioners were inside singing, while outside the bells were ringing."

But these far-flung field trips had downsides. Mary vividly remembers the 10-day drive to Mexico — seven people crammed into a used station wagon with no air-conditioning. "We mostly ate Heinz beans warmed up on a hot plate in motel rooms," she recalled. And moving around so often could be lonely. We had only one another for company. Mary read so much that, in my memory, her face is obscured by a Nancy Drew mystery. John and James, only 18 months apart, were each other's constant companions. As a little sister, I spent many friendless hours adrift.

Fueled by repeated readings of the four siblings' exploits in "The Chronicles of Narnia," we imagined that occasional loneliness and displacement was the price of adventure. When instead of Narnia, our portable classroom landed in relatively mundane St. Louis, we consoled ourselves with less magical explorations. James's favorite activities were unsupervised science experiments, guided by Childcraft encyclopedias, using a donated microscope and beakers. Mary preferred "being left alone to read and making marmalade." John and I can still recite much of the 1,000-word "Highwayman," by Alfred Noyes, the longest of the many poems we were made to memorize.

By 1976, our “strange” years had become increasingly “spare.” Mom and Dad had started a literary bimonthly (John Holt was a contributor) and opened an art-house cinema, but neither held a conventional job. My parents had circumvented state truancy laws but could no longer get around the need for money. (A recent nationwide study shows the current median income for home-schooling families is between \$75,000 and \$79,999.) After six years devoted to home schooling, our parents’ search for full-time employment was on. And though Mom would only realize it afterward, she wanted a break from being a mother and teacher 24 hours a day, seven days a week. That meant figuring out what to do with the kids.

Our transition to formal schooling happened to coincide with the moment St. Louis was trying to address the problem of its segregated school system. To avoid forced busing, the city decided to open several magnet schools with specialized curricula to attract students of all races from around the city. To my parents (perhaps conveniently), these schools sounded as if they offered the kind of progressive learning atmosphere they had been seeking. They quickly enrolled us. James and I were to attend the school dedicated to math and science; Mary and John the one focused on performing arts. We had no transcripts but were readily accepted. These brave new academic worlds needed white faces to succeed.

The night before our first day of school, instead of staying up worrying about what it would be like, we looked forward to it as “the latest adventure,” John recalls, “like moving to Mexico or England.” That sentiment was shared by James: “I was cocksure of myself because I thought what we had done was very cool.”

**One early September** morning, our parents dropped us off in front of our respective schools. They didn’t walk us into the building. They didn’t introduce us to our new teachers. They didn’t even tell us what grade we were in. John remembers it this way: “Luckily, Mary and I deduced that, because I was 10, I would go into the lowest grade (fifth), and as an 11-year-old, she would go into the next (sixth).” As the youngest, only 5 that fall, I burst into tears when I was separated from my brother James. I hadn’t been warned that we’d be in different classes. When I questioned my mother about why she left us to puzzle all this out on our own, she defended herself, saying, “I assumed you’d know what to do.”

Going from yoga and tea (with parents) to gym and a packed lunchroom was a shock to our systems. And feeling lost wasn’t the hardest part. Looking like Goodwill poster children was. “I thought I looked great in my huaraches and striped, fiesta-themed peasant pants,” Mary says. “But everyone else in the sixth grade was wearing a Led Zeppelin T-shirt and jeans. I was not too naïve to realize I needed to get some jeans. Quick.”

Everything about the single-file, cliquey public-school system was counter to our counter-lifestyle. “I was in math class,” John recalls, “sitting at a desk wondering, Am I going to have to sit in this same spot every single day from now on? The teacher was grilling kids on decimals, which I did not understand. To me it just looked like a dot! Then the teacher asked me to recite the nine multiplication table. I answered, totally nonchalantly, ‘I don’t know it.’ The teacher paused, eyes zeroing in on me, and said, ‘Boy, I’m gonna have fun with you.’ ” Slowly the meaning of being unable to recite lines from “Star Wars” (we’d never seen Hollywood movies) and not having feathered hair began to sink in. We were weirdos.

In 1978, [NPR interviewed my mother](#) about her home-schooling experiment when a multistate teachers strike left thousands of parents wondering what to do with their homebound children. After asking, “I’m curious about how you basically stood it all day,” Cokie Roberts repeatedly pressed my mother about our socialization. To gain independence and prepare children for the realities of adulthood, didn’t they need to be with their peers and suffer all the harsh experiences that entails?

“I don’t know if children should be put through bad school situations just so they can be socialized,” my mom replied. It was a noble sentiment, but unfortunately bad situations were exactly what was in store for us, especially for John and James. “I was very green, and a few days into school this kid pushed me so hard I fell over a desk,” John remembers. “I just couldn’t understand. Why would a kid want to fight me? At home, James and I were like two peas in a pod.”

At my schoolyard, James, in third grade, was instantly picked on. Within the first week, he recalls, “an older kid kicked me in the butt really hard. The other boys were laughing. A girl finally told me someone put a ‘kick me’ sign on my back. I never heard of that, teasing and pranks.” James was also taken to the back of the bus and “punched incessantly” for the better part of grade school. “Oh, God, it was awful.” James never told my parents. He just “took it.” Was Cokie Roberts right? James thinks so. “I wasn’t around kids,” he says. “The four of us were never threatened, so I didn’t learn how to stick up for myself.”

My mother worried that when we went to school, she would lose her identity. But she flourished in her new job as an editor at St. Louis magazine. We were the ones who lost ours. Mary never told anyone she’d been home-schooled. “By sixth grade I knew that kids weren’t, especially back then. When you’re a kid, you don’t want to be different, you want to fit in.” Mary conformed quickly and even liked the rules, like having to “write your name at the top of paper.” John was picked on until he fought back, pushing his tormentor over a desk. James learned how to fit in by observing the other kids and copying what they did. “It was a chameleon act. I was never the most popular, but I eventually made friends.”

Academically, my siblings were all over the map. Mary, the avid reader, did well without much effort. “And if I didn’t understand something, I wasn’t afraid to raise my hand and ask.” John was taken under the wing of Mr. I’m Gonna Have Fun With You, who drilled him on math one on one until John caught up. James excelled in subjects like science and history but had a hard time with reading. “It was very stressful,” he remembers. “I couldn’t get it.” Yet according to my mother’s Times article, “the amazing thing about my experience with James learning to read is that it is painless.” Was this an extension of her policy to “criticize the children infrequently”?

James now wishes our parents had made reading a priority for him. “It would have made my life a lot easier,” he recalls. “Struggling wasn’t fun. I was frustrated that I couldn’t do better in school.” I can vividly remember him in the sixth grade, crying about his drama class. “Because when I read aloud,” James says, “I would trip up over simple words.” But he did have the wherewithal to seek help. In eighth grade, James was so concerned about his atrocious spelling that he asked a teacher what he could do. She gave him a third-grade spelling book and told him to start on Page 1.

These academic shortcomings can be traced to my mom’s desire for educational spontaneity. At first, as she wrote, she was “careful to keep exactly to the schedule.” But she soon relaxed. “Classes were canceled whenever something interesting materialized. How to open an art-house movie theater was a course,” she said. “That’s what you did for months instead of having classes.” While watching “[The Blue Angel](#)” is fun, inasmuch as a psychosexual German film can be for a child, it doesn’t help prepare you for the realities of a typical classroom or provide you with building blocks for the fundamentals.

James has conflicting feelings about my parents’ teaching style. He acknowledges that his own son, Zac, who was introduced to formal education early, has many of his own learning difficulties. But his approach is the opposite of my parents’. “I’m on top of Zac,” James told me. “I don’t want him to fall behind like I did.”

My mother has her own take on James’s learning curve: “James had what I called a ‘Ping-Pong’ mind; he had trouble in certain areas but always came up with the most interesting ideas. That was just James, why change him? Why say, ‘James, you have to study more,’ or, ‘James, we’re going to drill on spelling words tonight’? We knew he’d be fine.”

**I have often** wondered how the home-schooled fared compared with their classbound peers. While advocates make glowing claims — that the home-schooled do better on their college boards and vote more often — there is little hard data on achievement. Not that statistics would have influenced my parents’ choice. To evaluate home schooling based on quantitative measures of success would go against everything that drew my mother to the idea. A. S. Neill, the founder of Summerhill, believed that



a child should live his or her own life, “not the life that his anxious parents think he should live.” And this was how my parents continued to approach our education once my siblings and I were in school. A failed test? No big deal. And if we wanted to stay home for a day, instead of pretending to be sick like other kids, we could every so often simply slip a note under their door that read, “Please don’t wake me up tomorrow.” Eventually we all settled in. Even my dad. He went on to publish several books, one of which was reviewed on the front page of The New York Times Book Review, and later became executive editor of The Week. The “counter, original, spare, strange” experiment had come to an end. “But it was one that I wouldn’t have traded for anything,” my dad says. “At least we had given you an adventure. I don’t think any damage was done.”

Despite the prophecy of a doomed future, none of us turned out to be a social misfit or an underachiever. Three of us graduated from good colleges. Mary is now a partner in an advertising agency. James conquered his reading and spelling issues and has been a top editor at several major magazines. Unlike my dad, I pretty much enjoyed my entire 16 years in school, and work as a writer. John found himself adrift for a while. He enrolled at Queens College but dropped out several times before giving up college for good. He got a job stocking shelves at a supermarket and would spend whole afternoons just lying in bed watching TV. At night, he’d hang out at dives on Northern Boulevard in Queens. My parents were at a loss. I remember months of tension followed by late-night discussions with tears on both sides. Finally my parents came up with yet another strange idea — paying John to make dinner for them every night. He found cooking relaxed him and helped relieve the stress of feeling like a “disappointment.” It also made him realize that success didn’t necessarily depend on a college degree. He got a low-level job from a colleague of my father’s, helping to install a new computer system at a magazine, and went on to a career in information systems. He is now a successful real estate developer.

My mother concluded her Times article by emphasizing that educating her children at home was a reflection of her most cherished beliefs. “Children’s lives are more than products that must be molded until they adapt well to society, or to another school, or to the work force. As it is now, a child’s life is very much bound up with schools and schooling, and that animating force that gives life to each child is ignored.” Today she still holds that her work was not in vain. “You’re all well adjusted and happy. And all of you are close to one another. What else could I possibly want?”

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RESOURCE: [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/13/magazine/my-parents-were-home-schooling-anarchists.html?\\_r=1&pagewanted=print](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/13/magazine/my-parents-were-home-schooling-anarchists.html?_r=1&pagewanted=print)