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The path of bliss

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32

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At home with bliss

BY MARIANA ALESSANDRI

Until 2020, I thought I was greedy for wanting more out of life. But then the pandemic hit.

Like many people approaching middle age, I used to hear a little voice asking, “Isn’t there more to life than this?” My answer was always “no”, followed by a harsh rebuke. I shamed myself for expecting more out of life than a good job, healthy children, and the means to put dinner on the table. To combat my still-nagging emptiness, I practised mindfulness and gratitude. I ordered myself to change my perspective: no one has cancer, so shut up. Until 2020, I thought I was greedy for

wanting more out of life. But then the pandemic hit, and I soon realised that ‘remote learning’ wasn’t going to work for my family, not for an entire school year. I had earned a sabbatical to write a book the next year, which meant I would be released from university teaching and email. So, my partner and I decided to pull our six-and eight-year-old out of school and teach them with pencils and paper instead of screens. I spent that summer reading the philosophy of Charlotte Mason, a British educator who said wild things like “children are born persons” and “every person exceeds our power of measurement”. She believed that education was “an atmosphere, a discipline, and a life”, not a stack of worksheets or a semester’s worth of spelling tests. I couldn’t get enough

of her gentle approach to learning, so I decided to try home-schooling using her principles.

As my colleagues and their kids fell into parallel Zoom fatigue, my kids and I read what Mason called “living books”, written by authors who cared enough about children to write well (compared to edited textbooks glued together by factoids and fill-in-the-blanks). I read history out loud every day, two days in Spanish and three in English. We learned how Alexander tamed Bucephalus, and how Horatius swam across the river in full armour. We read the Bible and Aesop, and the kids took turns telling me back the stories in their own words. By mid-morning they’d be writing and illustrating stories of their own. They practised mathematics every





day and studied nature once per week. My sister gave us a telescope so we could identify the constellations. We read Shakespeare out loud and watched speeches online. Over the course of the academic year, we studied the artworks and lives of Vermeer, Velazquez, Monet, and Picasso, and when we travelled to NYC to visit family that summer, we found their paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. We listened to Wagner, Brindisi de Salas, Miles Davis, and Hildegard of Bingen, and my kids took up musical instruments. That year, we laughed and ate oatmeal and learned to finger-knit. I couldn't imagine a better way to spend my time, but my friends thought I was nuts. Apparently, lots of people "could never do that".

Loved ones like to remind me that my home school year wasn't all bliss, that I had hard days and weeks. It can get ugly when you're stuck in a house all day with two kids as pupils. When the eight-year-old got obstinate, I'd say things I couldn't take back. When the six-year-old refused to do his writing, I sent him to his room to protect him from worse. Something shattered, overflowed, or went splat daily, and we all sulked. Prior to that year, I had trouble crying, but under the heat lamp of home school, I sweated out my eyes almost every day. I would so quickly get demoralised by the prospect of something going wrong - again? - that I'd feel defeated before we were done with lessons. Why wasn't it working? Why was I so bad at a thing that I had such reverence for? Unless you're a masochist, you'd hardly call this chosen life "bliss".

But what if bliss isn't what we imagine? What if even "a day at the beach" leaves room for a jellyfish sting and a sandy sandwich? My experience home-schooling convinced me that following your bliss doesn't mean smiling ear-to-ear; it leaves room for heartache. Bliss means doing something eminently worthwhile, even if you think your cat could do it better.

Before the pandemic, I'd done plenty of worthwhile things: I volunteered with Central American refugees to the US; I co-founded a grassroots parent-advocacy group for the advancement of dual language bilingual education in South Texas; I had babies. But none of these pursuits felt like 'bliss'. Home-schooling felt deeply gratifying. Bliss may be what bestselling author Glennon Doyle means by choosing "the right kind of hard".

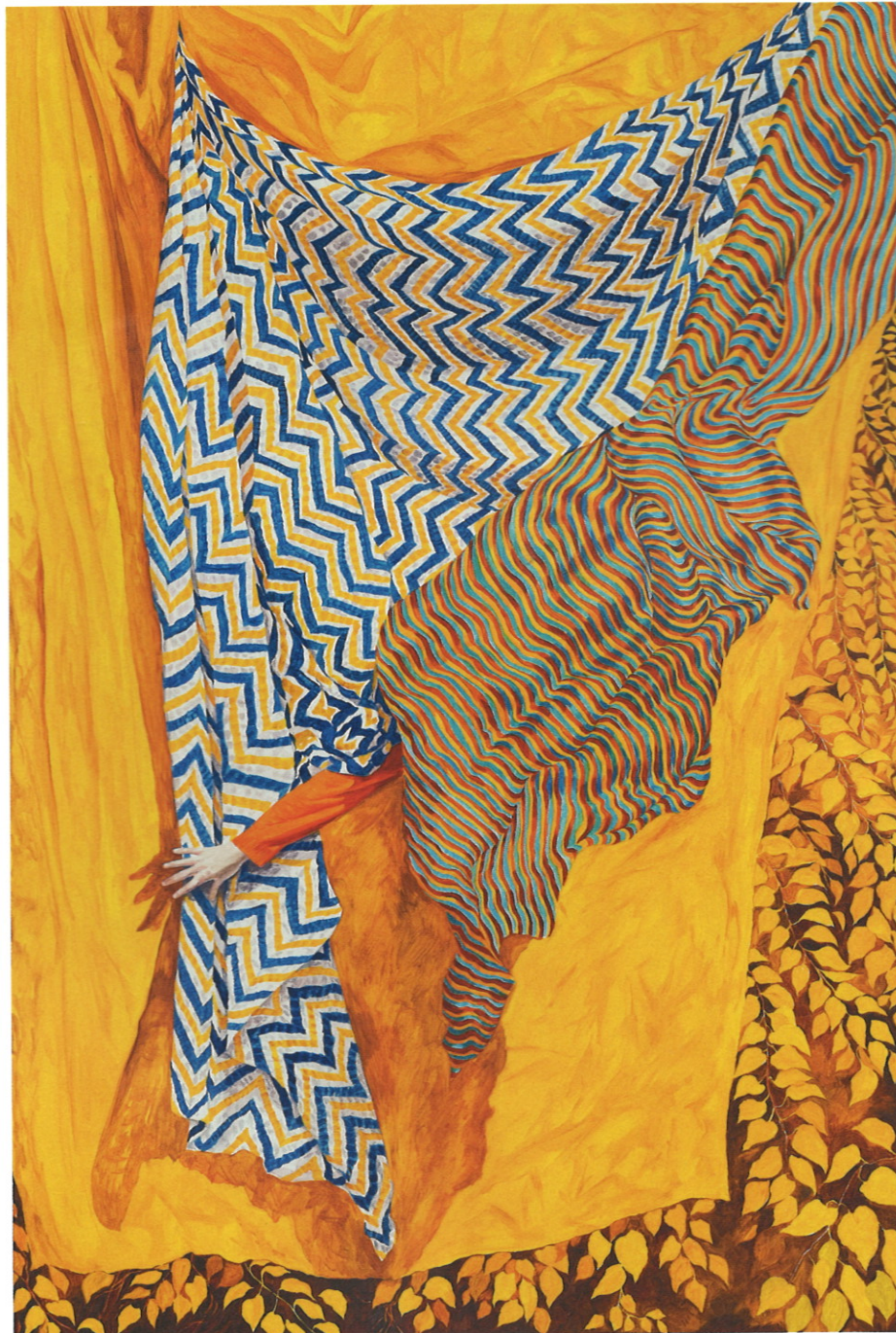
Bliss might be a cousin of "vocation", the feeling of being called to do something, even if we are ill-equipped. God called Moses to lecture His people; Moses, with his speech impediment, thought God made a bad choice. I am organised and enthusiastic, which makes me a good candidate for home-schooling, but I'm also quick-tempered and rigid, which tripped me up daily. Still, home-schooling felt sacred, even while I was calling myself a fraud. Although I remember wanting to give up, not once did I wish that my kids were away at school. I only longed to be more patient, loving, and respectful toward them. And I wished they weren't animals.

Bliss also nudges us off script. As tightly wound as I am about work, I wouldn't have guessed the extent to which home-schooling taught me the

value of slowing down and spreading out. Instead of filling up every free minute with work, I played the piano while my kids read. I made wholesome lunches while they wrote and painted. I cut fresh flowers, used a tablecloth, and washed dishes. I even took daily walks, trusting that my book would get written. I wrote every day while the kids rested and played. I didn't panic, and I met my deadline. Bliss asks us to take our time.

Home-schooling was not only a slow-motion worthwhile experiment somewhere in the ballpark of vocation, but it was also incredibly nourishing. In the US public school system, junk food is used as a reward for good grades or for keeping quiet; free play on the tablet is employed to keep active children sitting still. At home, we dined on fruit and vegetables, on Christina Rossetti and Ruben Darío. For nine months I broke clean under the surface of a world that rewards efficiency with sugar and passivity with more of the same.

During my year of bliss, my existential question; "Isn't there more to life than this?" never occurred to me. In home-schooling, I'd found the noblest thing I could imagine doing with my time. But now that I'm back to email and my kids are back to worksheets, the question recurs. When I hear it now, though, I don't rebuke myself. My experience answers "yes". There is more to life than scurrying from school to sports to sleep and so on and so on. If this question pesters your inner ear, dear reader, know that you might be hearing the voice of bliss. And if it's presently out of reach for you like it is for me, if we simply cannot follow our bliss right now, let's at least hold our ground. The answer is yes.



Drag it out, 2021, Monica Rohan

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