

Homeschooling, Homesteading, and the Renewal of American Citizenship

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*F*ar from merely withdrawing from modern social ills, homeschooling and homesteading actively work to heal them. In part because the home is no longer the primary place of work, school, or social gatherings for most Americans, it is typically thought of as a private retreat away from the “real world,” where the obligations of citizenship recede as personal concerns take center stage. But such a conception overlooks the formative role that is proper to the home. When centered as the locus of family life, the rightly ordered home can serve as a school for citizenship, offering lessons in self-government, voluntary association, and patriotism.

Heading Home

The holidays may be over, but Americans are still heading home. From the normalization of remote work to the rapid growth of both homeschooling and homesteading, Americans of all ages are recovering the centrality of the home in rising numbers. Since the COVID pandemic, homeschooling has become one of the fastest growing forms of education: Almost 6 percent of U.S. children are now receiving formal schooling at home, up from 3 percent in 2019.¹ At the same time, more households are embracing other aspects of homesteading to sustain and support themselves, whether through raising chickens, resurrecting homemaking crafts, or fully living off

of the land.² These movements are still small, relative to mainstream ways of life, but their paces of growth make them noteworthy, especially as the U.S. struggles with record-low birth and marriage rates.

Homeschooling and homesteading are broad categories, encompassing a range of practices. Homeschooling includes traditional forms in which parents teach all subject matter in the home, as well as newer iterations in which families hire tutors, utilize virtual programs, or form co-ops, micro-schools, or hybrid schools, combining in-home education with part-time group or classroom coursework. What unites these variations, according to the Home School Legal Defense Association, one of the oldest homeschooling organizations, is that they are primarily based in the home, directed by parents, and therefore oriented toward the particular needs of each family.³

A comparable unity underlies homesteading's varied manifestations. These include large regenerative farms complete with orchards, crops, and livestock, as well as suburban or urban adaptations in which grocery shopping remains essential but is also supplemented with practices like sourdough breadmaking, rooftop gardening, or countertop composting.⁴ At the heart of these pursuits is a "re-functionalizing" of the home, no matter the size.⁵ As homesteader Jason Craig puts it, "The center of a homestead is the home."⁶

Often, these trends overlap with one another: Homeschooling can open a parent's eyes to other ways the home can be made functional and self-sustaining, while home projects can become opportunities to educate children in virtues and practical skills that mainstream schools overlook. Hence, this paper examines these distinct but related trends as a whole—an emerging reclamation of the home as the bedrock of American life. What is motivating this homeward movement, and what kind of formation does it make possible for its members?

Reasons for Going Home: Modern Social Ills

It would be difficult—and foolhardy—to pinpoint a singular motive behind the growth of homeschooling and homesteading. As their varied manifestations demonstrate, these movements are diverse. Nonetheless, these practices share not just a common rootedness in the home, but a common departure from modern ways of life. Despite their 21st century twists, today's homeward movements bear a decidedly anti-modern bent, rejecting the technocracy, frenetic busyness, and idolization of individual autonomy that together have come to mark the modern age.

This rejection can be difficult to grasp in a world that prioritizes safety, convenience, and autonomy above all else. Why would a rational person opt to bake bread rather than buy it or give up the thrills of jet-setting travel to tie oneself to the needs of the land? Even more, why would rational parents give up opportunities for greater income and personal success to teach their children basic reading, writing, and arithmetic? A deeper dive into the social ills driving these trade-offs will better clarify their logic while also illuminating the positive vision that animates the turn to the home.

In one sense, the rise in homeschooling and homesteading is easy to explain. Prolonged school shutdowns during the pandemic revealed that parents could not, in fact, trust credentialed school leaders to make decisions in the best interest of their children. Onerous COVID-19 mandates—from stay-at-home orders to masks and vaccines—and the suppression of arguments against these measures sowed distrust of the health care establishment in a similar way. Dismal reading and math scores and skyrocketing rates of obesity, diabetes, and myriad mental health conditions underscored the failures of America’s schooling, food, and health care systems’ experts.⁷

But what was the alternative? Children need an education, and the sick need care. For many Americans, this was a wake-up call. If they wanted better for their families, they were going to have to provide it themselves, teaching their own children and growing their own food.

Recent surveys substantiate this narrative. In the latest National Center for Education Statistics Parent and Family Involvement in Education Survey, for example, the top two reasons parents cite as most important in their decision to homeschool are “concern about environments at other schools” and “dissatisfaction with academic instruction at other schools.”⁸ In other words, the primary motives for homeschooling constitute a rejection of mainstream schools—and, by extension, the experts and professionals who run them. Similarly, a 2022 survey conducted by Homesteaders of America revealed a desire for “healthier food”—presumably healthier than can be had through the Food and Drug Administration–regulated mainstream market—as a top reason participants homestead.⁹

Desires for strong academic instruction and healthy food for one’s family are nothing new. What *is* new is the conviction that trusting the professionals trained in those fields is no longer the best way to attain those goods.

Failures of the experts, however, are not the only factors prompting Americans to turn to homeschooling and homesteading. Other prevalent reasons given highlight desires for community and simplicity, both of which require a departure from modern modes of living. Specifically, 72 percent

of homeschooling parents report educating at home out of a “desire to emphasize family life together,” and 56 percent of Homesteaders of America respondents have cited a “longing to live a more simplistic lifestyle” as their reason for homesteading.¹⁰ These reasons, although not identical, point to an underlying desire for integrity—for the various efforts and interests of one’s everyday life to work with, not against, one another and those of other family members and together to support the common good of the home.

This pursuit of greater simplicity resists the restlessness that characterizes much of modern life. Against immense social pressure to “get ahead”—whether by working late hours, traveling for kids’ competitive sports teams, or saving time with takeout—the practices of homeschooling and homesteading anchor life in the home, where the pace is dictated by the steady rhythm of the seasons. In doing so, they counter the fragmentation and atomization that result from attempts to multitask and “have it all.” When vital activities return to the home and work in the service of it, what once seemed like disparate strands of a piecemeal life—a job, children’s schooling, mealtimes, and recreational pursuits—instead become integrated parts of a larger whole.

By the same token, homeschoolers’ and homesteaders’ desire to prioritize family life repudiates modern society’s exaltation of individual autonomy as the highest ideal. When the sexual revolution ushered in new norms and aspirations, glamorizing the endless possibilities that unattached single life leaves open, the number of individuals living alone rose steadily, a living arrangement that now represents more than a quarter of all U.S. households.¹¹ Even individuals who don’t live alone often act as if they did, with careers and social lives separate and disconnected from the other members of their household. Alongside these trends, loneliness has also risen—to such an extent, in fact, that in 2023, the U.S. Surgeon General declared an “epidemic of loneliness and isolation,” an epidemic characterized by unprecedented numbers of deaths as a result of despair.¹² Homeschooling and homesteading’s focus on the home suggests that individuals flourish better together, even if it means sacrificing some autonomy.

Cultivating Citizenship

Far from merely withdrawing from modern social ills, however, homeschooling and homesteading also actively work to heal them. In part because the home is no longer the primary place of work, school, or social gatherings for most Americans, it is typically thought of as a private retreat away from the “real world,” where the obligations of citizenship recede as personal

concerns take center stage. But such a conception overlooks the formative role proper to the home. When centered as the locus of family life, the rightly ordered home can serve as a school for citizenship, offering lessons in self-government, voluntary association, and patriotism.

Self-government. Since the Founding, the American experiment has rested on the “capacity of mankind for self-government,” as James Madison put it in *Federalist* No. 39.¹³ Americans exercise this capacity collectively when they elect representatives who, in turn, deliberate, legislate, and execute the laws. But this collective capacity is made possible only through the exercise of the individual citizen’s capacity for self-government. Without citizens capable of taking responsibility for themselves—ruling over their passions, making their own judgments and decisions, and meeting their own needs—democratic self-government on a larger scale ceases to function well. Citizens unable to govern their own affairs may willingly cede sovereignty over them to external authorities, whether commercial or governmental.

Homeschooling and homesteading offer ample opportunities to recover these practices of self-government, beginning with the extended sphere over which they take responsibility. Rather than outsource the education of one’s children and provision of basic household goods, the homeschooler and homesteader undertake these themselves, learning the particular needs and workings of their home and its members to ensure its harmony and flourishing. This requires the virtues necessary for self-government—initiative, industry, discipline, prudence, and resolve—and not only on the part of household heads. Homemaking also demands virtues in children, who become essential helpers in a functional, working home. Children’s contributions to home life have dwindled in recent years as resume-building in preparation for college applications has become all-consuming.¹⁴ Childhood and adolescence are often approached as a child’s “time to be selfish,” one mother told *The Wall Street Journal* last year.¹⁵ When the common good of the home trumps selfish pursuits, on the other hand, children learn how to become contributing citizens of their communities.

French thinker Alexis de Tocqueville observed the impact that such a well-ordered home life can have on the broader political community when he visited America in the 1830s. Noting that in Europe, “almost all the disorders of society are born around the domestic hearth, not far from the nuptial bed,” Tocqueville attributed the opposite effect to America’s 19th century hearths, which he called “the image of order and peace.”¹⁶ By taking pleasure in this order, which fulfills the bodily and spiritual needs of its participants, Americans “arrive at happiness through regularity of life,” Tocqueville explained.¹⁷ Consequently, when they set out beyond the bounds of

their homes, they “draw from [their] home[s] the love of order, which [they] afterwards bring into affairs of state.”¹⁸ The practices of homeschooling and homesteading restore this sense of order to the home, endowing their participants with the virtues and arts that maintain it and thereby preparing them for the duties of citizenship beyond it.

Voluntary Association. The arts of homeschooling and homesteading not only demand individual responsibility, but also call forth interdependence within communities, especially given the learning curves newcomers to these arts inevitably face. Hence, as their popularity has spread, local voluntary associations have likewise sprung up, wherein neighbors pool resources and give mutual support to one another in countless homemaking endeavors, from knitting to teaching Latin. Taking various shapes and forms, these associations can look as simple as the sharing of a dairy cow and as complex as a homeschool co-op, sustained by parents’ unique contributions. What distinguishes them from their mainstream counterparts found in restaurants and public schools is their collaborative character: Participants come together to pursue a common good they could not otherwise achieve alone.

In doing so, they learn an art essential to democratic self-government, one Tocqueville praised as a uniquely American bulwark against threats of despotic rule. In America, democratic equality leaves citizens “independent and weak,” Tocqueville warned.¹⁹ Because none are invested with inherent power over others, as was the case in old world aristocracies, democratic citizens “can do almost nothing by themselves, and none of them can oblige those like themselves to lend them their cooperation.”²⁰ This leaves Americans vulnerable to government overreach in the name of greater security and comfort, Tocqueville cautioned, an overreach that can be preempted only by maintaining the citizenry’s habitual art of voluntary association.²¹

Patriotism. By exercising individual responsibility as well as voluntary association, homeschoolers and homesteaders engage in the self-government that is crucial to addressing the modern ills of both regulatory overreach and social atomization. In doing so, they do not simply form virtuous individuals; they form citizens. Put another way, a recommitment to the home forms members of particular communities who are attached to those communities by the bonds of affection, and this affection—for local places, neighbors, and the traditions they carry on from generation to generation—is what ultimately constitutes patriotism.

This is not to say that a formal education plays no role in the development of a healthy patriotism. Schools and teachers can and should provide a strong history and civics education for their students. Without knowledge

of the principles, statesmen, and acts of providence that have built America, a student's love of country will be incomplete. But formal learning about America, while important for cultivating patriotism, is not sufficient. A genuine love of country requires not just intellectual knowledge of one's country, but intimate knowledge of it, a knowledge that takes time, care, and constancy.

This intimate knowledge can be hard to come by at the pace at which much of modern life moves, but a rooted home life can counteract this pace by establishing oneself in a particular place and reclaiming practices that require attending to its particularities, whether by working with the land or collaborating with its inhabitants. In this way, a person comes to know America not just as an abstract concept, but as one's home.

British thinker and statesman Edmund Burke explained this organic nature of patriotism in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Criticizing the revolution's attempts to uproot local identities for the sake of forging a uniform French identity, Burke counseled:

We begin our public affections in our families. No cold relation is a zealous citizen. We pass on to our neighbourhoods, and our habitual provincial connections. These are inns and resting-places. Such divisions of our country as have been formed by habit, and not by a sudden jerk of authority, were so many little images of the great country in which the heart found something which it could fill. The love to the whole is not extinguished by this subordinate partiality. Perhaps it is a sort of elemental training to those higher and more larger regards, by which alone men come to be affected, as with their own concern, in the prosperity of a kingdom so extensive as that of France.²²

When the vital activities of growing, cooking, building, mending, learning, and working are integrated and placed in the direct service of a home and its neighborhood, citizens come to love their home and their homeland not just as their birthplace or resting place, but as the work of their hands. This love makes for a sincere patriotism as well as a practical patriotism: That is, affection for a particular corner of America and its people lends citizens the willingness and the know-how to contribute more fully to its welfare.

Renewing the Founders' Vision

Perhaps this is why George Washington spoke so often and so affectionately of his own home in Virginia. When writing about Mount Vernon in letters to friends, Washington commonly referred to it as his "own vine and

fig tree,” referencing the Old Testament passages that speak of the peace and prosperity to grace the new Jerusalem.²³ As American scholar Daniel Dreisbach describes, “In the darkest days of war and when the pressures of public life crowded in around him, the very thought of Mount Vernon soothed his burdened soul.”²⁴

Washington’s deep devotion to the American cause was strengthened by his tangible love of the home America made possible not just for himself, but for all citizens. As he detailed in his now-famous letter to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island, Washington celebrated the freedoms of conscience and religion that enabled his Jewish brethren to make America their home: “May the Children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other Inhabitants, while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree, and there shall be none to make him afraid.”²⁵ By reviving the centrality of the home, homeschoolers and homesteaders are renewing the vision that Founders like Washington had for America.

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Endnotes

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