

Ben Lovejoy – No Rules: Sir, Yes Sir

Over the years, when I've been given the opportunity to speak at unschooling conferences, I've shied away from sharing my own story and the changes I've made to enjoy this wonderful life I now live. I've relied more on examples from the rest of my family: what our sons were doing or how peaceful our home was or how our own passions and eclectic friends have enriched our lives. I've shared stories about how Cameron visited the Yukon (and everywhere else in between, if you know Cameron), what game Duncan was into, or what incredible event Kelly was helping link me to. This year, I took Kelly's advice and decided to pull back the curtain to open up about my own journey and shed some light on how I personally came to the unschooling lifestyle.

Some of you know that I'm in the military and have been for 24 years as a commissioned officer. I currently serve in the SC Air National Guard in the section responsible for pay and entitlements and audits on base where I work. On drill weekends, I take on the role as Commander to 14 people who ensure 1,355 other guardsmen are paid on time for their duty performed. I joined the military after attending a military college in my home state of SC. There are many stories I can tell about my college experience, but most are better told in another setting over a beer. 😊 But it is important to get a general overview of that experience to understand my journey a little better.

As part of their initial year, incoming freshmen (or Knobs, as we were called) are introduced to the college's 4th Class System – a blueprint for how freshmen are indoctrinated into the military-college environment. This blueprint is full of training, discipline, marching, exercise, drilling, parades, and a host of other things unique to the military-college experience. This is in addition to the college courses that you must take and the intramural sports you're expected to participate in throughout your

college career.

Knobs learn almost every aspect of the 4th Class System from the Cadre – a select group of upperclassmen charged with molding Knobs into full-fledged Cadets. The responsibility for this molding process primarily lies with 19- to 21-year old Cadets who've experienced the same, rigid indoctrination as the Knobs they're challenged with training. Freshmen who survive Knob Year soon become the sophomores and juniors who become the Cadre and train the next class of incoming freshmen. It's a cycle that has repeated itself over and over and over again for some 160 years.

The college's 4th Class System has survived 34 presidents, Civil War, both World Wars, the Great Depression, and the stock market crashes of 1929 and 1987. It's faced the scrutiny of many critics, civil groups, and lawmakers; been documented in books and films like "The Lords of Discipline"; and challenged the minds and spirits of over 30,000 freshman who've matriculated through the college's gates since 1842. The college's past presidents, administrations, Board of Visitors, and extremely active alumni proudly boast that the college's 4th Class System is the backbone of the college and a primary contributor to successes of both the school and its alumni have enjoyed.

By traditional measures, it's hard to argue against the college's success. High graduation rates, alumni who lead major corporations or prestigious law firms, graduating seniors who've gone on to populate the rank of general officers in all four Armed Services, and still other graduates whose jobs now begin with the title of Mayor, Governor, Congressman or Senator are but a few of the results used to measure that success. Its massive endowment could fund a small city for a decade, and the constant publicity the college gets will ensure recruitment numbers will continue to rise for decades to come. All of this from a school that has roughly 350 graduates each year. Just 350 per year.

It's hard to argue with that success.

But those who thought the 4th Class System may have brought out the best in them had to have known of its darker side, too. The suffocating number of rules and the subsequent punishments imposed by this system forced things to come to a head that otherwise would not have. There were physical and mental abuses bestowed upon

extremely young men—all in the name of a revered, time-honored system. There was racism, dishonesty, poor judgment, group-think and group-speak, and just plain meanness for the sake of being mean. There were freshmen who were scared to death as Knobs who became the sophomores who manufactured that same fear on unsuspecting freshman only a summer break later. I saw former friends and classmates reign supreme over people only one to three years their junior just by virtue of their Cadet rank or status as college upperclassmen. I witnessed this dark side frequently and wondered how the school had survived so long using such harsh tactics and such an inherently flawed way of developing young people.

There were also incredible acts of integrity, honesty, and selflessness; and these events somehow kept me motivated enough to complete my four years and graduate. I experienced the magic of an administrator whose own time as a Cadet was the stuff of legend and whose tenure as the Assistant Commandant of Cadets touched my life in ways I appreciate to this day. Never once did he falter in his care of the many Cadets whose lives he touched and whose names, many years later, he still remembers. (I recently found his page on FB and noticed he had about 260 friends—most of whom were Cadets when he was an administrator at my college. He's about 79 years old now). I also marveled at the courage and honor of a gay professor who never allowed the overt or covert remarks and overtones of cruel young men affect the way he taught his class, nor how professionally he presented himself to his many students. This gentleman is one of only two people in all of my schooling who taught an English class that I even wanted to attend, and I attended both classes that he offered to non-English majors. I also observed numerous examples of integrity from young men who the 4th Class System was designed to change, but that couldn't because of what these young men stood for. These examples rarely came from Cadets who strictly followed the rules of the 4th Class System, but from Cadets whose own set of values, principles, and vision placed them above this simplistic fray. I found role models from these two men and the few Cadets whose sense of commitment meant falling on their swords for the preservation of freedoms that others at this school cried out for.

I survived the better part of my freshman year with a very limited vocabulary. "Sir, Yes Sir; Sir, No Sir; and Sir, No Excuse, Sir" were my three Knob answers and were the only acceptable answers

Knobs can give an upperclassman when asked a direct question.

“Sir, yes, Sir” and “Sir, no, Sir” were pretty straightforward. When you answered a question in the affirmative, you used “Sir, yes, Sir”; when you responded in the negative, you used “Sir, no, Sir”. Pretty easy stuff for a young man who’d grown up in the South.

“Sir, no excuse, Sir” was a bit stranger for most of us, but it soon became the most used answer of the three for many Knobs. “Sir, no excuse, Sir” gave us an out to answer without really answering and without letting upperclassman know what’s really going on in your mind. In a sense, it allowed you to plead the 5th and not have to withstand additional questions. To help you understand the answer more, here are a few examples of when “Sir, no excuse, Sir” might be used:

VOICE OF AUTHORITY: Lovejoy, were you talking in formation earlier when I was looking down at you from the 4th floor?

MY ANSWER: Sir, no excuse, Sir!!

WHAT I WAS REALLY THINKING: Do you really want me to believe you could see my mouth moving from 40 feet above when it’s 6am and pitch-black dark out?

VOICE OF AUTHORITY: Lovejoy, did you sneak that piece of bread back to your roommate from lunch today?

MY ANSWER: Sir, no excuse, Sir!!

WHAT I WAS REALLY THINKING: You’re damn right, I did! Probably because you and your jerk classmates made such a big deal out of him being late for formation and prevented him from going to lunch. If you stick around a few minutes longer, you’ll see my other classmates bringing back some lunch for him as well.

VOICE OF AUTHORITY: Lovejoy, did you call me an asshole when you ran by me a few minutes ago?

MY ANSWER: Sir, no excuse, Sir!!

WHAT I WAS REALLY THINKING: Asshole!

You get the picture. "Sir, no excuse, Sir" became an answer we learned to use carefully and kept us from directly incriminating ourselves for violating the rules the college and the 4th Class System imposed.

I offer this background first, to give you an idea of where I've been when I talk about rules in this speech; and second, to describe an extreme situation that's not unlike many homes when it comes to using arbitrary successes to determine lifestyle choices for others; and third, to affirm that the life we led can differ greatly from the life we choose to lead if we want it to.

I admit that I still appreciate rules in certain environments. I'm not here to say that I've thrown caution to the wind and reared feral children. Far from that. But what I have done for myself is not depend upon the rules of my past to dictate how I live now. I learned to trust that my boys would make good decisions without an arbitrary set of rules to dictate how they should live. When I learned to trust my sons, I learned to trust myself more, too. And I saw how these two vital occurrences gave way to letting go of unnecessary restrictions I'd placed upon myself and my sons.

Some rules for are important FOR WHAT I DO, and I expect they're important for others who work outside the home like I do. Rules that govern me as a Finance Officer in the military let me know what's acceptable to purchase and who can obligate the government for products and services. Internal control policies ensure better fraud and waste procedures are in place to help prevent the abuses that took place when operational budgets were much larger. Appropriation laws ensure Pay and Entitlements are the same for service members based upon grade and time in service, regardless of which Service people work in. In my line of work, these rules are important.

But other rules from my military experience aren't required in the home setting, nor are the rules from my college or the house I grew up in. My family decides what its collective and individual boundaries are; each of us gets to choose what works for us although there are experiences we can draw from if some-one is seeking guidance on a particular problem or another way ahead.

We've gotten to that point not because of a laundry list of rules, but because of our freedom of choice and our unwillingness to allow limitations from rules affect how we live.

Looking back to before we unschooled, we didn't have a bunch of rules then. Safety, manners, and rules for ensuring Cameron was prepared for school were our main focus. We were particular about 'yes, Sir' and 'no Ma'am', no TV in Cameron's room or friends over past supertime on school days, and no running around the pool. I believe we thought these rules would somehow protect our sons from something unforeseen and somehow improve their lots in life. In the back of our minds, we must have thought we were doing right by them then.

The common perception that, just because we're parents, we automatically know what's best for our children, is ingrained in us and tough to let go of without cause to do so or examples on how to do so. I believe this stands most firmly between acceptance of unschooling as a lifestyle—or radical unschooling—and simply seeing it as another form of academics. I personally had trouble with this when we decided to unschool with our boys. I saw the benefits of the academics, but questioning other sides of my own life to accommodate such a radical change just wasn't something I was willing to do. I just couldn't accept that my own life experiences and standards shouldn't account for something when it came to rearing my children.

But when I really took a hard look at why I believed these things, the answers that always came back were because of my own selfishness. It wasn't until I learned to trust my sons that I realized the perception of an omnipotent parent had no actual merit. That realization led to harder questions about what I thought and knew to be true about being my sons' dad and a heck of a lot of other things about my life and where I was headed. Eventually, my answers led me to radical unschooling.

If children are given freedom to learn but aren't free to make choices affecting the other parts of their lives, they're not getting the full scope of what the whole unschooling experience is about. Having ONLY the freedom to learn without having other freedoms needed for growing up is like learning to ride a bike ONLY to be allowed to ride within the confines of your own neighborhood. The purpose of biking, especially for a child, is freedom—the

freedom to explore, to become independent, and to have wheels, Man. Confining the space to ride means you're regulating the freedom the bike allows them in the first place. This doesn't mean to shirk your responsibility as their parent for safety reasons; unschooling, after all, is not the same as unparenting. But unschooling does require a huge measure of trust be injected into the relationship with the parent and the child in order to work.

I didn't get this all at once. As a matter of fact, it took me some time. I remember too many times when I expected the 'troops' at home to follow my orders like the troops at work. I remember all too painfully how Kelly pointed out her concerns for how Cameron reacted to what can only be described as 'orders' from me. I also recall when the orders I gave at home were given in a much harsher tone than ones I used at work. I was awful about expecting things to be in their place when I got home regardless of what that meant to the people at home. I've passed through some of the same stages that some of you are going through now. It took me some time to relinquish old baggage, but I have and now embrace what the author in this passage is saying:

"We should nourish the diversity and the uniqueness in all our kids... I want to encourage adults to live with the children around them... not to service them... but to be in real relationships with them. To go places with children, to read, to play, to draw with them, to travel with them, to live full lives with them. Our children do not need us to be professional parents; they need healthy, caring people to use as models, and parents who'll support them growing into themselves.*

The last sentence best contrasts where I came from. I cared more about the professional part of parenting and didn't pay as much attention the modeling and 'living' parts. Unschooling helped alter my thought process about parenting; my willingness to change made it permanent for me to think about and live differently. And although I've fallen back on old habits from time to time, I'm so much more aware to stop before damaging my relationships with my sons. Now, I let things pass and just move on. I've learned that orders aren't an acceptable way to communicate with family or friends, and that our former selves are the sum of the decisions we

made during an unenlightened past.

The difficulty of having so many rules in your life is not that you can't get things done; it's that you find it hard to do things truly on your own. If you're constantly told what to do, when to do it, and how to do it, how will you react when the people who've always done the telling aren't around to do so anymore? How will you develop your own decision-making process with someone else's rules constantly weighing in? People sometimes have a hard enough time trying to figure things out; but adding additional roadblocks only narrows the number of paths that someone can take. Rules become those roadblocks because they're normally established for the purposes of controlling other people or events.

I experienced something earlier this month where I was on the receiving end of someone smothered by someone else always telling him what to do. I joined seven other people from a SCUBA diving class in SC for our Open Water Certification Dive weekend in Florida. Normally, for SCUBA, you complete classroom and pool skills over one weekend and your open water dives the very next weekend. For me, I had to wait about six weeks because of a scheduling conflict. So when I went for my open water certification, I joined a completely new class with two new instructors. I had to get to know these people in a short period of time.

All water skills, including in the pool, require a buddy, and a young man named Carl became mine for the weekend. From my carpooling acquaintance, I learned Carl was taking the course mostly because his dad was a diver and thought his son might want to join his old man for some fun trips. His mom also dived, but she remained at home during this trip. It became painfully obvious why the boy's mom didn't come.

The father was the self-designated guardian on this particular trip. From the moment we drove up to unload our gear at our designated staging area the first day, the father was constantly telling Carl absolutely everything to do. Get your gear out, Carl. Lay your tank on its side, Carl. Put on your weight belt, Carl. Take off your mask, Carl. Eat some lunch, Carl. And on and on it went. The guy was a monster, and I understood why Carl shrank so much when I first tried talking with him on our way down to the dive site.

So let's set the scenario up for my first set of dives: I'm pretty anxious because I'm with a new class and new instructors. My 'buddy' is a wreck, and, yet, is still receiving instructions from his father OVER the directions from the instructors just seconds before we submerge. I'm breathing through an apparatus connected to a compressed-oxygen tank—something that takes more than a just few dives to get used to. And, finally, I'll be in 34 feet of water when we perform most of our skills.

After our first dives, I walked back with Carl to our staging area for lunch. Even though our morning dives weren't smooth, we both made it safely and intact. Luckily for us both, we had some time alone to get to know one another a little better. I told him how well he'd performed his skills and how much I appreciated him watching out for me during our free swim after the skills. I asked how he liked diving and learned he really was into it for himself, which was different from what I'd heard. With each question, I saw Carl slowly opening up and trusting I wasn't going to bite his head off when he answered me. When we did make it back to the staging area, Carl's dad asked him how it went. I quickly answered: 'It went great; he did quite well,' and shared a smile with Carl, who had to recover from the initial shock of this most basic compliment before offering a smile back.

Every dive after that, Carl was engaged as my buddy. He was attentive and helpful during underwater skills, and rarely left me more than a few feet during our remaining free swims. Whenever I did an underwater skill well, he smiled at me and even clapped once to show his approval. He talked with me over the weekend, and I noticed his father back off a bit as we got closer to completing our certification on Sunday. I hope Carl's father continued to stay off Carl's back and let him enjoy his accomplishment on the ride back to SC. Somehow, I don't think he did. It's unfortunate because Carl is a sweet, gentle young man.

I'd like to say I wasn't as bad as Carl's father, but I realize that's not for me to say. I wasn't the one who bore the brunt of how I was years ago. I'm just fortunate I had a loving and patient family and took a step back when I did to find a different path. My decision to change transformed me in more ways than I can say because I realized it wasn't Cameron and Duncan holding themselves back; it was I who held their reins.

Maria Montessori said: "If a child is given freedom and goes wrong, it's not because there's too much freedom, it's because there hasn't been enough." I agree with that statement on different levels. Freedom is not something given for short periods of time; it's constant and complete and open and without strings attached. It's unconditional. That's not to say that freedom is free; it does come with great responsibilities. But a child (or adult, for that matter) who has complete freedom of choice normally makes better choices than those who don't and definitely better choices than those who have on-again, off-again freedom of choice. That also goes for freedom of will, freedom of religion, and freedom from compulsory education. A child who's free to make choices without unsolicited scrutiny also tends to evaluate those choices with a much clearer mind. They can completely reflect on those decisions without all the clutter that comes with the pressures of that scrutiny.

I split hairs about rules and principles because I see and have lived with the differences, and I believe they represent two opposing forces in a home and school environment. Principles are internal; rules, external. We enforce principles for ourselves, while others force rules upon us. Principles are something people stand for and seem to have with them throughout their lives. Rules are something people tend to follow and just as soon cast aside once the situation that warranted the rules in the first place is over and done with. Principles represent a standard of conduct that people uphold because the standard stands for something important to them. Principles come from observation, reflection, and active discussions with others. Rules are more like borders that contain someone and can only be crossed with specific permission. They're usually cut and pasted from another generation's set of rules, and figuratively hung from the homes and offices of the plagiarists with the same reverence as a diploma. The problem is there is absolutely nothing original or reasonable about rules. They're hollow and senseless.

Think about it. How often were you, as a curious, expressive, sometimes wild sixteen-year-old hesitant to go home because you were past a curfew, or hadn't returned the car at the exact hour you'd been commanded to do? How often did the punishment fit the so-called 'crime' that you'd committed? How often did you not try something because you feared the punishment of what you perceived as innocent actions? If you're like me, you experienced many of the

same rules I did. The thought of home was more of a place that you wanted to get OUT OF rather than to be in. I chose the college I described earlier because I was tired of what I perceived as a lack of FREEDOM in the home I grew up in (INCREDULOUS). Going to a military college to find freedom from home was one of my first lessons of being careful of what you ask for. 😊

Kelly made it very clear that our home should and will always be a place our sons will want to be and want to return to—no matter what the situation. That safety that may have felt foreign to us as children should never be so to the children who live in our home or others who may need the safety of that home. Cameron and Duncan want to be in our home because they are free to express, to create, to come and go, to make mistakes, and to do so without inhibitions brought by shame or the thought of punishment or restrictions. If anything, they're more inhibited by our lack of resources to help them satisfy their constantly-curious minds. Such as our recent example of Duncan telling us he wants to learn sculpture, but only if he can do so—in MARBLE!! Needless to say, we're trying to figure that one out right now. 😊

Where do they learn this stuff??

How do you differentiate between rules and principles in your homes? I suggest starting with what you say and how you say it. Consider whether you use a lot of traditional parenting language. Statements like "Because I'm the dad, that's why," or "I don't have to explain myself to you" reek of a rule-bound home. They remind children unnecessarily that parents hold the power and that their parents don't want to hear their points of view. These are dead-end, conversation-ending statements which sometimes lead to more aggressive behavior to get a parent's attention.

Many behaviors that children learn in a rule-bound home have a completely opposite effect to the one the parents believe. The author of the book *The Velveteen Principles* suggests this isn't uncommon. "This is because many (if not most) children first learn about gratitude when their parents instruct them to say, 'Thank you' under the context of teaching good manners."

Parents can be very RUDE when teaching manners; they can also be very demanding. "Trouble arises when the lessons become layered with pressure, and, even worse, with guilt. A little boy gets a

present, and the first thing his mother says is, 'What do you say?' Suddenly, a positive experience becomes a pop quiz. Worse, if the child doesn't feel genuine gratitude, he's forced to tell a white lie by saying 'Thank you,' when what he really wants to say is: 'This is a present?'"

'Unruled' children don't have the same fears as their rule-bound neighbors. Free to explore themselves and the world around them, they use this opportunity to see the beauty and simplicity of their lives. Mistakes are seen as opportunities to create; imperfections, as qualities to be celebrated and not shunned. This freedom lends itself to the honesty they nurture in themselves and expect of others. They have nothing to hide so they see no reason to lie or fear reprisals for their own 'learning takes'.

As opposed to an environment bound by rules, unschooling offers freedom to encourage the uniqueness of our children. Because our focus is on them daily, our children are able to realize their self-worth and convey this to us and to others much more naturally. And because we tend not to compromise them as individuals and put them into situations that they're uncomfortable with, we show them respect and model a behavior which they'll tend to emulate rather than reject.

Schools and rule-bound homes do just the opposite. A one-size-fits-all environment rarely encourages self-worth or confidence. It does little to help children accept themselves as REALLY worthy because it does so much to strip individuality away. School demands children to "stay up" on their assignments when boredom has set in, or to "slow down" when the bright light of interest is just turning on. By its very structure, school breaks children down into the factory worker it intends to create, molding them into "Organizational People" rather than "individuals whose unique skills enable families, communities, and economies to really grow and prosper"—Daniel Pink's description of "Free Agent" employees in his book *A Whole New Mind*. "Organizational People" will plug away in their jobs as long as they have their jobs with little motivation to try something different or new. This isn't because there's not a better opportunity somewhere else; it's because they possess the fear of trying.

During a recent bike ride I had on an Army post, I had cause to consider something about society's rules in contrast to the rules

of life. I was riding on the downside of a hill, building speed as I raced toward the bottom. I could tell there was a car behind me, but the road had a double yellow line which, I assume, kept the driver from passing me. As I started my ascent, the double yellow line changed to one which gave the driver behind me the green light to pass. As the driver accelerated, she honked twice and pulled all the way over to the other lane to pass safely by me. She did not return to my lane until she was a good 30 ft ahead of me, using her turn signal to let me know of her intent to return to the lane in front of me.

I understand you might believe she drove as she did because she was on an Army Post...that maybe she was more careful because of the rules of the road levied by the Post. Or maybe she lived there and had developed her habits there.

But I'd beg to differ. From the years and miles of cycling experience I have, I can tell you this kind of driver is extremely rare. Very few car drivers care about passing on a double yellow line; even fewer will signal their intent before pulling in front of a moving cyclist. I'd estimate that 1 in 500 drivers honk their horns to let you know they're passing you. This particular driver did them ALL without hesitation. Within the short time I shared the road with her, EVERY decision she made helped preserve her own safety and mine as well.

I thought about this driver a lot, and I knew I wanted to include her in my speech. I told Cameron about her when I got home, and he understood my reaction because he'd joined me on rides in the past and knew how drivers could be. As the conversation moved away from the ride, Cameron suddenly asked me what I was doing when I was 23 years old—a milestone he'd reached only a few weeks before. I told him that at the beginning of my 23rd year, I was a Second Lieutenant in the Air Force living on my own in California and having a relationship with a girl who lived in South Carolina. At the end of that year, I was a First Lieutenant living in California with that same girl, but as a husband to a wife and three dogs—which, BTW, came as part of the dowry. 😊

As I shared this story with him, Cameron's eyes kept growing BIGGER and BIGGER until I thought they'd pop out of his head. He couldn't believe that, at his age, I'd already started a career, was married, and had moved all the way across the country! It wasn't

that he didn't understand or respect my path or choices; it was that he just couldn't see himself following a similar path any time soon. His constant zest for life RIGHT NOW far outweighs any societal rules or expectations even when the example from decisions I'd made. I admire him for making up his own mind, just as I'll admire him for the few examples of mine he chooses to take with him during his own life.

This led me to ponder why parents are so intent on having their children do certain things by a certain time. Why must they walk by 1, talk by 2, read by 6, and drive by 15? Why must they leave home by 18, start a career by 22, marry by 25, and have children by 27? Who are we to push for such arbitrary timelines to dictate when our children are ready to take on such huge responsibilities? Is it because we chose to do something one way and expect our children to follow suit and NOT make up their own minds? To me, that's akin to what happens to 99% of the sophomores who went to my college: They honestly believe they've EARNED the right to treat the incoming freshman in the same shitty way as they were treated. They believed that since they were made to do more pushups than was expected, they could force other Knobs to do the same. They believed that since they were yelled at or made to suffer, they had the right to render the same abuse as well. They turned out ok after all, right? If we subscribe to that same train of thought as parents, how can we expect our children to not want to do the same to their own children? Breaking the cycle is the ONLY way to improve either situation.

When we allow ourselves to be sucked in by society's rules, we risk separating ourselves from our children in ways we can't imagine. When we side with the nameless "thems" of the world without standing up for what makes our children unique, we allow other people's rules for life become more important than our children's happiness, health, and well being. To paraphrase my friend Diana Jenner: "I'd rather parent the children I have than parent to get the children that society expects." What a powerful and BRAVE principle to live by!

As the conference's final podium-based speaker, I thought about what I could say to tie things up neatly and send everyone happily on their way, inspired to go wherever this conference takes them. After I awoke from my dream, I realized that I didn't have that kind of power, so I drew from other sources. I decided upon a

statement from a British Statesman that marked a pivotal time in this century, a more recent event that marked an important point that I've had as an unschooling parent, and a humorous, thought-provoking anecdote that I think unschoolers, perhaps unknowingly, really live by.

In the 1930s, Winston Churchill, wrote of the leaders who refused to acknowledge the clear and present danger rising out of Germany.

"They go on in strange paradox, decided only to be undecided, resolved to be irresolute, adamant to drift, solid for fluidity, all powerful to be impotent. The era of procrastination, of half-measures, of soothing and baffling expedients, of delays, is coming to a close. In its place, we're entering a period of consequences."

Churchill's message jumped off the pages of another speech I heard a friend give at an unschooling conference that I attended. That message is to act NOW with intent, resolve, courage, and commitment—all things my friend suggested you must bring, at one point or another, to your life as an unschooler and what Churchill expected of his peers at the time.

The reasons we came to Life is Good are varied. Some people came to reaffirm a commitment; others to become more involved; and still others to help make a decision on their way ahead. But the common denominator for all of this, in the end, is our children and our relationships with them. And as you reflect upon what you've seen and heard and felt and laughed or cried about over these incredible five days that Mary, Jon, and their volunteers brought to us, remember where that relationship is and where you want it to be.

I personally couldn't afford to wait any longer when I committed to unschool with our sons 11 years ago, and I don't believe you can either. When you do decide to unschool, embrace the whole experience and not just the academics. The compelling information for you to do so is available and has been for quite some time. The books, these conferences, the numerous Yahoo groups, the gatherings, the mentors, the multiple benefits of children living and learning freely in their own time, and a million more examples of things happening in our personal lives have created powerful

evidence of what's happening across the world with people who've decided to live intently with their children. I don't know what else to say except stop dragging your feet on this one. Bigger things than you are at stake.

Finally, let me close with an anonymous quote sent me by a friend and mentor that gives an interesting comparison of traditional parenting and unschooling parenting:

"The difference between involvement and commitment is like an eggs-and-ham breakfast: The chicken is involved, but the pig was committed.

Stop merely being the chicken, and become the pig. Children may occasionally go back for seconds on eggs if they eat this type of breakfast, but they ALWAYS go back for the pig. I know because I was right behind many of them in the bacon and sausage lines at the breakfast buffet this weekend. Partner with your children and commit to this lifestyle; it's the best decision you'll ever make.

* Original editor's note: I wrote to Ben to get a citation, and he responded, "I'm not positive. I took it from a journal I have and did not write down who said it. The only clue I have is the quote."