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Samoutou Family Blog



ABOUT THIS BLOG...



Family of 5
from Gabon, Hong Kong and the UK

Living in Impfondo,
Republic of Congo
Since April 2012

Blog by Joyce the mum,
Homeschooling novice,
Eye Charity founding doctor / director.
Reluctant domestic goddess

Passionate about sashimi,
helping people see
physically and spiritually,
and Jesus

Please do give comments and feedbacks so
that we can improve the way we
communicate with you!

P.S. This is the personal blog of the
Samoutou family
(Views our own)

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ARCHIVES

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DECEMBER 14, 2013

Educating in the Jungle: From Disaster to Delight

Dear T,

How are you? I have been thinking a lot about you and what you wrote in your last email. You wrote: 'I am still seriously considering homeschooling but it's really "not the done thing" amongst our friends and family. So it's quite hard to make the leap.' I have been praying for you as you make important decisions about your children's education.

When we moved to Congo, our decision to **homeschool** was made entirely by default. Like you, homeschooling was 'not the done thing' amongst our friends and family. In fact, homeschooling is illegal in my home country. Whilst I applauded other homeschoolers, I would never have even considered homeschooling if we had another choice. Our children loved schools and thrived in them. So why would we not leave such an important task to the professionals and let our kids enjoy the company of their peers? Secretly, I couldn't understand why anyone would want to homeschool if they had a choice. The only explanation I could give myself was that homeschooling mums must be of another species. Unlike me, they were angelic selfless mother-earths who devoted their lives and sanity to their children. They were natural homemakers who patiently brought their children up in the most wholesome manner as they baked and sewed. As for me, I was such a task-oriented person that I struggled to be people-oriented even when it came to my own children. I simply do not have that kind of mothering gene, just like I don't have the gene to be slim! I was in awe of, and truth be told, intimidated by these supermoms.

Most of our first year of homeschooling was filled with frustration and tears, for both my daughter and I. I was consumed by guilt and fear that our children were robbed of their potential. There were no opportunities for them to learn from extra-curricular classes and museums. But more fundamentally, in a nutshell... as a teacher... I sucked. In August, as we approached the start of the dreaded new school year, I started crying out to God in utter despair. The situation was so disastrous that I thought that the best that I could hope for was for homeschool to turn out ok, and for us to learn to accept it. But God came through in the most magnificent way. Never in my wildest dream could I have imagined that we would actually not just bear it, but love it! Yes, thanks to people praying for us, we actually love homeschooling! I can hardly believe this miraculous change myself! So what changed?

The first thing I realised was that I was always hoping and waiting for someone to answer our advertisement for a teacher. I woke up to the reality

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that until God answers our prayers and brings us a teacher, I was 'it'. So for now, until further notice, the solution is not for a teacher coming to Congo. The solution is for me to become a better teacher. In life, we often put our hope in waiting for circumstances to change, when all along, we ourselves can change.

I had to face the reality that the only way I could become a better teacher was to put in more time and effort. But like everybody else, my days are already too full. One dear friend advised me, 'Joyce, something's gotta give!' I reviewed my list of responsibilities and I sighed - they are all important! None of them can go! It was so hard to let go, but I did it, because it had to be done. It came to me that even if everything else goes well, if I do not give my best to the kids, my conscience will never be clear, and I will never be at peace. So I gave up my part-time clinical work at the hospital (even though I felt like I let my overworked colleagues and patients down - I now only admin and logistics work). I now turn my phone off during school hours. Because we live in the hospital, people are always coming by. I put up signs on the doors to ask people not to disturb us during school hours unless blood is involved. If the kids are working on something that doesn't require my help, I prepare for my next lesson rather than start tackling the pile of work from New Sight that is legitimately breathing down my neck. As I gave 100% to the schoolwork, so did my students! Do I like the fact that some other things had slipped as a result? No! But I am far happier now. Sometimes, we have to let some things slip so that the things that really matter can become better.

As I took the time to invest in my children's education, I was awakened to all the learning opportunities that had always been there and yet I had never noticed before. Whilst we do not have theatre or galleries to go on field trips to, we went on field trips to see our visitors install generators, weld gates, and perform mass health screening. We went to mud houses, walk in the jungle with the Pygmies and visit the Mexican nun at the refugee camp. Whilst we do not have many resources to do lab experiments, we learnt anatomy when we had to kill and gut chickens. Whilst we do not have outside speakers and performing groups, we have short-term visitors and long term humanitarian aid workers from all over the world. Just this month, we were shown photos and had the most interesting talks on Albania, Senegal, France, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Montana, Connecticut, Minnesota, and New York! There are countless opportunities to learn everywhere - we just have to realise that some of them are not doors, but windows of opportunities! So entering through windows is unconventional, but it sure is fun!





Whilst I will always prize the many benefits of traditional schools, I can now appreciate the gems that homeschool offers. Our son just turned 5 and isn't all that interested in any conventional learning / the 3 Rs (Reading, wRiting and aRithmetic). However, he loves countries, maps and flags. So we bought a book of flags online and asked a visitor to bring it. He spends hours each day happily drawing flags (art and pattern recognition), counting the strips and stars (numbers), and copying the names of the countries to label his flags (writing). He draws flags on his pictures of racing cars and rugby matches. Through them, he learns all the things that the textbook that he has no interest in says he should learn. He gets to choose and read all that fascinates him. Homeschool allows us the freedom to tailor-make learning according to the students' interests and learning styles. Being a control freak, I usually thrive on schedules and order. However, I have come to appreciate the flexibility that homeschool offers. For example, if my child becomes frustrated by a new math concept, she can go practise the piano first. Half an hour later, the music has calmed her down and she comes back with a smile, ready to give the math another try. A class would not be able to accommodate that degree of freedom. I used to focus on ticking the boxes of things for my kids to learn as quickly as possible. Now we take our time to soak in and explore anything that fascinates us. I grew up with rigid curriculums and intense exam pressures. I am so thankful that my children get to really love learning.



If I have the choice now, I am still not sure that I will choose homeschool. Having said that, I am learning to embrace this season. God has a funny way of bringing some incredible blessings that I would have missed if I had not been 'forced' into homeschooling. Perhaps homeschooling is His way to force task-oriented me to slow down and spend time with my children before it is too late. Perhaps it is His way of allowing us the opportunity to pass onto our children all that is dear to our family - we study, write and memorises scriptures for Language Arts; we learn Chinese, Lingala and French; we study Gabon and Hong Kong - subjects that do not appear in any conventional curriculums. Sometimes, what initially feels like a painful mess brings forth the most unexpected and delightful of fruits.




Both homeschool and traditional school have its pros and cons. At the end of the day, it is about what is right for your children for this season. Out of all the people in this world, God chose you and R to be the parents of your children. As you seek God, you will definitely know what you should do.

Keep in touch. So proud of you and R.

Lots of love,
Joyce

PS We are still looking for help with child care and teaching though. If you know anyone who may be interested in coming out to help us in Congo e.g. a gap year student or someone wanting a sabbatical, please forward them **this** and let us know! Thanks!

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