

# Learning to un-learn: Escaping an enclosed education



**Highland Views**  
Chris Highland  
Guest columnist

Corresponding with a young relative about her homeschooling experience, I wasn't surprised by her response to the article I sent ("The Revolt of the Christian Home-Schoolers," Washington Post, May 30).

"I think it's a true experience for many of us who were home-schooled. Our parents were told by the church to be scared of all things secular and government related. To educate us properly without evolution and Sex Ed would require homeschooling. And now we are left with the choice they made." A certain level of disappointment is evident. Though I'm aware this fear-based faith is a foundation of much "education" outside public schools, it is sad to hear the consequences.

My relative continued her response: "I would argue I was deprived of many social norms that have left me somewhat handicapped in interpersonal relationships at times. And left with a feeling of resentment for the sheltered upbringing I had." On such a personal level, we hear the potentially devastating result of raising a child in a bubble environment, a well-defended wall of worry where the "evil secular world"

threatens narrow beliefs.

I'm not against all homeschooling. In fact, in certain circumstances teaching kids at home may have a positive effect. Certainly during a pandemic, it makes sense to protect young people from a deadly virus. Under special circumstances, with special needs children, perhaps it makes better sense to instruct them at home. Yet, other reasons to "protect the kids" should be questioned and challenged.

If the bubbles, walls or fences to guard "moral education" are built on myths, conspiracies or irrational beliefs, how can that environment be healthy or educational?

I don't support public funds going to religious schooling, home or private institutions. To paraphrase Benjamin Franklin, only a weak religion is unable to support itself; he wondered why their God wouldn't provide for them. We could ask the same today. This seems especially critical when we hear young adults like my relative who carry the impact of those early phobias from church and parents through their lives. That's not right.

I wasn't homeschooled, but I was "schooled" by churches, preachers, evangelists and, to some degree, by a conservative Christian college. That was many years ago and I still find myself not so much "haunted" by that formative period as agitated by the memories, the emotions, the worldview drilled

in deep. Religion continues to fascinate me, and I regularly write about religious themes, while the fearful paranoia and quest for power among some in the wider world of faith stirs me to speak out, and encourage people like my relative to do the same.

Thankfully there are courageous younger people who point the way to real solutions. My family member pushes beyond her resentment for her "sheltered upbringing" to draw from her inner wisdom: "I think it will also be interesting to see if there is almost a reverse of this in the future. COVID having allowed more people to be involved in their children's education. But also the push of many state governments to turn schools into a place of indoctrination of hate and of religious right ideals."

She suggests one important avenue of action could be "more secular, atheist, liberal and libertarian parents [who] take up the the homeschooling mantle."

If some state legislatures and school boards are intent on turning public schools into religious-right academies (for instance, restricting discussion of diversity and discouraging the honest presentation of history), maybe one response could be more secular-centered homeschooling.

This may not be the most optimal solution to the "indoctrination of hate," but at least an alternative is presented that would free up non-religious parents to seek public funds along with the

fearfully faithful. My view is this presents extra problems; it isn't the best answer. Greater investment of time and resources in public education is the way, since public schools welcome every child and are meant to provide a well-rounded education for each student. If there are deficiencies in the system, fix them, put the necessary monies into repairing and providing essential resources. Otherwise, we end up with thousands of sectarian schools and homeschools dividing the population ever further. The opportunity to learn from diverse backgrounds and various viewpoints is lost when the "us" is forever split from the "them." Not a good model of education.

Wise religious folks in collaboration with rational secular folks make a significant difference here, when they work together to challenge those who deprive young people of a broad and holistic education, the kind my family member was denied. The initial step probably should be to listen and learn from those whose sheltered experience of education at home left them with resentments born of fearful parents often inspired by narrow-minded pastors and myopic congregations.

*Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. His books and blogs are presented on "Friendly Freethinker" at chighland.com.*