

FACING OUR FEARS

**How the Voices of
Homeschool Alumni
Can Help Homeschooling**

R.L. Stollar

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This paper was originally prepared by R.L. Stollar, Executive Director of Homeschool Alumni Reaching Out (HARO) for the 2014 Great Homeschool Convention in Ontario, California. HARO's mission is to advocate for the well-being of homeschool students and improve homeschooling communities through awareness, peer support, and resource development. You are free to share or distribute this presentation with proper citation of its source.

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I. Introduction

“The major problem is that the public has been convinced that child abuse is a major problem.”ⁱ

This quotation, from a person considered one of the most influential leaders in Christian homeschooling, perfectly encapsulates an unfortunate attitude that has plagued homeschooling for decades. The attitude extends beyond child abuse; it extends into a tragic unwillingness to face our movement's deepest fears about failures and shortcomings concerning a plethora of issues.

I want to discuss these fears.

I want to encourage you — as homeschooling parents and communities — to face these fears.

I want to challenge you to listen to homeschool alumni and graduates who are speaking up about why these fears need to be taken seriously.

Before I do that, I should introduce myself. My name is Ryan Stollar. I am the Executive Director of Homeschool Alumni Reaching Out, otherwise known as HARO. HARO is a non-profit organization advocating for the wellbeing of homeschool students and improving homeschooling communities through awareness, peer support, and resource development. Our vision is, "Renewing and transforming homeschooling from within." Our hope is to work from

within homeschooling and develop partnerships with communities and groups to bring awareness to and empower homeschoolers to address pressing matters such as abuse, neglect, and mental illness.

You might not have heard of HARO. But you have likely heard, through friends, family or the Internet, about our initial and controversial project, Homeschoolers Anonymous. Homeschoolers Anonymous is a website that shares stories — many of which are negative and critical — about experiences of students who grew up in the Christian homeschooling world. If you are familiar with Homeschoolers Anonymous, you likely have some deep, visceral reaction to the fact that I am a founder of this group. If so, that is ok. I am used to it.

What you should know, however, is that I write this not as a "homeschool apostate"ⁱⁱ or "prodigal,"ⁱⁱⁱ as we have been called. Nor do I write from a heart of anger or bitterness. I write, rather, out of hopefulness, as someone who cares deeply about the future of homeschooling. I care deeply about that future, because I am not only a homeschool graduate myself, I am also a "child" of homeschooling. I grew up in this world, my parents were leaders in this world, and I have lived this life.

Before I begin discussing my topic today of "Facing Our Fears," I'd like to tell you a bit about myself and my life so you know where I am coming from. I grew up in San Jose, California. My parents homeschooled me all the way through — from kindergarten through high school graduation. My parents not only loved homeschooling, they were also leaders in the California and Oregon

Christian homeschool scene. My mom and dad co-founded SELAH, the Bay Area, California homeschool support group. My father was the convention organizer for years for CHEA's annual state-wide conventions. My parents also started a homeschool debate club in San Jose, called CLASH, along with John and Annie Rose, the parents of Lila Rose — who is the president of the pro-life group LiveAction. My father was also president of the national homeschool speech and debate league, NCFCA, for 2 years.

So my experience with homeschooling went far, wide, and deep. I had the opportunity in high school to travel for three years around the country with Communicators for Christ and teach speech and debate to other homeschool peers. I taught speech classes to the children of homeschool leaders at one of HSLDA's national leadership conventions; I was at the 1999 Proclaim Liberty rally in Washington, D.C., when the U.S. Senate passed a resolution declaring a National Home Education Week; I even coached Brett and Alex Harris, the younger brothers of Josh Harris, author of *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*. I have seen the inner workings of homeschooling, I have climbed its power structures, and I have seen both the positive and the negative.

My parents were, and are, amazing and loving individuals. They put an overwhelming amount of time and energy into my education. I write this today with both a Bachelor's and a Master's degree, the ability to speak confidently in public, and the skill sets necessary to work on behalf of neglected and abused children. That is a direct testament to my parents' dedication to my well-being. I want you to know that my homeschooling experience, under the guidance of my parents, was positive. They treated me

with kindness and respect. They have shown me, time and time again, that they love me unconditionally.

And yet.

Yet I am the co-founder of Homeschoolers Anonymous, an organization maligned as anti-homeschooling, anti-Christian, bitter, and immature. We are constantly infantilized and referred to as “children” — even though I am 30 years old. Something is going on here. And I'd like to explain what it is.

When it comes to the homeschool "conversation," — that is, the conversation about how we best educate our children in a Christian way — that conversation has been a monologue. It is a monologue and not a *dialogue*. It is a monologue delivered time and time again, in convention after convention, in curriculum magazine after magazine, about certain values and ideas. While these values and ideas change in color and tone, from one speaker to the next, from one convention or magazine to the next, there are some perspectives that seem to consistently surface:

1. Because our homeschooling freedoms are constantly on the attack, we mustn't give outsiders reasons to dislike us.
2. Homeschooling parents have the best intentions in mind for their children, and they execute those intentions in relatively successful and harmless ways.
3. No “real homeschooler” would use homeschooling to hide abuse or neglect.

4. People who speak up about bad homeschooling experiences are either bitter or hate God — or both. Or even worse, they hate homeschooling and want it banned.

5. We should rarely speak up and criticize other homeschoolers, especially not homeschool leaders, if they are Christians.

I want to highlight this monologue because I want to point out to you how this monologue has been constructed in a way that specifically excludes dissenting opinions. Which means homeschool alumni feel guilty or afraid about speaking up. This is an important point because of the following fact:

Homeschooling is not simply something *done* by parents; homeschooling is something that is also *experienced* by children.

There is a chasm — a deep and profound gap — between what good, well-meaning parents *intend to do* and how those intentions and actions are translated and experienced by children.

When we reach out and ask those children — both current and former students and alumni — about their experiences, the homeschool conversation ceases to be a monologue. It becomes, rather, a *dialogue*.

Dialogue is what the homeschooling movement desperately needs.

My life passion, my goal for Homeschool Alumni Reaching Out as an organization, is to facilitate this dialogue. My dream is that every homeschool

convention across the country — and every local homeschooling community — will welcome a conversation about how we can improve homeschooling for current students and future generations. That conversation begins with *listening* to the experiences of those who have *lived experiences* of homeschooling. And in this paper I hope to communicate to you just a few of the themes arising from those experiences that I encounter on a daily basis. The themes I want to talk about are:

- 1) Child abuse.
- 2) Mental illness.
- 3) Modesty and purity.

Let's start with child abuse.

II. Child Abuse

Contrary to the quotation from the homeschool leader I started with, child abuse *is* a significant problem. It is significant in scope and it is significant in impact. Before we talk about child abuse in the context of homeschooling, let's just talk about the pervasive reality of child abuse in general.

Here are some basic facts about child abuse:

- As many as 1 in 3 girls and 1 in 7 boys will be sexually abused at some point in their childhood.^{iv}
- In as many as 93% of child sexual abuse cases, the child knows the person that commits the abuse.^v
- As many as 47% of perpetrators are family or extended family.^{vi}
- Only about 30% of child sexual abuse cases are reported to authorities.^{vii}
- Physical abuse is also common. In fact, physical abuse is the second most common form of child maltreatment.^{viii}
- In 2012, the most recent year for which we have an official report for, over 100,000 children in the U.S. were physically abused. Over 1,500 of them were abused to the point of death.^{ix}

And what about basic facts about *the people that abuse* children?

- We know, of course, that all sorts of people can perpetrate abuse. But with the exception of child sexual abuse, children are most likely to be physically abused or neglected *by parents and/or caregivers*.^x
- With regards to child sexual abuse, it is still overwhelmingly the case that someone the child knew was the abuser. While parents do sexually abuse their children, sexual abusers were more commonly some other male relative, a family friend, or a family acquaintance or neighbor.^{xi}

From these numbers and facts we see that abuse *is* a serious problem. And unlike stereotypes about strangers in minivans offering children candy, we see that those who threaten our children are *people we trust*.

As many as 47% of child sexual abusers are family or extended family.

People we trust.

It is frightening. It is hard to believe. But it's the truth. Child abusers walk among us — in our homes, our churches, and our schools. They aren't "others," they aren't wearing signs that say "Monster." They walk among us. They are friends and family. We trust them, and they abuse our trust. They abuse our *children*.

As Boz Tchividjian, Billy Graham’s grandson and the founder and executive director of GRACE (Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment), says,

“It is time that the Christian community come to terms with the heartbreaking reality that those who pose the greatest risk to our children are within our families, churches, and circle of friends.”^{xii}

One of the many stories of sexual abuse in the Bible gives evidence to this fact. In 2 Samuel, Chapter 13, the story of Amnon and Tamar is told.^{xiii} Amnon, son of King David, lusts after his sister Tamar. Amnon constructs an ornate ruse in order to get alone with Tamar, after which he rapes her. When Absalom, Tamar’s other brother, hears about Tamar’s rape, he instructs her to, “Be quiet for now, my sister; he is your brother. Don’t take this thing to heart.” The Bible says that King David learned of the assault, was furious, but did not do anything about it. Similarly, Absalom “never said a word to Amnon, either good or bad”; rather, he let his anger fester until he sought illegal retribution by murdering Amnon. The sexual abuse in the family of King David — one of the most well-known biblical figures — was swept under the rug and the victim silenced. Such handling of abuse continues today.

Hearing this can be overwhelming. It can make you feel sick, or nauseous, or overwhelmed. I understand that feeling; I live it every day. And the reason I live it every day is because I know — I *know* from my own life, my friends, and my community — that these numbers can also be found within homeschooling. *Child abuse happens within homeschooling.*

This might be hard to hear. It might make you feel offended, or defensive, or incredulous. So let me make clear up front what I am *not* saying:

- I am *not* saying homeschoolers are a bunch of child abusers.
- I am *not* saying homeschooling *is* child abuse.
- I am *not* saying homeschoolers, as a group of people, abuse their children any more than any other group of people.
- I am *not* saying child abuse doesn't happen in groups of people other than homeschoolers.
- I am *not* saying we should ignore child abuse in other groups of people. We should never ignore child abuse, wherever it may happen.

What I *am* saying — what I do need you to understand — is that is simply this:

Child abuse happens in homeschooling communities.

That's what I need you to understand.

I can't tell you whether it happens more or less often than in other communities because no one has those numbers. And if someone says they do^{xiv}, know that they're making them up or using flawed statistical analysis.^{xv}

What we do know — and maybe this is even a reason *why* some of you are homeschooling right now — is that abuse happens in public schools. We also know it happens in private schools. We know it happens in churches, in day care, at religious institutions — whether those institutions are Christian, Buddhist, Jewish, or Muslim. We know abuse happens in secular institutions, too. So we should also know it is no great claim that abuse happens in homeschooling families and communities as well.

Some colleagues of mine run an important website called Homeschooling's Invisible Children.^{xvi} It has documented hundreds of cases of homeschooled children who were physically and/or sexually abused by their parents, caretakers, and/or homeschool teachers. The details vary from case to case, but as more and more cases are documented, some patterns emerge. While these patterns could make for an entire talk in and of themselves, I'd like to focus on one pattern in particular: *hardly anyone ever suspects the abusers.*

Sometimes when child abuse happens in homeschooling communities, it is in communities that are referred to as new religious movements, or “cults.” For example, groups like the Twelve Tribes,^{xvii} Lev Tahor,^{xviii} or Warren Jeffs' Fundamentalist Latter Day Saints sect^{xix} — all of which believe strictly in homeschooling for their children — have been documented as physically or sexually abusing their children. This doesn't seem as surprising to us; these groups are “different,” and thus we are already suspicious of them.

But abuse isn't just found in so-called cults. This is why what

Homeschooling's Invisible Children is doing is so important: It's showing us — case by tragic case — that abuse *can* be found in families that seem normal, loving, even publically outstanding. The stories on Homeschoolers Anonymous also reveal this.

One of the first long-form testimonies that we received for Homeschoolers Anonymous was by a young woman using the penname “Mary.” Mary's story broke my heart. She was viciously beaten all over her body, she was forced to go without food for days, her parents made her drink ipecac as a punishment, and — the moment that made me break down in tears — she was forced to throw her favorite childhood doll into a blazing backyard fire. To date, Mary's story has put my stomach in knots more than any others we have published.

As we published each part of her ten-part story, people wondered, “How ‘fringe’ was her family? Surely Mary's family lived in the middle of nowhere, isolated her from everyone. Surely the problem was that no one ever saw her.”

But that wasn't the case. In her conclusion to her story, Mary says the following:

“I can assure you that they were not the ‘fringe’ in homeschooling. My dad has an amazing job and they are very well off financially. Dad served as the president of the home schooling organization in our state for quite a few years. They have volunteered at church since I was little, helped out in AWANA, taught Sunday school, kept the nursery, volunteered at other church events, helped organize and plan the

homeschool conference in our state every year, volunteered in debate, teach Good News Clubs, host homeschool events in their home and generally keep their reputation about as squeaky clean as is possible... At church we were the model family. My siblings and I lived in utter terror of what would happen to us if we dared misbehave or say anything that they deemed inappropriate while at church or anywhere else out. Nearly a weekly lecture that we received on the way to church was that anything that happened in our household was not to be talked about and was not anyone else's business. On Sundays, when we had been made to stay up the entire night before, they would force us to drink coffee so that no one would notice how tired we were... My parents did a masterful job of covering up and to this day are revered and treated as role models by church members that I grew up around.^{xx}

Remember what Boz Tchividjian said?

“Those who pose the greatest risk to our children are within our families, churches, and circle of friends.”

Mary's dad, who beat her senseless, served as *the president of the home schooling organization in her state*. Her family was in contact with an abundance of families — in church, at Sunday School, through homeschool debate and other homeschool activities.

And yet.

And yet no one noticed the nightmare that her life was. No one reached out to her or her siblings.

Because her parents seemed trustworthy and upstanding, even role models.

Mary isn't alone.

Mary's parents aren't the only ones pretending to be something they are not.

If you go onto the website for Homeschooling's Invisible Children, you will hear about people like Dwayne and Pamela Hardy, who beat their children until they bled and were left with permanent scars — and yet friends described Dwayne and Pamela Hardy as “loving Christian parents.”^{xxi}

Or people like William Flynn Walker, who was imprisoned for transporting three children out of Alabama and sexually abused them. Walker was a founder of a prominent Christian homeschool umbrella school.^{xxii}

Or people like Jeffrey and Rebecca Trebilcock, who systematically starved their five children and consequently shocked neighbors who described the couple as “loving Christian parents.”^{xxiii}

Or people like Michael and Sharon Gravelle, who sexually abused a birth daughter and then forced their eleven adopted special needs children to sleep in stacked cages.^{xxiv} The Gravelles *seemed* like such a nice couple in public that even an HSLDA attorney, Scott Somerville, described the father as a “hero.”^{xxv}

I could go on and on with examples. But hopefully you see the trend here. Child abusers appear in our midst. Even in the midst of our homeschooling. And they could very well be our “heroes,” our “loving Christian parents,” even our “prominent” homeschool leaders.

“Those who pose the greatest risk to our children are within our families, churches, and circle of friends.”

Child abuse happens in homeschooling communities.

So what are we to do? What are we to do as homeschoolers who want more than anything to protect our children, to protect our friends’ children — to keep every child, really, out of harm’s way? How can we work together — as parents and leaders and alumni like myself and my peers — to stare this abuse in the face?

I’d like to give a few suggestions. And the starting point for these suggestions is that that we have to let go of the dominant monologue. That monologue, if you remember, insists on the following:

1. Because our homeschooling freedoms are constantly on the attack, we mustn't give outsiders reasons to dislike us.
2. Homeschooling parents have the best intentions in mind for their children, and they execute those intentions in relatively successful and harmless ways.

3. No “real homeschooler” would use homeschooling to hide abuse or neglect.
4. People who speak up about bad homeschooling experiences are either bitter or hate God — or both. Or even worse, they hate homeschooling and want it banned.
5. We should rarely speak up and criticize other homeschoolers, especially not homeschool leaders, if they are Christians.

We have to let go of our earnest wishes to think that abuse could never happen in homeschooling, could never happen among families that seem loving, and — most importantly — could never happen to our own children and our children’s friends. And we need to start speaking up and letting others speak up.

This means that we need to be open to *dialogue* with those who have grown up in our midst — who went to our homeschool co-ops, took classes with people we know, were friends with the other homeschool kids — and yet experienced abuse. Because only they can tell us what it was like. Only they can tell us how the abuse was hidden. Only they can tell us how they tried to reveal it — and yet we somehow missed it.

This is personally important to me. When we talk about child abuse, and especially when we talk about abused kids who were homeschooled, we’re talking about my friends. We’re talking about that family that my parents knew when I was a kid who got busted for making child pornography. We’re talking about the girl who had a crush on my brother who spent years being

molested by her own brother. We're talking about that other girl — who was in homeschool debate class with me — who was raped in college but didn't know it was wrong because her parents never taught her she had the right to say no.

We're taking about me, too. Because I was abused, not by my own parents but — coincidentally enough — by a public school employee, when I was very young and taking speech therapy at a local school. But my parents never taught me until years later about sex or consent or what was ok and not ok. So I never had the words to express myself.

So what can we do?

Action Steps

I have a few suggestions for you to take home with you. And I want to make clear that these suggestions are by no means exhaustive; they do not represent every possible step that needs to be taken to fight abuse. They are, rather, some starting guidelines for *personal* and *communal* action:

1) Report abuse.

Report, report, report. If you learn only one thing from reading this, please let it be this: *If you suspect or know a child is being abused, report it immediately to the authorities.* Call a hotline, call 911, or better yet, *call both.* Do not delay, do not make excuses, and do not turn a blind eye. Get on the phone and make a

report. Child abuse is a criminal action. It is not covered under Matthew 18; it is not something to be handled “in house” by you and your friend, by your pastor, or by your homeschool leader. Child abuse is to be handled by *the authorities*.^{xxvi}

If you suspect or know a child is being abused, report it.

2) Educate yourself and your community about abuse.

If you’re going to take child abuse seriously, and if you’re going to commit to reporting it when you suspect or know it’s happening, then *you have to know what abuse is*. Organize an annual or bi-annual evening for your homeschool group where you learn how your city, state, and country define child abuse. Educate yourself on the differences between abuse and neglect. Find out what hotlines are available to you, have community awareness days where you discuss the warning signs of abuse and neglect, and *empower yourself with information*.^{xxvii}

Similarly, educate your kids, too. Teach them what abuse is. Empower them to say, “No!” This means, of course, that you need to teach them about sex — which, I know, you might not be comfortable hearing. But this is a great example of exactly why sex education is vitally important. Children need to know the proper names for their body parts, they need to know what is good touch versus bad touch, they need to know their bodies belong to them and no adult should make them do anything that makes them uncomfortable^{xxviii}, and they need to have the words to use to express themselves to you if they

experience abuse. It's not enough to just say, "Speak up if you're abused." You need to also teach your kids what abuse is in the first place. They need to feel a sense of ownership and empowerment over their own bodies, not shame or secrecy or guilt. If kids already feel their bodies are shameful, guilty, or secretive, how will they feel free or strong enough to tell you about the abuse that only exacerbates those feelings? There needs to be openness and freedom to talk about these things in families and communities if we're ever going to bring abuse to light.

- 3) Stop the propaganda against social workers and child protective services.

I can tell you story after story about children who grew up just like I did: with an absolute terror about social workers and CPS. Many homeschool alumni grew up reading books that told them child advocates were malicious drunkards who fabricated evidence^{xxxix} and shady back-room politicians wanting nothing less than one-world government to squash Christianity^{xxx}. They heard that people who reported child abuse were "nasty neighbors" who simply hated homeschooling.^{xxxi} Popular novels even communicated that children who accused their parents of abuse were demon-possessed.^{xxxii}

This created a terror that has kept children from speaking up about abuse. Parents have used this terror to silence their children. This terror is even used from one parent to another to keep parents from reporting each other when they knew abuse was happening.

Yes, social workers and child protective services have made mistakes. They've made a lot, honestly. But I know amazing foster parents; I know homeschool parents who work for CPS; I know homeschool alumni who are social workers. These people and organizations work tirelessly to protect our children, and are increasingly knowledgeable about homeschooling — even with firsthand experiences *as* homeschool parents or students. So if we're going to fight child abuse successfully, we need to stop with the myth that they are a cabal of demonic child-snatchers.

4) Develop relationships with your local school board and CPS.

Growing up, I thought homeschooling's two worst enemies were our local school board and CPS. And you know what? Sometimes they were. But I have come to realize that, at the same time, sometimes our local school board and CPS's worst enemies were *homeschoolers*. Homeschool leaders have gone on record saying everything from "All state child protective service organizations should be dismantled and abolished"^{xxxiii} to "Abolish the child abuse hotlines"^{xxxiv} to "The core problem with Child Protective Services is its existence."^{xxxv}

I want to appeal to you, as homeschooling parents, to rise above this antagonism. Because ultimately, if there's anything that homeschoolers, school boards, and CPS should be united on, it's helping kids. So I want to encourage you, as parents and communities and leaders, to develop positive relationships with these entities, rather than antagonistic ones. Reach out and build relationships, even on a personal level. Let them get to know you as

individuals, as families; build trust; show them you have nothing to hide; show them you have so much to offer. By building better relationships, you not only aid homeschooling as a movement, you also build partnerships that can help identify kids in need, as well.

5) Listen to children.

None of these suggestions are worth anything if you don't do the first step of *listening to children*. A child risks so much when speaking up about abuse; you need to take their side. When a child tells you they were abused, or tries to tell you but just can't find the words or courage, believe them. Believe them and report it immediately. Then stand with that child, support them, and be their ally and advocate. Do not tell them it is their fault, do not get angry at them; show them nothing but unconditional love. It doesn't matter who the child says abused them; it might be someone you know, someone you care deeply about — your husband, or another one of your children, or your pastor. But you have to set aside your disbelief and other loyalties.

If we don't take this monster that is child abuse by the horns, the results can be life-changing — and not in a good way. Child abuse has life-long effects, some of which can be crippling. I'd like to look at some of these effects now — in particular *mental health* effects. Child abuse is, as our next section reveals, inherently linked to mental health.

III. Mental Health

The topic of mental health is slightly trickier to discuss than the topic of child abuse. It's not generally controversial to claim that child abuse exists. We might disagree as to what exactly constitutes child abuse, but most every community acknowledges that certain actions are abusive. However, in certain communities, it *is* controversial to claim that mental illness exists. Some people believe that mental illness is not a real thing and that it — along with psychology — was invented by anti-Christian forces in the last few centuries.

So before I discuss how child abuse can impact people's mental health, I want to first dispel the myth that acknowledging mental illness is a recent invention or somehow antithetical to the Christian faith.

A Brief History of Christianity and Mental Health

Many notable Christians throughout history have struggled with mental illness, including Augustine^{xxxvi} and Ignatius of Loyola.^{xxxvii} More contemporary Christians have also written about their personal mental illnesses, such as Charles Spurgeon^{xxxviii}, C.S. Lewis^{xxxix}, Mother Theresa^{xl}, and Martin Luther King Jr.^{xli}

There's this idea that mental health and psychology were invented as the result of anti-Christian individuals and forces like Sigmund Freud, Evolutionism, and/or secularism. However, that idea couldn't be further from

the truth: “Long before Freud, philosophers and scholars have addressed the needs of those suffering from mental distress or illness. Indeed, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Augustine, and St. Ignatius of Loyola offered many ideas and discussions about people afflicted with mental distress.”^{xlii} A recognition of the reality of mental health and psychology dates all the way back to Ancient Greece and the early Christian Church fathers. According to one Orthodox Christian Archdiocese, “The Fathers distinguished between mental illness and demonic possession. Well before the time of Christ, Greek physicians treated people for mental illness. As heirs to this medical tradition, Byzantine physicians did the same. The Church Fathers routinely refer to medical treatment of the insane with no hint of disapproval.”^{xliii}

In fact, it was a 13th-century Christian monk — Bartholomeus Anglicus — who first discussed music as a potential remedy for people suffering from “a condition which resembles depression in his encyclopedia, *De Proprietatibus Rerum*, prescribing music and occupation for depressed patients and sleep and gentle binding for frenzied patients. There is no hint of demonology in his diagnosis.”^{xliv}

Connecting mental health with *supernatural* causes would in fact be considered a *demonic and heretical idea* by early Christians. *That* idea came from what is called “The Cult of Asclepius.” In the ancient polytheistic world, Asclepius “was the god of the most widely practiced healing cult” and “Asclepian temples existed throughout ancient Greece and Rome”: “The sick would come to the Asclepian temple, bringing offerings in the form of small images of the affected part. They would sleep in the temple, and healing took

place during dreams.”^{xlv}

The Cult of Asclepius, advocating for supernatural solutions to mental and other illnesses, existed side by side with both Hippocratic medicine and Christianity. However, it stood in opposition to both of them. The cult believed in supernatural remedies. In contrast,

“Hippocratic medicine [avoided] supernatural interpretations of illness, including mental illness. This avoidance of pagan supernaturalism made Hippocratic medicine congenial to Christians and led to the acceptance of a natural origin of diseases of the body and mind by most early Christian writers... Many Christian writers found Hippocratic medicine congenial to Christian thought because its naturalistic approach focused on care of the body, eschewed the supernatural, and left the care of the soul to other philosophers. The medical authorities cited most frequently by the fathers held that persistent sadness proceeded from a disorder of black bile and that both medicinal and psychological treatments could be used to remedy it... The fathers exhibited not only an awareness of humoral physiology and the connection of the body with mental processes but also an interest in the physical basis of madness.”^{xlvi}

Thus one of the earliest contributions of Christianity to Western Civilization is the acknowledgment of the reality of mental health and the necessity of compassionate care for those who suffer from mental illness. There was a “widespread (indeed, nearly universal) belief in the ancient world that the

sick person bore responsibility for his or her illness.” With the rise of Hippocrates, however, as well as the Christian church, this belief — as well as the Cult of Asclepius — began to be challenged. In contrast to Asclepius, early Christians did not claim “to offer miraculous healing” but rather “established a role, previously unknown in the ancient world, of charitable concern for the sick, which ultimately led to the creation of...the earliest hospitals.”^{xlvii}

Ironically, then, those today that deny the reality of mental health and psychology actually have more in common with an ancient Greek cult than with Christian tradition.

Fortunately, many contemporary Christians and Christian churches are beginning to wake up to the absolute necessity of seeing mental illness like any other illness. From Rick Warren’s recent *Gathering on Mental Health and the Church*^{xlviii}, to Baylor University’s Matthew Stanford^{xlix}, to Christianity Today’s Amy Simpson^l, there are many Christian leaders and thinkers that are realizing that when Christianity turns a blind eye to mental health issues, much damage is left in the wake.

Child Abuse and Mental Health

It isn’t just Christian tradition that affirms that mental health is important for humans to acknowledge. Simple science also confirms this fact. The brain is as much a part of the physical human body as a leg, and thus damage can be done to it in the same way that damage can be done to any other part of the body. In the same way that being run over by a truck can break someone’s leg, child

abuse can hurt different parts of the brain.

When a child experiences abuse or neglect, the trauma can actually *reshape the brain* by influencing the amygdala, “the part of the brain that regulates emotions, particularly fear and anxiety.” The effects of this reshaping “can profoundly influence victims’ physical and mental health, their ability to control emotions and impulses, their achievement in school, and the relationships they form as children and as adults.”^{li} In fact, child abuse has been called “the tobacco industry of mental health,” because it primes the brain for future mental illnesses, leaving “victims more vulnerable to depression, addiction and post-traumatic stress disorder.”^{lii}

Mental Health and Homeschooling

Mental illness can directly result from the trauma that child abuse inflicts. Unfortunately, if homeschooling communities are already inadequately dealing with child abuse, they are even less adequate in their treatment of mental health issues. So I’d like to turn our focus now towards mental health in general and how homeschooling communities relate to it specifically.

Like child abuse, mental illness is a serious problem. And like child abuse, mental illness can impact homeschoolers as much as it impacts any other subculture.

26% of adults — about one out of every four — in the U.S. suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder. This is about 57.7 million people. About 6% of of

adults — 1 in 17 — suffer from a particularly serious mental illness.^{liii}

Mental illness is the second leading cause of disability worldwide.^{liv}

But despite being so common, the pressing matter of mental health doesn't get talked about much. There's a stigma that hangs over them.

Mental illnesses are like any other illnesses: they have causes that arise from the human body, from physical and chemical make-up as well as experienced trauma.^{lv} While people who experience mental illness are often denigrated as "crazy," the fact is that what we consider "crazy" is a powerful, often crippling, and most importantly *real* disease.

Like any and all groups of children, teenagers, and adults, many homeschool students will be born with, develop, or experience mental illnesses or disorders. 1 out of every 10 children or adolescents has a serious mental health problem, and another 10% have mild to moderate problems. These problems are going to exist among homeschool students — your own children perhaps, or friends of your children at the local homeschool co-op.

Homeschoolers are not immune to mental illness any more than they are immune to cancer or the flu.

Mental health problems — when not managed under care and guidance — can lead to tragic results, including suicide, self-injury, substance abuse, inability to function independently or at a job, inability to successfully complete school, and health problems. Low-income families and families of color experience

particular difficulty getting necessary services for addressing mental health issues.

Sometimes the unique circumstances surrounding certain homeschooling subcultures may give rise to or significantly exacerbate mental illness.

Sometimes abuse and neglect may give rise to or significantly exacerbate mental illness. And sometimes homeschooling will have nothing to do with the mental illness or disorder a student may struggle with; it may just be the biological and chemical make-up of that person.

There are many reasons why a homeschool student might suffer from mental illness. What is absolutely essential is that the student's family, friends, and homeschooling community are equipped to help and empower that student with the resources and tools necessary for managing the illness. In the same way that family, friends, and communities ought to support someone diagnosed with any other disease (such as cancer), they ought to support someone diagnosed with a mental disease.

Homeschool students (and later alumni) who are raised in conservative Christian homeschool communities are particularly at risk for mental illness if only for one reason: **conservative Christians are statistically proven to be reticent towards acknowledging the reality of mental illness and the importance of mental health management.**^{lvi} While society in general has a stigma against mental health awareness, that stigma is markedly pronounced within conservative Christianity.^{lvii}

In his 2008 Baylor University study, Matthew Stanford found the following among church attendees with professionally diagnosed mental illness(es):

- 41% were told by someone at their church that they did not really have mental illness.
- 28% were told by someone at their church to stop taking psychiatric medication.
- 37% were told by someone at their church that their mental illness was the result of personal sin.
- 34% were told by someone at their church that their mental illness was the result of demonic involvement.^{lviii}

A recent 2014 study by LifeWay Research also revealed that, “Only a quarter of churches (27 percent) have a plan to assist families affected by mental illness according to pastors.”^{lix}

Nouthetic Counseling: A Word of Caution

I mentioned at the beginning of this section that some people believe that mental illness is not a real thing and that it — along with psychology — was invented in the last few centuries. One popular manifestation of this belief is nouthetic — or what is often called “biblical” — counseling.^{lx} Such “counseling” (I do not think it deserves the title of “counseling”, nor is it “biblical”) assumes that pastors and other spiritual leaders — untrained in the actual practice and science of mental health — can adequately address mental illness because mental illness in this perspective is basically another word for

sin. This method began with Jay E. Adams's 1970 book *Competent to Counsel* and is currently championed by eminent evangelical Christians such as John MacArthur, who claims "behavioral sciences...are not scientific," psychology is an "occult religion," and Jesus and the Bible should be "the church's only solution" to mental illness.^{lxi} This is the same method and mentality that respected (and formerly respected) leaders in the Christian Homeschool Movement — most notably Voddie Baucham, Reb Bradley, Doug Phillips, and Bill Gothard — have promoted for years. They have taught thousands of families at homeschool and other religious conventions around the country — and through their books and other educational materials — that mental "illness" is fake. It's all just "sin" and "rebellion" and can be resolved through a "right" relationship with God.^{lxii}

This counseling theory, which I pointed out earlier has more in common with an ancient Greek cult than Christian tradition, has been directly correlated to abusive environments. Christian writer Samantha Field explains:

"This is not a rare teaching. This horrifying idea is deeply entrenched in fundamentalist teachings about psychology. Because they dismiss 'repressed memories' and 'delayed recall,' this leads them to dismiss the claims of adult abuse victims who have never had the opportunity to speak out against their abuser. They tell children that they simply cannot be abused by their parents, and if they think they're being abused, they should just be grateful for their parents 'disciplining them.'"^{lxiii}

Testimonies from homeschool alumni give faces and stories to the devastating impact a denial of mental health realities can have on a person. I'd like to share a few statements from alumni who have experienced this.

The first is from a young woman named Lana. Lana says,

"I didn't recognize [depression] because I didn't believe in depression. I thought all one needed for mental health was faith in God and I had that. And I tried to have it more and more. I prayed and felt guilty and despaired that if I couldn't handle school stress, I would never be able to succeed as a missionary. I also had severe anxiety — my demonic attacks turned out to be anxiety attacks, and treatable by medication and therapy. It was years before I finally got help."^{lxiv}

Here is another story by a homeschool graduate going by the initials RD:

"The fundamentalist worldview pops up and says 'you can't be depressed; there's no such thing. You are having these thoughts, this self-loathing, because you realize how out of tune you are with God's will.' This only creates a downward spiral that leads to more depression."^{lxv}

In some cases what a child learns about mental health and illness is directly taught by that child's parents. Take Elizabeth's story, for example:

"[My parents] taught us that an illness was God teaching us something,

and intervention was only acceptable under dire circumstances. Due to this mentality, we were blind to the mental sickness that was creeping slowly into each and every one of us, accepting it as 'normal' and 'God's will.'"^{lxvi}

When a child is raised to believe that something like depression is somehow a “lesson” or the result of “sin,” it becomes a form of spiritual abuse. The child internalizes that message and only feels worse, more broken, more sinful — which adds shame on top of shame. That perpetuates the cycle of depression. Miriam is a young homeschooled woman who recently graduated from high school. Here’s what she said about her struggle with self-injury:

"[Christians] taught in church that god is supposed to be the ultimate source of joy and peace. i felt a deep shame. if god made christians joyful, why was i depressed. if god gave christians peace, why did i have to get relief from a blade. i knew i was a bad christian. i knew that god must hate me."^{lxvii}

I knew that God must hate me. I hope that, as you hear that — you being parents yourselves, parents who want nothing more than to raise your children to love God as much as you yourself do — that you take a moment and ask yourselves, “What am I teaching to my children about mental illness? Am I teaching them that depression isn’t a personal failure? Am I teaching that if they are depressed, God loves them no less?”

That might raise another question: *Are you teaching your children about*

mental illness in the first place? Because chances are, someone you know — whether it's your own kid or your kid's best friend — is going to suffer from mental illness. So we need to be teaching our kids not only about mental health, but the *right* information about it. Avoiding the issue, sweeping it under the rug, is only going to backfire.

These ideas — ideas that homeschool students and alumni have grown up with, and are still growing up with — are not only unhealthy. They are potentially *life-threatening*. Left unchecked, undiagnosed, and unmanaged, certain mental illnesses can become more complicated and intense, even leading to new illnesses. They can lead to suicide or other acts of harm against one's self or others. Around 90% of all individuals who died from suicide met criteria for one or more diagnosable psychiatric conditions.^{lxviii}

Mental illness cannot be treated lightly.

Action Steps

Homeschool Alumni Reaching Out believes that homeschooling families and communities need to equip students and alumni with adequate information about mental health issues. Students and alumni need to be provided structures of support if they suffer from mental illness.

As you read this, I'd like you to think about ways in which you can encourage yourself, your family, and your community to talk openly about mental health issues.

Here are a few ideas to get you started:

- 1) Encourage homeschool students to talk freely and openly about mental health problems with trusted adults in their lives.
- 2) Teach students the truth and actual science about mental illness. Students need to know that mental health problems are just as important and real as physical health problems.
- 3) Eliminate from homes, curriculum magazines, and conventions any materials or speakers that teach dangerous pseudoscience about mental illness, such as saying such illness is not real, is the result of demonic possession, or is treatable "supernaturally" to the exclusion of professional therapy and medicine.
- 4) Integrate into children's overall healthcare an attention to potential mental problems in students.
- 5) Learn how to encourage healthy social and emotional development among students.
- 6) Make significant efforts to encourage families to recognize early the mental health needs of children and adolescents. This means learning how to recognize early warning signs of mental health problems.

7) Hold regular education and awareness events to continually empower and equip families and communities with the tools and support systems necessary to create safe, nurturing environments for all students, regardless of — and especially in cases of — mental health issues.

These are all suggestions for students and communities. What about suggestions for you, as parents?

1) Homeschool parents need to realize that mental illness *is a real thing that impacts them, too.*

Maybe *you* struggle with a mental illness and feel alone or ashamed in your own community. Or maybe one of your friends has. As I said earlier, 26% of adults in the U.S. suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder. That means, out of every 4 of you reading or listening this, 1 of you is dealing with one or more mental illnesses in your daily life. Do we know how to support one another? Are we letting each other know it's ok to talk about, that we won't judge? That we will be there for one another?

2) Homeschool parents with mental illness need to realize that their illness will — whether they know it or not — impact their children.

This is something our communities should be open to discussing. Because sometimes, even though we wish it weren't the case, children need breaks from their parents if their parents are mentally unwell. Again, are we

equipped to bear one another's burdens like that?

- 3) Homeschool parents need to manage their own mental illness — and get outside help whenever necessary — if they are going to ensure a safe, nurturing environment for their children.
- 4) Homeschool parents need to have established contingency plans in the event that their mental illness becomes too much to handle along with dedicated homeschooling.

The possibility (or likelihood) of such an event ought not bring shame. It is part of life. But that situation needs to be planned for, so that both the parent's health needs as well as the student's educational needs can continue to be met.

Now that we have considered child abuse and mental health, I want to transition to the third subject, modesty and purity. This might seem like the odd man out, if you will. How on earth do modesty and purity round out a conversation about things like abuse and depression? Well, as you will find out, this topic rounds out the conversation very well — and that's exactly why we need to talk about it.

IV. Modesty and Purity

When we consider modesty and purity as a *dialogue* and not simply a monologue, we will realize what has often been communicated to homeschool children about modesty and purity has tied directly to abuse they have experienced and mental illness they struggle with. So, in fact, the dominant monologue about modesty and purity is a great example of how everything I've been talking about is all inter-connected. There's this vast web of issues and no one issue is itself the "problem."

If you follow homeschool news, you've probably heard a lot of homeschool "problems" as of late. Maybe those problems involved specific people, like Doug Phillips or Bill Gothard. Or maybe those problems involved specific ideas, like "Patriarchy" or "Legalism." Over the last year, for example, homeschool debate coach Chris Jeub declared that "Patriarchy Has Got To Go,"^{lxi} Presbyterian pastor Shawn Mathis claimed one of the "root problems" in homeschooling circles is Legalism,^{lxx} and HSLDA's Michael Farris drew "A Line in the Sand," denouncing both Patriarchy and Legalism as "damaging" and "threatening" to homeschool freedoms.^{lxxi}

While I do think both Patriarchy and Legalism as systems of thought need to be called out, I want to point out that you are more than two-thirds of the way through this paper about issues homeschooling communities desperately need to address and this is the first time I have mentioned Patriarchy and Legalism. And I only mentioned them in the context of what homeschool leaders have called out thus far.

What I hope to communicate in highlighting this fact is that is that there's no *singular* problem. While it is convenient to target certain systems of thought like Patriarchy and Legalism (especially since their most outspoken advocates, Doug Phillips and Bill Gothard, recently came under fire for sexual assault and harassment allegations^{lxxii}), we cannot content ourselves with thinking that as long as we reject those two systems of thought, homeschooling will suddenly be healed. As Christian theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer has stated, "We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself."

The wheels of abuse and neglect in homeschooling are driven by much more than Patriarchy and Legalism; those systems are but a few of the wheel's parts. All these problems are connected. They involve valuing ideas over children so much that we don't stop and ask how our children experience those ideas. We neglect *dialogue*.

So.

Modesty and purity.

I want to make this simple. Let's talk about a phrase, a phrase that you have probably heard many times. This phrase goes something like this:

The greatest gift a young Christian woman can give her future husband is the gift of her purity.

Now, some of you might hear that phrase and think, “Amen.” Some of you might instead think, “That’s not true.” What I want to focus on is not whether you agree or disagree. I want to focus on *interpretation*. In other words, I want you to think about how this phrase gets interpreted by children.

Let me tell you how children — and by that, I mean almost every homeschool alumni I have talked to — has interpreted that phrase. That phrase means:

If a woman is no longer a virgin, she’s worth less.

One of the clearest examples of both this teaching as well as how it has been interpreted comes from a book that was wildly popular among homeschoolers when I was a teenager: *When God Writes Your Love Story* by Eric and Leslie Ludy. (In fact, it continues to be popular today, even to the point of being a recommended resource in the context of sexual abuse prevention.^{lxxiii}) The Ludys’ book, marketed as “The Ultimate Approach to Guy/Girl Relationships,” claims to be “for anyone searching for the beauty of true and lasting love, for romance in its purest form, and is willing to do whatever it takes in order to find it.”^{lxxiv} In one of the final chapters of the book, entitled “Too Late?,” Leslie Ludy discusses “sexual sin” and “moral compromise” — in other words, “lost virginity.”

There are two issues I want to highlight from this chapter about lost virginity: The first is the story Leslie tells about a 12-year-old girl named Rebecca. Leslie says that Rebecca — again, a 12-year-old — was lured by a 16-year-old boy

from a church youth group into his house one day. Leslie says that Rebecca “left as a used and defiled sex toy” and was “forced from childhood into womanhood.”^{lxxv}

From Leslie’s description alone, Rebecca’s story reads as a straightforward account of a 12-year-old girl being raped. The words “used” and “forced” indicate a lack of consent. Yet Leslie puts Rebecca’s story in the same chapter as stories of willing sexual encounters of individuals who chose to have sex before marriage. All these stories are then discussed as “sexual sin” and “moral compromise.”^{lxxvi} At no point does Leslie identify Rebecca’s story as a story of child sexual abuse, sexual assault, and/or rape — and at no point does Leslie then relate it to the importance of children and teenagers learning sexual consent and safety. The message to young women reading this would be and has been clear: you being “forced from childhood into womanhood” is *you sexually sinning*, even if you were “forced.”

The second issue I want to highlight from Leslie’s chapter on “lost virginity” is how accounts of losing virginity are described. Leslie describes a number of young women’s first sexual encounters in the following ways: Karly, for example, “made the mistake of giving [her boyfriend] her most precious gift—her virginity, but now he was distant and cold towards her. She was full of guilt.”^{lxxvii} An unnamed 25-year-old from Australia is described as saying she had “given away the most precious thing I had—my purity. There’s nothing left of my treasure... Now I have nothing to offer my husband.”^{lxxviii}

While Leslie does state that God can “forgive” each of these women for their sexual impurity and “can give us a ‘second virginity,’ spiritually speaking,”^{lxxix} at no point does she question whether a young woman’s virginity (or “purity”) is “the most precious thing” one has. At no point does she question whether virginity is “the most precious gift” one can give one’s husband. The Ludys, in fact, endorse this idea — hence the importance of God granting a spiritual “second virginity.”

The Ludys are not alone in fixating on a person’s virginity as all-important. Another essential reading on relationships for homeschool teenagers was (and continues to be) Elisabeth Elliot’s *Passion and Purity*. While Elliot’s book is more contemplative than the Ludys and focuses on Elliot’s personal story of her relationship with her late husband Jim Elliot, Elisabeth states upfront that her book “is, to be blunt, a book about virginity.”^{lxxx}

The message that homeschool students and alumni have received from books such as these is pretty clear: that if you are not “pure” (in other words, if you are not a “virgin”), then you no longer have “your most precious gift” that you can give your spouse. I want to take issue with this because I believe that not only is it a damaging message, I also believe that it is an unbiblical message. Marriage is a covenant of love: individuals deciding to commit and give themselves to one another, emotionally, physically, and spiritually. And the greatest gift within the context of marriage is not one’s “purity” or “virginity” but *one’s self*.

In the Book of John, Jesus declares to his disciples that, “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.” And to make clear what it means to love another, Jesus adds that, “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”^{lxxxix} According to traditional Christian theology, Jesus himself demonstrated this greatest act of love when he sacrificed himself on the cross for humanity. And what Jesus sacrificed was not any one part of his body, or his virginity, or his “purity” of heart. Rather, he sacrificed *himself* — he gave the totality of his being for humanity.

Traditional Christian theology also tells us that marriage is to look like the relationship between Jesus and the Church. One must conclude, therefore, that the greatest act of love, the greatest gift, within the context of marriage is *not* any one part of one’s body or one’s virginity or one’s “purity” — but rather, in similarity with Jesus’s greatest gift, the giving of one’s *self* to another. *You* — not your virginity, but all of who you are, your body, heart, and soul — is your greatest gift to your spouse. This doesn’t mean virginity cannot have value; the problem is the message that it’s the *most* important thing when it comes to romantic relationships. You are such much *more* than whether you are a virgin or not. And that you — being an amazing and beautiful individual made in the image of God — want to give your life to share the journey of life with another human being? *That* is the ultimate gift.

But homeschool students and alumni learned otherwise. They learned that the greatest gift was not their *selves* but rather their *virginity*. And it is so important to see how this unbiblical teaching has led to great damage. Because when students and alumni are taught to value their virginity over

their selves, their self-worth becomes inherently linked to their “purity.” Hence the idea young women have absorbed — that, *If a woman is no longer a virgin, she’s worth less*. Kidnapping survivor Elizabeth Smart spoke of this idea last year when she said that after being kidnapped and abused it was “easy...to feel like you no longer have worth, you no longer have value.”^{lxxxii} Smart directly related this feeling to the purity teachings she had imbibed.

To fully appreciate how this idea has manifested for homeschool alumni, let’s look at a few examples of their experiences:

The first is from a young woman named Laura. She wrote,

“I had to go through the True Love Waits program. The ‘activity’ I remember the most was a wrapped present. I held the package and stood at the front of the room. Then, the youth leaders lined up the guys and each of them tore off some of the paper. Then I had to read some paragraph about how virginity is like a gift – no one wants a present that was ‘meant for them’ to have already been opened by someone else. Because of that one activity, I never told anyone I was raped at 15 until years later.”^{lxxxiii}

The next story is from a young woman named Cora. Cora says,

“Having been told all of my life that my worth was in eventually being someone’s wife, serving him, and having children and that my virginity essential to attracting a husband, I naturally informed my [boyfriend]

that I wanted to wait until marriage. He agreed. Then he started pushing. And pushing. Until he held me down in the bathroom one day, and forced himself on me... I told my friend. She told me it was because I was teasing him. I believed her. We both lived in a world that demanded that women be responsible for a man's desire. The mere fact of existing and causing a man to want you means you should expect to be violated... I never told anyone else for a long, long time. I knew my parents would also tell me that it was my fault."^{lxxxiv}

Another story, from another young woman named Auriel:

"When I was 9 years old, [my mom] told me that having my hair down made me look like a 'lady of the night.' Even though I was a shy, modest girl, Mom constantly told me that something I did or wore was sinful, displeasing to God, and might turn on my dad or my brothers. I was so scared that I was going to lead my brothers or dad into sin for lusting after me."^{lxxxv}

I know these stories are difficult and troubling to hear, so bear with me for just one more. This last one is from a young woman named Christine:

"When my boyfriend [in college] raped me, I felt horrible but thought it was sex. I thought to complain about it to a friend would be to say that sex was wrong... I had not been taught about 'good touch' and 'bad touch'. As a child, I was taught that I must always put my own interests and feelings aside and serve other people, and not argue. My body had

never been my own – not when my parents coerced me to hug someone or when they’d told me to pull down my pants so that they could give me more spankings... I was unused to being in touch with what my body told me... So, ironically, the teachings that my parents thought would keep me abstinent and make me a ‘good girl’ actually ended up putting me in unwanted sexual situations.”^{lxxxvi}

I think Libby Anne, a formerly homeschooled blogger, summarizes these stories in an importantly precise way. She says,

“Presents, chocolate bars, roses, chewing gum, packing tape—these sorts of metaphors abound in circles where what I call ‘purity culture’ is strongest, and each one is used to illustrate how having sex before marriage will ruin you, rendering you dirty and potentially even unable to bond or form real relationships for the rest of your life. In the effort to keep young people from having sex before saying marriage vows, Christian leaders, pastors, and parents resort to threatening their youth... in the process, these very teachings have led young women...to leave their rapes unreported, remain in abusive relationships, and stay with their abductors. This is not okay.”^{lxxxvii}

Libby Anne is right. *This is not okay*. What young women — and young men, too!^{lxxxviii} — heard about modesty and purity is nothing less than cruel.

Now, you might agree with that. When you hear these stories, you might also have a kneejerk reaction like, “But I never said *that!*” Or, “I *would* never say

that!" Or, "If my children asked me, I would let them know I *don't* think that." All of these reactions bring us back to the importance of dialogue.

See, communication is a two-way street. Though honestly, sometime it's more like a traffic-jammed freeway in Los Angeles. Through my decade-plus experience with speech and debate, I can confidently tell you that communication is so, so much more than *what you say*. In fact, communication experts often say that *what you say* is probably the least important aspect of communication. Far more important than *what you say* is *how you say it*, your *body language* when you say it, the mindset of your *audience*, and — probably most important for our current discussion — *what you don't say*.

All of these factors go into the turbulent mixture of communication. And sometimes? Sometimes you have no control over some of the factors. You can't mind-read your audience and thus know their mindset. You can't prepare in advance an entire list of things *you are not saying* but you unintentionally communicate.

This is directly relevant to the homeschooling conversation — both in general and about the modesty and purity aspect of that conversation in particular.

It's relevant in general because your lived experiences as homeschool parents are completely different and distinct from the lived experiences of homeschool children. Things that you might take for granted, aren't taken for granted by your kids. I was struck by this fact when blogger Libby Anne wrote

a piece about finding out her mom didn't actually believe everything in a homeschool magazine that their family regularly received. Here's an excerpt:

“My mother subscribed to *Above Rubies* and read each issue thoroughly. The ideas contained within the magazine aligned at least generally with beliefs I heard my mother espouse. When my parents disagreed with a religious leader, they were quick to say so. In fact, I grew up hearing James Dobson described as too wishy-washy and soft. Yet, I never heard my mother call Nancy Campbell or her magazine into question, so I assumed that the messages contained therein were approved, and that it was something I should read, take to heart, and learn from. And read, take to heart, and learn I did... I've talked to more than my fair share of homeschool graduates who grew up in this culture and took to heart things they later found out their parents never even realized they were learning.... Parents may not realize the toxic ideologies their children taking in through osmosis from the Christian homeschooling culture around them... ‘You need to tell the girls, mom,’ I said. ‘They read *Above Rubies* just as I did at their age. You need to tell them you don't agree with all of it, because if you don't, they'll think you do.’”^{lxxxix}

I was blown away when I read this interaction between Libby Anne and her mom because, wow, I can so relate to it. I remember hearing all sorts of messages from my friends, my friends' parents, from the magazines that were in our home, from the leaders who spoke at conventions — and I, too, just assumed that we were supposed to agree with what they said. I assumed my parents agreed. Years later, after all sorts of fear and anger and fights between

my parents and I, we realized that (1) I thought they thought things they didn't and (2) they had no idea I thought they thought those things. I was living in a shadow of misunderstanding and fear because my parents did not publically express dissent about certain prevailing ideas and they never bothered to ask me what I was hearing from the homeschool culture around me.

Now take all those observations and apply them directly to the modesty and purity issue. You have a whole life of experiences. For my parents, it was experiences growing up in the 60's and 70's and reacting to certain expressions of love and sexuality they found harmful. And in response to those experiences, they came up with — and listened to others come up with — ideas for how to avoid the pain and heartache they experienced. They came up with ideas about modesty and purity and bought Josh Harris's book *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* and we attended seminars by Reb Bradley about *Preparing Your Children for Courtship and Marriage*.

But my fellow alumni and I didn't grow up in the 60's and 70's. We grew up in often sheltered and protective homes. So our parents' expressions of love and sexuality — built in reaction to *their* culture's expressions of love and sexuality — mean something *entirely different* to us than to our parents. They are heard differently, felt differently, and lived differently. So much is lost in translation.

And when modesty and purity get communicated — in *our* culture with *our* experiences — with a line like,

The greatest gift a young Christian woman can give her future husband is the gift of her purity.

...we are not thinking about Woodstock. We are not thinking about the Free Love Movement. We are thinking about holding hands or the Antebellum Dances or the swing dances so popular in homeschooling circles. We are thinking that if we lose that “gift of purity” (whether by force or willingly), our worth has been diminished.

So you need to stop and ask yourself difficult questions like, *what if my child gets assaulted?* You probably don’t want to, because that is probably one of the most heart-wrenching and sickening scenarios you could ever imagine. You would probably do everything in your power to stop such a situation from occurring.

But you can’t just wish away the possibility. As a parent, you have to come to terms with what we talked about earlier: that as many as 1 in 3 girls and 1 in 7 boys will be sexually abused at some point in their childhood. What are your modesty and purity messages teaching *those* girls and boys? How will your messages be interpreted after an experience of trauma? Are your messages going to empower them to speak up, or will they silence them into shame, guilt, and secrecy? Into darker moments? Perhaps even longer and more abusive relationships?

What I want to challenge you to do today is to go home and rethink *everything* for *yourself*. I want you to put yourself in Laura's shoes; I want you to put yourself in Cora's shoes; I want you to put yourself in Auriel's shoes; I want you to put yourself in Christine's shoes.

How are *they* hearing your metaphors? How are they hearing your analogies?

This is why dialogue is so important. This is why we need alumni to keep speaking up and we need to hear from you — you who are parents and leaders of our communities — that you welcome our voices. Because you actually *can't* put yourself in our shoes entirely. *We* need to tell you what roads we walked and what words we heard from you. We're the ones who can tell when you communicated messages that trapped us in abusive mindsets, abusive relationships, or drove us into depression or suicidal thoughts. And if you will listen, if you will open your arms and hear our words and show us you care, then we can work together to make things better for the next generation.

But we have to do it together. You cannot change this world alone.

V. Closing Thoughts

I'd like to conclude: first, with a story; and second, with a thought about that story. The story comes from Thích Nhất Hạnh, a Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk and poet. In his book *Touching Peace*, Thích Nhất Hạnh talks about a young boy who fell down and scraped his knee. Here's the story:

“When we look deeply at our pain we see that our suffering is not ours alone. Many seeds of suffering have been handed down to us by our ancestors, our parents, and our society. We have to recognize these seeds. One boy...told me this story. When he was eleven, he was very angry at his father. Every time he fell down and hurt himself, his father would get angry and shout at him. The boy vowed that when he grew up, he would be different. But a few years ago, his little sister was playing with other children and she fell off a swing and scraped her knee. It was bleeding, and the boy became very angry. He wanted to shout at her, ‘How stupid! Why did you do that?’ ... A number of adults who were present were taking good care of his sister, washing her wound and putting a bandage on it, so he walked away slowly... Suddenly he saw that he was exactly like his father, and he realized that if he did not do something about his anger, he would transmit it to his children... He saw that his father may have been a victim just like him. The seeds of his father’s anger might have been transmitted by his grandparents.”^{xc}

There are a lot of lessons we could take from this story, many of which would be profound — and probably closer to the lessons its author intended.

Lessons about how far the apple falls from the tree, or lessons about how anger begets anger, and so forth. These are good lessons, but I am struck more by something else. I am struck by one simple fact:

You cannot stop children from scraping their knees.

You simply can't. And when you think about, isn't that something we nonetheless try every single day? We desperately want our children to be ok, to be mature and independent, to be healthy. And if you are Christian, your desire that your kids remain Christians can override all these other concerns. It is Christianity or bust.

Yet despite our best efforts, *children still scrape their knees*. And we get mad at them for it. We get furious. We feel like our best efforts went unappreciated, or thrown out the window, or stomped on in a tantrum. Our kids get hurt — and then we get mad at them for getting hurt.

Which only hurts them more.

You cannot stop children from scraping their knees.

But you know what you *can* do? *Love*.

Love is what you have control over. You have control over whether you show your children love and acceptance, whether you model for them the love you see in Christ — the self-sacrifice, the unconditionality, the grace and forgiveness and patience.

And guess what? *Love* conquers fear. Love gives us the courage to face our fears.

John 21:17 says,

The third time Jesus said to Peter,

“Simon son of John, do you love me?”

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?”

He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Feed my sheep.”^{xci}

Do you love me? Feed my sheep.

And you know what? You can't feed the sheep if you just keep scaring them away.

I challenge you today, as I challenged you in the beginning of this speech, to face your fears as homeschool communities and parents. Because facing those fears is an act of love. I ask that you join myself and other alumni in taking seriously the task of making homeschooling a safer place for all children.

We have to do it together, and I'm all in. Are you?

Child Abuse 101: Action Steps for Homeschooling Communities

Homeschooling families and communities need to equip students and parents with adequate information about child abuse. **What are ways you can encourage yourself, your family, and your community to talk openly about child abuse?**

We have a few suggestions to get you started. And we want to make clear that these suggestions are by no means exhaustive. They are, rather, some starting guidelines for *personal* and *communal* action:

1) *Report abuse.*

Report, report, report. If you learn only one thing from reading this, please let it be this: *If you suspect or know a child is being abused, report it immediately to the authorities.* Call a hotline, call 911, or better yet, *call both.* Do not delay, do not make excuses, and do not turn a blind eye. Get on the phone and make a report. Child abuse is a criminal action. It is not covered under Matthew 18; it is not something to be handled “in house” by you and your friend, by your pastor, or by your homeschool leader. Child abuse is to be handled by *the authorities.* If you suspect or know a child is being abused, report it.

2) *Educate yourself and your community about abuse.*

If you’re going to take child abuse seriously, and if you’re going to commit to reporting it when you suspect or know it’s happening, then *you have to know what abuse is.* Organize an annual or bi-annual evening for your homeschool group where you learn how your city, state, and country define child abuse. Educate yourself on the differences between abuse and neglect. Find out what hotlines are available to you, have community awareness days where you discuss the warning signs of abuse and neglect, and *empower yourself with information.*

Similarly, educate your kids, too. Teach them what abuse is. Empower them to say, “No!” This means, of course, that you need to teach them about sex — which you might not be comfortable hearing. But this is a great example of exactly why sex education is vitally important. Children need to know the proper names for their body parts, they need to know what is good touch versus bad touch, they need to know their bodies belong to them and no adult should make them do anything that makes them uncomfortable, and they need to have the words to use to express themselves to you if they experience abuse. It’s not enough to just say, “Speak up if you’re abused.” You need to also teach your kids what abuse is in the first place. They need to feel a sense of ownership and empowerment over their own bodies, not shame or secrecy or guilt. If kids already feel their bodies are shameful, guilty, or secretive, how will they feel free or strong enough to tell you about the abuse that only exacerbates those feelings? There needs to be openness and freedom to

talk about these things in families and communities if we're ever going to bring abuse to light.

3) *Stop the propaganda against social workers and child protective services.*

Many homeschooled children grew up with an absolute terror about social workers and CPS. Parents have used this terror to silence their children. This terror is even used from one parent to another to keep parents from reporting each other when they knew abuse was happening. Yes, social workers and child protective services have made mistakes. They've made a lot, honestly. But amazing foster parents exist; homeschool parents work for CPS; homeschool alumni who are social workers. These people and organizations work tirelessly to protect our children, and are increasingly knowledgeable about homeschooling — even with firsthand experiences *as* homeschool parents or students. So if we're going to fight child abuse successfully, we need to stop with the myth that they are a cabal of demonic child-snatchers.

4) *Develop relationships with your local school board and CPS.*

Ultimately, if there's anything that homeschoolers, school boards, and CPS should be united on, it's helping kids. So we want to encourage you, as parents and communities and leaders, to develop positive relationships with these entities, rather than antagonistic ones. Reach out and build relationships, even on a personal level. Let them get to know you as individuals, as families; build trust; show them you have nothing to hide; show them you have so much to offer. By building better relationships, you not only aid homeschooling as a movement, you also build partnerships that can help identify kids in need, as well.

5) *Listen to children.*

None of these suggestions are worth anything if you don't do the first step of *listening to children*. A child risks so much when speaking up about abuse; you need to take their side. When a child tells you they were abused, or tries to tell you but just can't find the words or courage, believe them. Believe them and report it immediately. Then stand with that child, support them, and be their ally and advocate. Do not tell them it is their fault, do not get angry at them; show them nothing but unconditional love. It doesn't matter who the child says abused them; it might be someone you know, someone you care deeply about — your husband, or another one of your children, or your pastor. But you have to set aside your disbelief and other loyalties.

For more information about child abuse and other issues, visit Homeschool Alumni Reaching Out at www.hareaching.org.

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Mental Health 101: Action Steps for Homeschooling Communities

Homeschooling families and communities need to equip students and alumni with adequate information about mental health issues. Students and alumni need to be provided structures of support if they suffer from mental illness.

What are ways you can encourage yourself, your family, and your community to talk openly about mental health issues?

Here are a few ideas to get you started:

For Students:

- 1) Encourage homeschool students to talk freely and openly about mental health problems with trusted adults in their lives.
- 2) Teach students the truth and actual science about mental illness. Students need to know that mental health problems are just as important and real as physical health problems.
- 3) Eliminate from homes, curriculum magazines, and conventions any materials or speakers that teach dangerous pseudoscience about mental illness, such as saying such illness is not real, is the result of demonic possession, or is treatable "supernaturally" to the exclusion of professional therapy and medicine.
- 4) Integrate into children's overall healthcare an attention to potential mental problems in students.
- 5) Learn how to encourage healthy social and emotional development among students.
- 6) Make significant efforts to encourage families to recognize early the mental health needs of children and adolescents. This means learning how to recognize early warning signs of mental health problems.
- 7) Hold regular education and awareness events to continually empower and equip families and communities with the tools and support systems necessary to create safe, nurturing environments for all students, regardless of — and especially in cases of — mental health issues.

For Parents

- 1) Homeschool parents need to realize that mental illness *is a real thing that impacts them,*

too.

Maybe *you* struggle with a mental illness and feel alone or ashamed in your own community. Or maybe one of your friends has. 26% of adults in the U.S. suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder. That means, out of every 4 of you reading or listening this, 1 of you is dealing with one or more mental illnesses in your daily life. Do we know how to support one another? Are we letting each other know it's ok to talk about, that we won't judge? That we will be there for one another?

2) Homeschool parents with mental illness need to realize that their illness will — whether they know it or not — impact their children.

This is something our communities should be open to discussing. Because sometimes, even though we wish it weren't the case, children need breaks from their parents if their parents are mentally unwell. Again, are we equipped to bear one another's burdens like that?

3) Homeschool parents need to manage their own mental illness — and get outside help whenever necessary — if they are going to ensure a safe, nurturing environment for their children.

4) Homeschool parents need to have established contingency plans in the event that their mental illness becomes too much to handle along with dedicated homeschooling.

The possibility (or likelihood) of such an event ought not bring shame. It is part of life. But that situation needs to be planned for, so that both the parent's health needs as well as the student's educational needs can continue to be met.

For more information about mental health and other issues, visit Homeschool Alumni Reaching Out at www.hareaching.org.

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^{lxxxviii} An example of how purity teachings have impacted males can be seen in Abel’s story on Homeschoolers Anonymous, “Ticking Time Bombs of Atomic Hormones”:

<http://homeschoolersanonymous.wordpress.com/2013/04/02/ticking-time-bombs-of-atomic-hormones-abels-story/>, accessed on September 29, 2014.

^{lxxxix} Libby Anne, Patheos, “They Why Didn’t You Tell Us That, Mom?,” September 1, 2013,

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/lovejoyfeminism/2013/09/then-why-didnt-you-tell-us-that-mom.html>, accessed on September 29, 2014.

^{xc} Thích Nhất Hạnh, “Transforming Our Compost,” *Touching Peace*, Parallax Press, 1992, p. 31.

^{xc} John 21, New International Version, Bible Gateway,

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John%2021>, accessed on September 29, 2014.