

I am a queer, nonbinary person who was homeschooled for religious reasons from the fourth grade in 1999 until my high school graduation in 2009. While I experienced my first years of schooling in both a private Christian school and a two years in a public elementary school, my family and church became increasingly concerned about the "secular creep" that was taking place in formal education, and a sizable group of families in our community began to homeschool their kids in the late 90s. Certain that formal education explicitly taught students to accept "sinful beliefs, my mother chose homeschool as a means to staunch those influences and armor her children with an array of religious curriculum and heavily curated electives, like homemaking or biblical apologetics, that would ensure that we grew up, first and foremost, as Christians.

For me and my three younger siblings, this meant that all subjects like Science were heavily moderated to align with their strict worldview. Because of my parents' religious beliefs, moreover, gender dictated my schooling. I know that from the outset me and my sister were assigned to cap out on our math and science studies at the lowest acceptable tier – that is, whatever checked the necessary boxes to say that we graduated. Even before my struggles with math were obvious, my mom always said that we'd skip geometry and calculus and instead do statistics or Business Math, which is essentially basic math for home economics, because "they were easier". I didn't question this at the time, but as my brothers began school I noticed how they were eventually assigned subjects like military history, physics, geography, and Latin.

Though I wouldn't learn this until I was 30, I experienced these years of homeschooling with undiagnosed ADHD and autism, which provided a strange insulation in my education that my siblings often didn't share, since I hyper-fixated on academics. I was "smart" and the idea is that I would get myself into college somehow, despite my education becoming increasingly self-directed with every succeeding year. I also feel like my gender expression (which involved frequently fumbled attempts at femininity) gave my parents pause in how successful I would be in finding a godly husband and raising a family, and so I was exempt from some learnings electives like sewing, cooking, even when I tearfully demanded to learn to cook when I was sixteen years old.

Meanwhile, my younger sister did not share a propensity for self-teaching, and oftentimes found herself struggling with subjects, frequently cheating by unlocking the drawer to Mom's answer-key books so that she could stay in the same grade as her other homeschooled friends. Additionally, being born female capped the level of necessary ambition that my sister and I were expected to pursue. I still feel shame about my complete ignorance of higher education until my junior year of high school. My mother thought she was being gracious to my younger sister by planning for her to max out her education at much, much lower levels, because she expected that with her temperament and spirit, my sister was likely only going to be a homemaker anyway. In fact, it was explicitly stated throughout my childhood that my sister would never go to college or get a degree. She would instead be "a mother".

As a result of these years of teaching I was left with crippling anxiety, depression, and obsessive-compulsion by my graduating year. I constantly cried through every assignment I completed with virtual schooling, dreading that my ignorance of something - anything - unknown would prevent me from a decent grade and, therefore, graduation. My lifelong difficulty in math led to my mom essentially giving up on it as a viable subject for me. After having to repeat Algebra II for the third time we simply wrote on the necessary forms that I had passed Statistics in the tenth grade and I focused on other studies for my final two years.

By the end of my schooling I had zero confidence in school and in social life, and I recall those years through a haze of heavy depression. Left to my own direction, I completed my studies in fits and spurts, which translated to me hyper-focusing on completing the entirety of both my junior and senior years of schooling in three months, and using the remaining time to tend to my eating disorder and work a full-time job at a restaurant owned by a member of our church.

College itself was not exempt from my religious homeschooling career. I wasn't permitted to apply for any non-Christian colleges or any schools outside of the southeastern United States. I eventually got into Belhaven College in Jackson, Mississippi to pursue a Creative Writing degree. This was one of the few colleges on my parents' list of stipulations, in that it required you to both attend weekly chapel service and vetted proof that you attended a local church on Sunday mornings in order to receive your degree. I was severely depressed during my tenure there, spending the first quarter of my freshman year oversleeping and isolating myself from fellow students. After I could no longer trust myself to physically attend classes or even operate my own car due to the involuntary crying fits I continually battled I was forced to end the spring semester of my sophomore year with a long list of class withdrawals due to an inability to complete assignments. I returned to college that fall where I stumbled through my scaled-back classes with even worse success, and I eventually dropped out for good before the following term.

I'm grateful for my life now. I'm still intensely interested in the world around me and have solid relationships with my chosen family, though that group includes few of my blood relatives now. I am, however, acutely aware of the damage that being raised as Christian homeschooler wreaked, because I still encounter the repercussions of that every day. There are gaps in my knowledge that I will never close, and futures that I never got to choose or live because of my education's limited scope. I received lower standards of education as a result, which then led to taking lower-paying jobs. Denying my neurodivergence in childhood stunted my academic career, which also affected my ability to maintain a job. I credit homeschooling as the prime culprit in my bouts of suicidal ideation, because the ignorance it fostered made me believe that I was utterly worthless, and its insistence on religious devotion failed to give my life any further meaning. I'm so deeply grateful that my life looks different than it does now, because there were

many, many times where I wasn't certain that I would have much of a life after those experiences at all.

Signed,
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