

The clip-clop of horses' hooves and the whir of bicycle wheels were discernible in both directions this morning for the first time since early May. We have grown use to the sounds we hear each day as the Amish workers pass by on their way to the rolled metal factory, but the voices of children traveling in the opposite direction have been quiet this summer. Now, though, on this first Monday of September, school has begun at Clear Waters School a half mile east of us here on Coe Creek. The children sound happy, laughing and chatting as they travel to school.

It would be pleasant to remember the September beginning of each school year in this way, but that is not the way it was for me. I had no desire to return to school each fall. In fact, I disliked the whole system of education. It wasn't so much that I didn't enjoy school itself—I just didn't want to go. I was intensely homesick as soon as the school bus arrived. It seemed to me that it would have been immensely better to just have the books and learn at home myself.

Of course, there are many children who are "homeschooled" these days. And now, with a little different perspective, I can't say that I think it is a good idea. It would, no doubt, have been much easier for my parents to let me stay at home all of the time and have a home-based education, but it would not have been good for me. Children need socialization, and school is probably the best place to get it.

Some people disagree with this. After all, they opine, children can meet other children in Sunday School, in clubs, in home-based activities. But, there is probably nowhere that is as diverse as the public school, and it seems to me that we need to become acquainted with all kinds of people if we are to grow into responsible, caring, tolerant adults. We need to spend time with others who aren't "like" us in order to understand that we really are all "like" each other in the important ways.

I did enjoy some of my school time once I was there. Access to more books than we had at home—where reading was also very important—was a joy. The advent of the bookmobile stands out as one of the two most positively memorable events of my years in elementary school.

The other was recess. We played softball during the spring and fall every morning, afternoon, and noon break. Usually, boys and girls played together, and at that age, we were roughly equal in our size, abilities, and motivation. In fact, I don't think any of the boys could "hit it over the ridge" (a de facto home run) with the regularity of my classmate, Carol. We had no dress code, so we were all in jeans and sturdy shoes, and hair that was braided nicely when mothers sent their daughters to the bus often was hanging loose by noon. We knew how to play.

And that is one thing our school had in common with the Amish school in our neighborhood. One neighbor girl, out of school now for a couple of years, admitted that the one thing she missed about school was the softball games. The competition is spirited, but generosity is also observable, as one sees the older, stronger scholars helping and encouraging the younger ones.

Still, as I saw the Amish children riding by in the morning, a strange, anxious feeling settled in the pit of my stomach. And tomorrow, when the yellow school bus goes by on its route to gather the kids for public school, it will intensify. I am so glad I can stay at home.