

Home Education

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Unbridled Curiosity Our Experiences with a Field Journal

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A year ago, I was completely sold on the idea that my children would need to spend the bulk of their elementary school years acquiring knowledge and memorizing facts. Part of me—the professional teacher lingering inside—applauded such programs as efficient and thorough, but another part of me—the emerging creative learner—felt the need to blend in some more meaningful learning experiences.

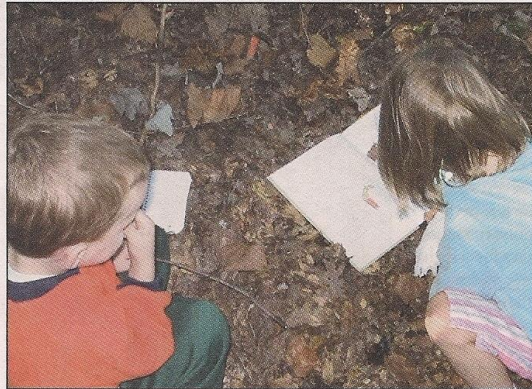
At the bookstore one evening, I was browsing through the educational materials, thinking about what we might use to cover this subject or that subject, when the idea of a field journal popped into my mind. I found a plain black hard-cover sketchbook in the stationery section that looked very scientific and started concocting all kinds of plans. My daughter Stella, who was four at the time, has had a passionate interest in drawing since she first put crayon to paper. Her favorite subjects are flowers, animals and the sky. I felt confident that channeling some of her artistic energy into science lessons was a wonderful way to learn all of those facts on my list.

When I introduced her to the journal, she was excited about drawing things outside, so we went outside to pick something to start with. We started looking around and before I knew it all these rules started bubbling up out of me. It has to be alive. It has to be interesting. It has to be still enough to draw. As much as I tried to fight the urge, I ended convincing her to draw some emerging hostas. Perfect subject, I thought. We can observe them

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over time, as they grow and watch the development of a plant. We can identify the type of leaves, the parts of a flower, and so on. My mind was racing with all of the possibilities for tie-ins with our semi-classical model.

She drew up a chair and began looking for basic shapes, the way I had taught her. Drawing the tips was easy, a few curvy angles. Some squares for the mulch. Then, she sat quiet and kept looking at the



Stella and Sam Rutledge by Ivy Rutledge

ground; minutes passed, and she drew small hairs on the tips. I compared her picture to the ground, and sure enough—round, hairy pointy hosta tips were poking through the ground. Then, I dictated to her, and she labeled the page with the date and the word “hosta.”

Stella was pretty good about obeying all of the field journal rules, but as the months of spring and summer marched on she began to cast the book aside when she wanted to “draw whatever I want.” I continued to encourage her toward “appropriate” subjects that coincided with our science lessons. Her drawings of trees, flowers and snails turned into “school draw-

ing,” but in her free time she drew her sunny landscapes and flowery meadows. With the addition of each picture in the field journal, I was glad to see a variety of subjects, an improvement in her handwriting, and the addition of various descriptive words. I felt proud of her completion of such a rich assignment, yet I was disappointed that she was not more interested in it.

Then came the picture that changed my outlook. One afternoon, we saw a blue heron at the park. This magnificent, long, sleek bird flew overhead and landed in the pond, completely unnoticed by anyone but us. We immediately wanted to follow him, watch him. Stella grabbed her journal and pencils and we stealthily walked over to the edge of the water. She crouched down, traced his outline in the air with her finger, and then drew her picture.

When we got home, we got out our bird guide and learned about herons and other cranes.

We liked her picture so much we decided to enter it into an Audubon Society contest for children’s drawings of birds. Although she did not win the contest, she was proud of her drawing and loved the attention she got at the reception for local entrants. Time after time, when asked about her drawing, she would point to her picture on the wall and tell folks that she drew the heron in the water, that she snuck up and stayed very quiet.

There were other wonderful and skillful pictures, but for us, nothing matched the experience and wonder of seeing that particular bird on that particular day. And Stella will always have a page in her journal to remember the experience.

It was at that point I realized the true potential of her field journal. I began to view her as a nature explorer, a real scientist. Children love things that are real. They like to feel like real scientists, real writers and draw real pictures in real books. They like to truly *own* their work, from the idea stage to the finished product. I bought her a new field journal, a pretty one with faint lines for writing, inspirational quotes and a sec-

tion that gives tips for drawing and identifying natural subjects. I found her favorite flowered backpack, and filled it with real tools for exploring and examining: a magnifying glass, tweezers, bags for collecting specimens, and a tape measure. This was a field bag for the artist and scientist in her, not for me at all.

Exploring the yard became one of her favorite things to do. Stella would discover something out in the yard and say, "Hey, Mommy, come look at this!" prompting me to ask her, "Would you like me to go get your field journal so you can draw it?" Whenever she responds with an eager, "Yeah!" I feel like I have rediscovered why we are homeschooling. Slowly, the dynamic is changing, and more and more she goes to get her field bag herself. When we go for a walk in the woods she always brings it with her so she can examine leaves and rocks, collect berries and draw trees.

Now that my three-year-old son Sam is putting crayon to paper, he too has a field journal. His is a small, red memo book, and he keeps his field journal in a vinyl lunch bag, with a zippered hard compartment where he keeps his crayons. On top is his field journal, magnifying glass along with a matchbox car and rubber ball. He was right there with Stella, exploring and checking out the odd stinkhorn fungus we found in the woods, searching for an orange crayon, pinching his nose and poking at the fascinating-yet-repulsive specimen so she could measure it. Sam showed off his orange and green scribbles proudly without letting go of his nose, while Stella asked how to spell "fungus." It was interesting to watch two unique drawings emerge from the shared experience.

Our homeschooling journey has taken us to a place we never could have planned. Each day that unfolds brings us new insight into the patterns of the world and human interaction. What started as a quest for that common educational goal, a body of knowledge, has become something much richer. Over the past year, Stella has drawn dozens of pictures in her field journal. Sam has a growing book, and I think I'll find one for me too. Each page holds more than just a picture, but a memory of a moment in time, experiencing nature with unbridled curiosity.