

# Living Education

An Oak Meadow Publication



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LOVE

## Reimagining

### **In this issue:**

Co-Creating Kindergarten

Mud!

Resource Roundup

Making Peace with Zoom



# Welcome!

I am a big fan of finding the silver lining in any situation. Even in the midst of a pandemic, I found myself noticing silver linings everywhere, beautiful grace notes amid the cacophony of trauma. The past year has shown us how resilient, perseverant, and resourceful people can be when things go awry.

We have all had to reinvent and reimagine so many aspects of daily life. We've coped. We've strived. We've laughed and cried. We've faced unexpected changes with creativity and heart. And mostly, we've figured it out.

That's what this issue celebrates: the human spirit and its indomitable quest to thrive.

Happy reading!



DeeDee Hughes

Editor





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# When the Doors Close

By Elizabeth Brown

You've heard it a million times before. When one door closes . . . But what happens when virtually all of them close? Museums, art and music classes, gymnastics. Almost every outlet that gets our homeschool kids out with friends, enriches their core curriculum, and gives their teachers a break is closed. It's hard to see the metaphor work when we've lived through this exhausting and heartbreaking pandemic.

But what if you could find a way to see it as an invitation?

As I sat snuggled up with both kids reading aloud one morning in October, I felt exhausted and overwhelmed by the never-ending "no's" that were piling up in response to many of the things we love to do as an expansion of our homeschool days. Then, my daughter looked at me and said, "Hey Mom, want to build an ant farm?" What a simple question and a simple solution to a problem that has felt huge for months. An invitation to walk right into our backyard and experience the wonder of nature, the science of tiny creatures, and an incredible team that works together to build a masterpiece. We spent hours observing, researching, and learning about ants. And it was beautiful.



A year ago, I can't promise I would have spent hours on ants. There was a schedule. I'm flexible, but the calendar was still full of planned activities, playdates, and errands outside of our dedicated school hours. When the calendar gets wiped clean, it can be refreshing but overwhelming. I was struggling to see any light at the end of the tunnel for "all the fun things" until my daughter asked about ants. Her question felt like an invitation to learn from my children this year more than ever. I've always wanted to encourage their sense of wonder, but it was a controlled filling of their buckets by me. A constant study on how to help them keep interested, stay wild, grow kind, and gain knowledge. As we slowed our minds, bodies, and souls down enough to observe these tiny creatures in our backyard, I could see how much wonder flows freely from an 8-year-old girl and a 7-year-old boy.

This year, I'm not going to get in their way. I'll simply join their adventure.

As we moved through fall and into winter, there's been a wonderful peace about what is and what isn't. We've hiked almost every trail within 20 miles of our home. We've read more books than we can count. We've had math lessons around cooking dinner and baking desserts. We've raised chickens in our backyard and studied every change as they grow and begin to lay eggs. The kids decided people need a break this year and started their own business of making weeknight dinners and doing doorstep deliveries.

I've embraced learning from my children, and I can feel the wonder grow stronger in me every day. I'm crawling through the forest floor to their makeshift shelter with them. I'm helping them name every squirrel that inhabits our backyard and imagining their life stories together, like where Fred and Wilma met and why they chose to live in the Brown's backyard. We've handwritten letters to family and friends because snail mail can feel like a hug from the people you can't see right now.

Of course, not everything is rosy. But it isn't really supposed to be, right? It's okay for life to teach us lessons on disappointment, sadness, and anger. This has been a time of turmoil across the globe, but from turmoil comes grit, a quality I hope my children carry through their lives.

It's really something to take time to sit with your feelings and not always try to fix them. This is another lesson my children have taught me: maybe rushing to solve the disappointment or

creating a directed activity to distract from sadness isn't what we need. Saying, "I'm sad I can't be in my gymnastics class this year, and it just makes me want to cry a lot" doesn't mean anything is inherently wrong and must be fixed in order to preserve our children's psychological well being. It's the truth of the experience, the vulnerability of the feeling. When this happens, my daughter can cry, let sadness have a space in her heart for a bit, and choose to move forward and into something else when she feels ready. I'm grateful she can experience challenging emotions with room to breathe while she's still living in our home, where she is safe to develop resilience, grace, and grit from these and choose to move on in a healthy way.

Like starting an ant farm.

So, yes, doors have closed. None of us knows exactly when they may open again. But the wide-open space is there waiting. The space between your lessons, where you used to pencil someone or something in on your calendar, where we were tasking and organizing, running on busy. The space where your children have been waiting for you all along.

Join them on the forest floor. Be their student. Enjoy the ants. 🐜



*Elizabeth Brown is homeschool mom to her two adventurous souls, Isla Oak (8) and Stokes (7), and wife to her best friend, Marshall. As a family, they've grown their backyard into a home-school dream with five chickens, two fun-loving dogs, and a garden. Elizabeth is native to Jacksonville, Florida, where she has taught high school photography and loves to photograph local wildlife. Her photos can be seen online at Oak Marsh Photography. Elizabeth is a pilot, marathon runner, and traveler who is always looking forward to the next adventure ahead, big or small!*



# Phenology and the Art of Paying Attention

By Megan Devine

*"To pay attention, this is our endless and proper work."*

—Mary Oliver

Nature works in rhythms and cycles. We are all part of these rhythms and cycles, but we can easily get out of sync with the natural world. What if, instead, we could expand our awareness and understanding of the natural world?

Reimagining our relationship and connection to nature can boost our well-being, help keep us grounded and balanced, and provide rich opportunities for learning.

## How can I reimagine my connection with nature?

One specific approach is to incorporate the practice of phenology into your homeschooling.

Phenology is the study of seasonal changes and timing of natural events in relation to plant and animal life. Phenology is a science, but it is also a mindfulness practice that is grounding and can offset stress associated with modern culture.

Phenological practices encourage children to observe nature, investigate and reflect upon their surroundings, and make discoveries. Often these practices are experiential and activities can take place outdoors. This gives children opportunities to reap benefits that are associated with direct experiences in nature, such as improved mental, emotional, and physical health and well-being. Research has also shown that through positive experiences in nature, children will develop a strong appreciation and a foundation for environmental stewardship.

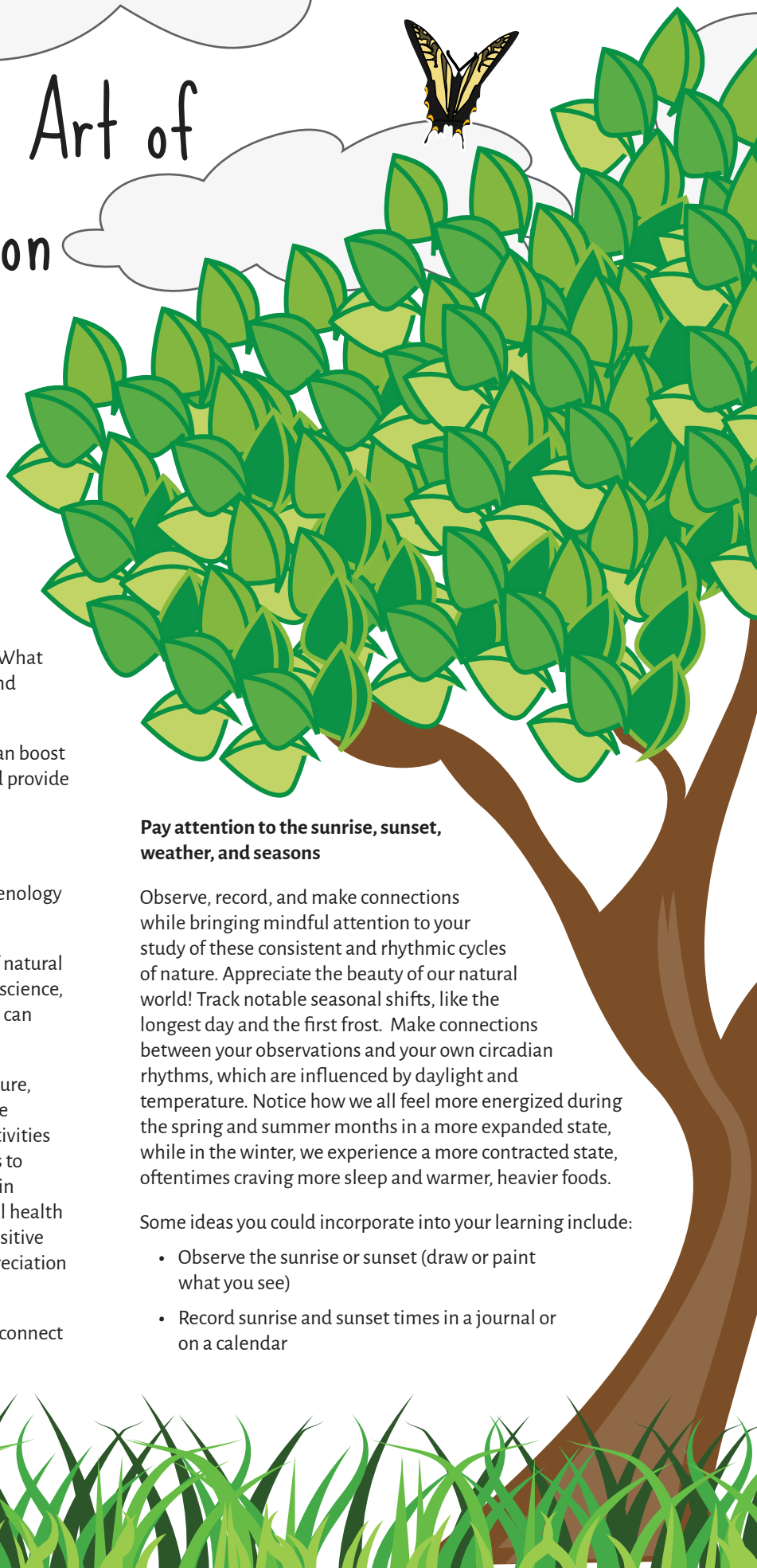
Here are some activities that will help you and your child connect to the rhythms of the natural world.

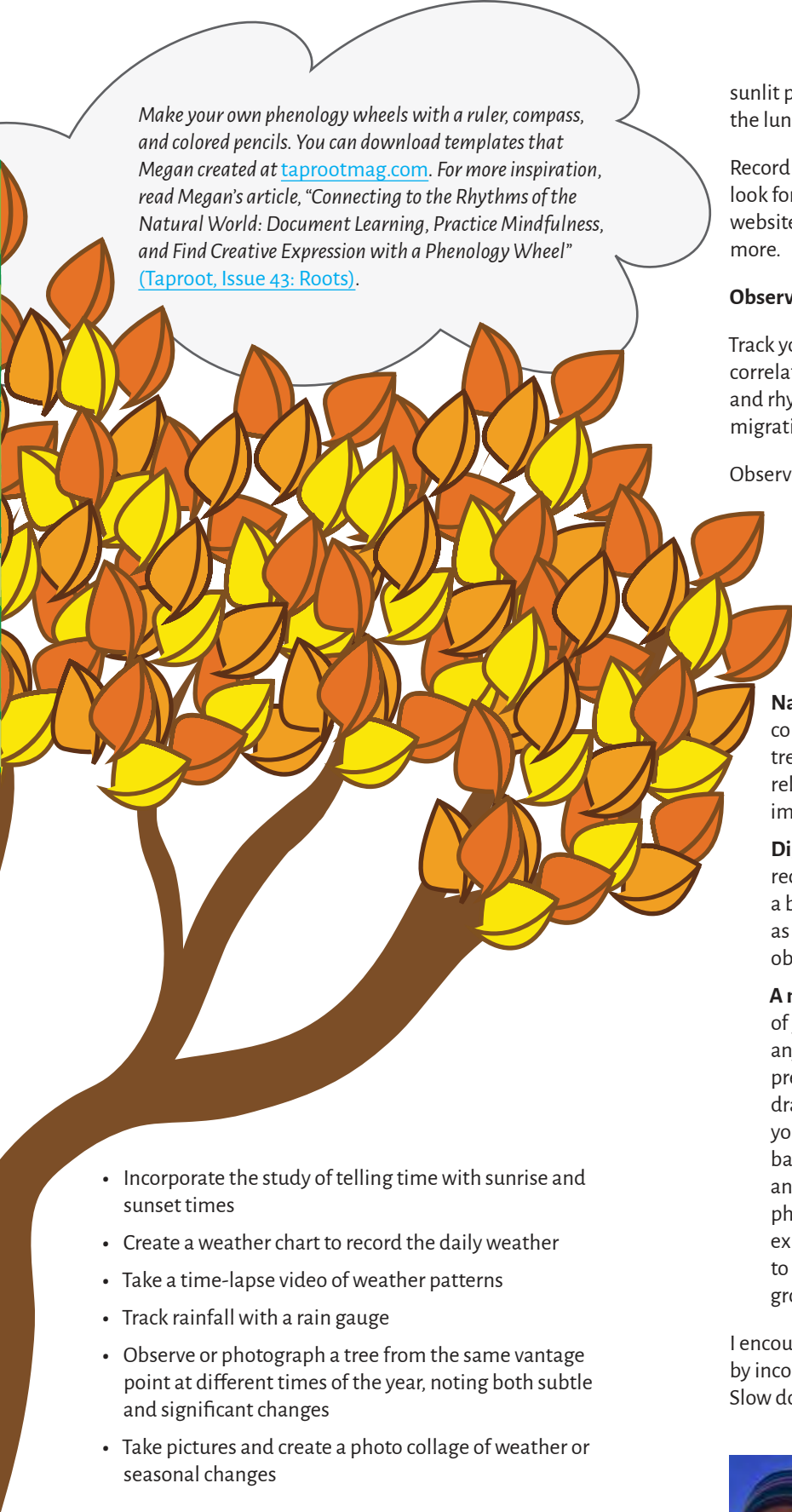
## Pay attention to the sunrise, sunset, weather, and seasons

Observe, record, and make connections while bringing mindful attention to your study of these consistent and rhythmic cycles of nature. Appreciate the beauty of our natural world! Track notable seasonal shifts, like the longest day and the first frost. Make connections between your observations and your own circadian rhythms, which are influenced by daylight and temperature. Notice how we all feel more energized during the spring and summer months in a more expanded state, while in the winter, we experience a more contracted state, oftentimes craving more sleep and warmer, heavier foods.

Some ideas you could incorporate into your learning include:

- Observe the sunrise or sunset (draw or paint what you see)
- Record sunrise and sunset times in a journal or on a calendar





Make your own phenology wheels with a ruler, compass, and colored pencils. You can download templates that Megan created at [taprootmag.com](http://taprootmag.com). For more inspiration, read Megan's article, "Connecting to the Rhythms of the Natural World: Document Learning, Practice Mindfulness, and Find Creative Expression with a Phenology Wheel" ([Taproot, Issue 43: Roots](#)).

- Incorporate the study of telling time with sunrise and sunset times
- Create a weather chart to record the daily weather
- Take a time-lapse video of weather patterns
- Track rainfall with a rain gauge
- Observe or photograph a tree from the same vantage point at different times of the year, noting both subtle and significant changes
- Take pictures and create a photo collage of weather or seasonal changes

### Track lunar cycles

The lunar cycle is the moon's journey around Earth. It takes 27.3 days for the moon to orbit Earth and 29.5 days for the moon to complete a full cycle. During that time, the moon passes through eight phases, identifiable by its changing shape as a result of the

sunlit portion. Begin to notice if there are any correlations with the lunar cycles and your own individual rhythms.

Record the moon cycle on your calendar so you know what to look for. Dive into resources such as *The Old Farmer's Almanac* or websites such as [moongiant.com](http://moongiant.com) or [moonconnection.com](http://moonconnection.com) to learn more.

### Observe animals and plants

Track your observations of plants and animals. These often correlate with seasonal observations but are specific to cyclic and rhythmic patterns, such as animal and plant life cycles and migration patterns.

Observe, track, and record occurrences such as:

- The first drip of sap from a maple tree in the spring.
- Bird and butterfly migration patterns to and from your local area.
- Which plants are blooming at a given time.

**Nature tables** provide a perfect place for children to collect and display artifacts from nature and seasonal treasures. Your nature table can be enhanced with related toy figurines and books that encourage imagination, play, and investigation.

**Digital documentation** is another way to track and record your nature observations. You may want to keep a blog or share images and notes via social media (such as Instagram) as a way to time-stamp your phenological observations and compare them from year to year.

**A nature journal or phenology wheel** is a visual record of your nature observations. A nature journal can be any blank book that you use for sketches, notes, photos, pressed leaves, etc. A phenology wheel is a circular drawing with space for recording and illustrating your observations, activities, and ideas about nature-based events, such as moon cycles, weather patterns, and plant growth. I have found the act of creating a phenology wheel to be both a lovely outlet for creative expression and a mindfulness practice that helps me to stay connected with the natural world, centered and grounded.

I encourage you to make a deeper connection to the natural world by incorporating phenology into your homeschooling journey. Slow down. Breathe. Pay attention. It's worth it. 🌰



Megan Devine is an Oak Meadow teacher, a mama of four, writer, soap-maker, and chicken-tender living in the Northwoods of Minnesota. She is fueled by strong cups of coffee and the passion and desire to teach and learn. Megan has contributed to a variety of publications including *Minnesota Parent*, *Taproot*, and *Highlights High-Five Magazine*. She shares ramblings and snapshots of her life on her blog: *Kids, Lakes, Loons and Pines*.

# Co-Creating Kindergarten

by David Minerva

I never planned to homeschool. I imagined that when my daughter was five, she'd be off to school, to sing songs with friends and learn new things without me. A certain global pandemic, however, had different plans.

When my partner and I realized we would be homeschooling, we asked a friend for curriculum recommendations. Oak Meadow looked like a good fit, and we were excited to get started.

## The Perils of Over-Structuring

I appreciate a schedule, and my daughter is the same way. She benefits from a set bedtime and regular meals and snacks. Once we had our books, I sat down to figure out how to work the lessons into our daily routine. We could do a story in the morning, a morning lesson after a snack, and an afternoon lesson right after lunch! It worked pretty well for a while, but there was a problem.

Without realizing it, we managed to recreate a typical school schedule at home. While our daughter enjoyed the activities, she felt boxed in, and us parents were getting pretty overwhelmed. We needed to loosen up.

## Inspiration from Unschooling

Unschooling philosophy holds that children are natural learners, and formal schooling can squash their curiosity. If we let kids follow their own interests and drive, if we trust them, they'll learn what they need when they need it at their own pace. It appealed to me, especially when I remembered how frustrating school was for me.

While many unschooling families give their children complete free reign, I didn't think that was a good fit for us. I liked the kindergarten curriculum's focus on a good foundation before moving on. More importantly, our daughter was enjoying having us lead the activities, and she enjoyed the structure and reliability.

What we needed was a hybrid.

## Establishing A Rhythm

I needed to establish a rhythm with a lot more freedom. Our coursebook was a good guide, but I also read up on Waldorf homeschooling approaches. This allowed me to narrow things down to what was truly essential.





Every day, we start with circle time and read a story together. Four days a week, we have a morning main lesson block exploring language arts, math, science, and arts and crafts (while acknowledging that these things are always interrelated). Rather than planning what our afternoons will look like and what we “have to” accomplish, for each week I make an optional list of activities, from the coursebook and our lives. Monday through Thursday, each afternoon, she has a parent to help her with the activity of her choice. Some weeks we won’t get to all of them, and that’s ok!

On Fridays, she’s in the driver’s seat, and can choose to work on something from our list, or something completely out of left field. Right now, that means trucks. It’s not what I would choose, but that’s the point.

### Using Main Lessons to Spark Interest, Not Meet Benchmarks

The main lesson block in the morning is often seen as the core academic time, when top-down instruction flows from teacher to student, and it can feel a bit like playing school.

What I’ve learned from working with my own kid, and from talking to homeschooling and unschooling parents I admire, is that the key is for main lesson time to be an opportunity. It’s not about what she has to learn or master—it’s about introducing ideas! After just a few weeks of introducing letters, she was engaging with language in a brand-new way. She started practicing letters independently and experimenting with combining letters to see how words are made.

It’s remarkable to see, but it does require me to step back and give up some control. That isn’t always easy.

### Allowing Kids Freedom to Co-Create Their Education

We’ve all heard “homeschooling allows you the opportunity to tailor education to fit your specific child” one thousand times.

What does it even mean?

It took me some trial and error to sort it out! For us, it means not only paying attention and doing what we as parents think will work best but also making our kid a partner in her educational experience.

We’re doing this in two ways.

First, she gets some choice in what she is learning every single day. Do you need to do something physical today? Do you want to focus on your letters more? Going to the park to look at bugs? The options vary to fit with the season, but there’s plenty of freedom. And on Fridays, the options open up even more.

The second thing is more radical. We have a monthly family meeting, during which we all sit down together and talk about everything, including school time. None of her education just happens to her; she had a hand in and approved the plan. And if it stops working, she’ll have a chance to speak up.

### Integrating Other Activities

When I was seven years old, I took weekly art lessons on Thursday evenings, and I loved them. But to accomplish them, I had to go to school all day, come home, and have a rushed dinner before being hurried out the door for the one hour of the week I was excited about. By the time I was there, I was exhausted.

Thankfully, we don’t have to do that. My daughter is in Girl Scouts this year, through the Juliette program, which is essentially the homeschool version of Girl Scouts. Every Wednesday we end our “school time” a little on the early side, have a snack, and then settle in to work on whatever badge she’s decided on. It’s not that different from our “school work,” but the slightly different angle and wider community seems to be helping. She’s also studying French, and that can take place during the “school day” or at any time.

### Kindergarten and Beyond

Little kids may seem like they aren’t ready to make decisions about their educational journey, but I think with guidance and involved caregivers, most can be.

I found it easy to replicate rigid classroom patterns at home, and I can’t be the only one with this problem. The good news is we don’t have to choose between a completely freewheeling approach and an uptight micro-scheduled one! We can give our kids freedom and autonomy, foster their love of learning, and give them the chance to grow their confidence, while also providing a bit of structure. I can present ideas and concepts to my child, and then see what she does with them!

Next year, this may all look different, and that has to be ok. But for now, I’m enjoying kindergarten. 🍌



*David Minerva Clover is an artist, freelance writer, and full-time parent. You can find his writing in The Washington Post, The Huffington Post, Parents, and other fine publications on the internet. His interests include gardening and farming, history, and dinosaurs. He lives in Michigan with his partner, child, and a long list of wonderful animals.*

# Earth Cycles



# mud!

Spring is a great time to muck about in the mud! So many possibilities! You and your children might not need any further inspiration than a mud puddle and a stick, but for those who might feel a little stuck (in the mud!), here are some creative ideas from Oak Meadow teachers and staff. Dig in and enjoy yourself!

**Make mud pies.** Find some tin pans or other containers that children can use outside. If there is mud around, let the children have an opportunity to use the natural source. If not, provide some dirt and water. Make sure to dress children in proper clothing and not worry about the mess. Try to be ready for the dirt, and have a system in place for an easy change once they have finished their mud play.

**Make a mud world.** Add moss to mud and model animals, people, and other shapes. Create a whole world for your mud people and animals!

**Make mud prints.** Press pinecones, pine boughs, sticks, rocks, nuts, and other objects into mud and gently pull them free to see the print left behind.

**Make mud art.** Artist Richard Long became famous by creating art using mud. Try making a mud design on paper or use your body as a canvas!



*River Avon Mud Painting, 2000, by Richard Long*





Mud play is not just for toddlers—teenagers (and adults) can have fun on mud runs! Sometimes we just have to embrace the mess, even if it means a bit more dirty laundry! Here, Zoe, daughter of K-8 teacher Megan Devine, embraces the mud during a fall cross country running race.

“At the Hartsbrook School in Hadley, Massachusetts, the preschool/kindergarten have a “Rushing River,” which is a hillside of mud with a “river” that runs down it. The “river” is a hose at the top of the hill that is turned on for a brief time to create lots of mud and gives the kids a chance to make dams, create mud cakes and pies, and to divert the stream into other tributaries. It’s fun to watch them rush to the Rushing River when the teacher turns on the hose!

Creating any “hill” by shoveling heaps of dirt, and then running water down it in a stream is great fun and it makes a good river and good mud!”

“I have vivid childhood memories of the small stream that ran through our backyard. It always had water in it, but after a rainstorm it seemed especially impressive to me. I would spend hours building mud dams, knocking them down, cleaning leaves out of the waterway and discovering the creatures that lived among the leaves, observing waterfalls, and making leaf boats to tumble over those waterfalls and see how far I could get them to go.”

“My girls, who are now 26 and 28, still remember fondly one of their favorite childhood activities, which was to make Muck Stew. The recipe was flexible, the fun immeasurable. Start with a bucket of mud and water. Add small pinecones, pine needles, random berries, leaves, small twigs, seeds, flower petals—whatever you have in your outdoor pantry. Stir well and serve to your parents, family pets, and various stuffed animals. This ensured hours of fun and endless laughter.”

“When my kids were little, we often went to my in-laws beach on the east side of Schroon Lake. There was a spring that ran under the road, down the bank, flowed across their beach and into the lake. It created a permanent deep puddle on the beach that was constantly getting filled from the flow. My girls would play in the thick mud at the bottom of the puddle. At some point, they started scooping big lumps of it out. They figured out that if they let it dry a little, they could kind of shape it. Soon they found that if they threw handfuls onto the big rocks, the resulting mud would get smoother and their shapes got nicer looking. Eventually they had a whole line up of little cups, bowls, animal figures all spread out on the rocks drying. Every time we went to the beach, they added to their collection.

A geologist friend checked out some maps and told me that although there’s not a lot of clay in the Adirondacks, one of the small veins actually runs right down the east side of Schroon Lake. We realized that the girls had stumbled upon old techniques for harvesting clay and working out the impurities. I am still in awe of the imaginations of my two girls and how they figured out how to become little potters on their grandparent’s beach!”





# Resource Roundup



by Erin Shelby

**D**o you need to reinvent your homeschooling? Maybe you're tired, burned out, and drained. Isn't home learning supposed to be more than reading and worksheets? Or perhaps you've got the basics mastered, but you need new inspiration. Don't worry: help is on the way! Homeschooling is a community, and you are not alone. You can reinvent what isn't working and find a better rhythm. This resource roundup has some ideas that could work for you.

## Art and music

If you live in the Cleveland, Ohio, area, you probably know that [The Cleveland Museum of Art](#) is free to visit in person. Here's something even better: their collection of art is free to access online. In addition to being able to browse the collection, you can also check their calendar for upcoming events you can participate in from the comfort of home. Past events are also available on the site to view. Want to take something old and make it new? Use the [Open Access tool](#) to take a piece of art that's in the public domain and put your own spin on it.

Have an aspiring artist in your home? Did you know that there are free lessons available from the Guggenheim Museum? The "Sketch With Jeff" series features Jeff Hopkins, a teaching artist at the museum. You can start with [episode 1](#), the sketch a spiral challenge, or start at [episode 5](#) with the challenge to invent a new animal. If you're ready for something more challenging, you can skip ahead to [episode 64](#) to learn about making symmetrical works of art.

When it comes to finding help with teaching music, choices abound. Here are just a few:

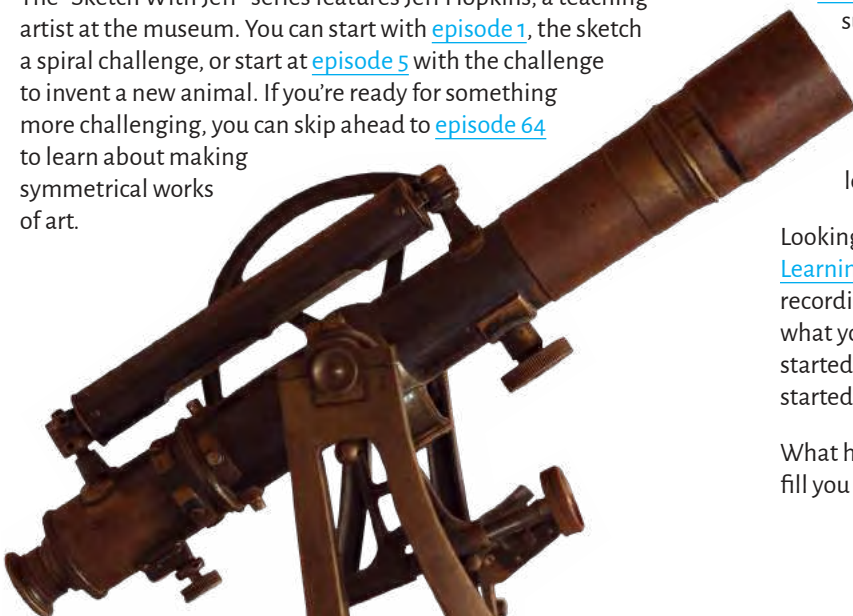
- [The Cleveland Orchestra](#) has free videos and lesson plans [here](#). You can even print out coloring book pages and an instrument family chart!
- Omaha Symphony in Omaha, Nebraska, offers free music education. In the [Virtual Classroom](#), you can access free lesson packets and watch tutorials from professional musicians.
- Learn how to make your own instruments courtesy of the Nashville Symphony. Conductor Enrico Lopez-Yañez shows you [how to make a ukulele, rainstick, kazoo, maracas](#), and more.
- Watch concerts for free: London Symphony Orchestra plays online, and you can watch. You can subscribe to get notifications directly from their channel, or just visit [this page](#).

## History

The Holocaust is a dark part of human history. The [United States Holocaust Memorial Museum](#) works to make sure that the survivors and victims are never forgotten. You can take a [virtual field trip](#) to the museum and check their [events calendar](#) for more information. Although a "ticket" may be required for a virtual event, admission may still be free, depending on the event. Online exhibitions, online lectures, and more are available [here](#).

Looking for a way to dive into historical artifacts? The [Smithsonian Learning Lab](#) lets you do just that! You can search images, videos, recordings, and more to create collections of your own based on what you've searched. You'll need to create a free account to get started, and there's a page that gives you [The Basics](#) on how to get started.

What happened on this day in history? Let [Encyclopedia Britannica](#) fill you in! While you can always pay for a membership, there's







plenty of free stuff at [Britannica.com](https://www.britannica.com). You might be interested in the crossword puzzles, word searches, and quizzes. These games are a fun way to keep boredom away. You can also search Britannica's site or browse by subject. Plus, Britannica isn't just limited to history. There's geography, anatomy, entertainment, and philosophy content on the site, too.

### Science, technology, engineering, and math

Want to look at the stars? [Orlando Science Center](https://www.orlando-science-center.org) boasts the claim of having Florida's largest publicly accessible refractor telescope. While it might not be possible or practical for you to visit in person, you can always get a telescope and do your own stargazing at home. Then, check out their free magazine, *Scope*, or their blog for more fun ideas. Some of their past posts have included how to demonstrate static electricity, what to do with leftover Halloween candy, and how to make paint out of baking soda. You can check out their blog [here](#).

Boston Children's Museum offers free resources for fun at-home learning. Here's what's available for free as of this writing:

- A 48-page [Tinker Kit Educators Guide](#) is free and available in English and Spanish. This is designed to encourage play and has specific learning outcomes in mind.
- 24 pages of [Tinker Kit Activity Sheets](#) are also available to download.
- The [STEM Sprouts Guide](#) is geared specifically towards three- to five-year-olds and includes a proposed daily schedule for science, technology, engineering and math.

### Language arts

Do you like poetry? Do you love poetry? Either way, it could grow on you a little more with [Poetry 180](https://www.poetry180.com). A traditional school year is 180 days, so Poetry 180 provides 180 poems, one for every day of the school year. The idea is to have a poem to enjoy every day so poetry can become part of your everyday life. The Poetry 180 website also provides audio recordings, discussions of poems, and

an archive with works dating back to 1943. In this archive, you can find recordings where poets read their own work.

Are you looking for more books to include in your curriculum? [Project Gutenberg](https://www.gutenberg.org) could be your answer. This free site is loaded with over 60,000 free digital books. Many of these are on the older side, and their copyright has expired, making them available to the public for free. You can check out the [Top 100](#) frequently viewed or downloaded books—it's a roll call of popular authors, including Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Mary Shelley, Lewis Carroll, Ayn Rand, Mark Twain, Oscar Wilde, Frank Baum, Leo Tolstoy, Henry David Thoreau, and many more.

### College courses for free

Did you know college courses are available online? While you can't get a college degree for free, you can audit courses for free from Harvard University. If you find something interesting, give it a try. This could be great for a parent and teen to do together. Browse free online courses from Harvard University [here](#). Or check out Yale's most popular course ever, [The Science of Well-Being](#).

### All grades

Are you struggling with a certain subject or a certain grade level? If you need a lifeline, you're in luck. You can visit [PBS online](https://www.pbs.org/online) and browse a variety of subjects and grade levels. There's help with preschool, social studies, the arts, math, science, social studies, world languages, and more. You can sort by grade level or subject matter. 🐼



*Erin Shelby has previously written for Living Education. She has been a guest blogger for Medishare.com and Shine-A-Light Press. You can visit Erin online at [erinshelby.wordpress.com](https://erinshelby.wordpress.com).*

# Dreams, Plans, Lemonade

By Erin Bouchard



We had dreams. We had plans. Our son was to begin kindergarten, which he was most excited about. We were going to move across the country to be closer to family. I was going to work outside the home again. We were looking forward to buying a house with some land where we could build our very own garden. Well, 2020 was not the year our dreams were going to come true.

It is said that when life hands you lemons, make lemonade. After coming to terms with preschool abruptly ending in-person classes, job opportunities outside of the home possibly not being safe, and moving during a pandemic not being ideal, we had to figure out how to make the best of the situation. I am in awe of my colleagues, my family and friends, my place of worship, and so many companies and organizations that made lemonade out of 2020's lemons.

Not to say that there weren't hiccups or failed situations, but from people staying home, to grocery stores putting precautions in place, to telehealth becoming common, to houses of worship going fully online to provide their members spiritual community, to teachers going above and beyond to meet their students' needs behind a computer screen, we have seen so many ways in which people have reimagined how to reach each other when they can't actually touch them.

I don't want to minimize the extremely difficult times. The past year brought pain, stress, and unexpected trauma into many peoples' lives, including my own. Logistics, finances, communication, jobs, education, and self-care had to be reimagined in order for my family to survive and thrive.

## Unexpected homeschoolers

As an educator and as someone who enjoys working, I had never imagined myself homeschooling my son. I thought school was an important place for him socially, as well as academically. I had considered different types of school options, but never for him to learn from home. He loved his preschool class and teachers, and

it was a no-brainer that he'd go to kindergarten. As it turned out, after all options were considered, we felt it was best for me to work remotely and to homeschool him.

He was an early reader with an insatiable appetite for learning all kinds of things. I soon found out that juggling work and his learning (whether through play or more structured activity), along with daily life and household duties, was overwhelming. In fact, it wasn't working. I had thought that he'd want to "work" while I was working, but he didn't, and a power struggle ensued. I had to reimagine our reimagined plan.

## Unschooling solution

Surprisingly, the solution appeared on its own. I didn't want to stress him out about what he "needed" to learn, and I didn't want to be stressed out about it. So, we adopted an unschooling curriculum. If someone had asked me a year ago if I'd be unschooling my son, I would have scoffed at them. No way, no how! However, it has been the best decision.

We found that, rather than forcing him to work in booklets that teach math and other subjects, he was more interested in learning things that came up in his books. History, geography, astronomy, zoology, and paleontology are subjects that are quite popular in our house right now. We found several book series that he loves, including Magic Treehouse by Mary Pope Osborne and the Amelia Bedelia chapter books by Herman Parish.

When there's a topic to which he gravitates, we run with it. He was gifted several magazine subscriptions—*National Geographic Little Kids*, *Highlights High Five*, and *Highlights Which Way USA*—that allow him to read about all kinds of things and to do puzzles and other fun activities that aid in his learning. For the holidays, his grandmother got him Mad Libs, which was perfect because it combined his love for reading and all things silly. It was also an opportunity to teach him parts of speech and for him to get writing practice.





### Authentic connections

There's an ebb and flow to his desire to learn certain things. He went months without opening a *Which Way USA* magazine, but then one day he woke up and dove in all on his own, which was followed by a week of consistent work with them. I throw in some fun math activities using pennies and other coins, and I teach about shapes when he plays with his Magna-Tiles. All this learning gets supported by our activities and experiences in the wider world outside the home; when he makes connections between what he's learning and what he sees at the zoo or on a hike or in the night sky, his excitement is palpable.

While this is great for now, I don't know what this year will bring. However, I do know that re-imagining will likely be necessary. Perhaps, we will need to rethink his schooling come fall. Something I've come to accept in all of this is that I don't have to know right now what life is going to look like six months or a year from now. All I can do is work with what I have and what I know now, and then make the best decision I can.

### Appreciating the journey

While I've been told time and again, 2020 made me finally recognize that it is the journey that matters, and that sometimes our dreams and plans need to be pushed back or completely changed. Further, some of the most unexpected things can happen when your plans don't work out like you had imagined the first time or, even, the second time.

We all have dreams and plans. We tend to assume that things will go on as they have. Yet, we all get handed lemons at some point. We don't actually know what's ahead for us. That is a scary realization for me, as I like planning and knowing what to expect. Lemonade is lemons reimagined. Rethinking how our son was to be a productive learner and a happy, well-adjusted child during this time grounded me in a way that I didn't expect. Seeing the world through his eyes and learning things right along with him taught me a bigger lesson about life. And for that, I'm truly grateful. Good thing I like lemonade. 🍋



*Erin Bouchard loves learning, teaching, and telling stories. After many years of teaching students of all ages and in many subjects, Erin and her family moved to Colorado, where she decided to become a stay-at-home-mom to her young son. Their home/unschooling explorations have delighted her beyond her wildest imagination. Erin enjoys hiking, watching movies, and eating yummy vegan food.*

(originally published in *Living Education* Nov/Dec 1994)

# The Heart of Education

By Lawrence Williams, Ed. D.

Learning is a subtle and fascinating process, and one of the most intriguing aspects of the learning process is the effect that other people have upon our ability to learn. When I was in the first grade at John Marshall Elementary School, I had a teacher I'll never forget. Mrs. Jeffries was an older teacher (of course, all teachers were old to me at that time), and she was a wonderful introduction to the world of education.

The thing I remember most about Mrs. Jeffries was how quickly I learned while I was in her presence. It wasn't that she taught in any special way, or that she had any spiffy high-tech learning materials. After all, this was 1952, and lined paper and #2 pencils were about as high-tech as it got. What made me learn so well was the way it felt to be around her. I don't remember her physical appearance; I couldn't tell you what color eyes she had, what kind of clothes she wore, or even what her face looked like.

All I can really remember is how she felt. Warm. Loving. Accepting. When I was around her, I felt secure and appreciated. I could relax and be myself.

Another interesting thing was the spacious feeling in her classroom. As I think about it, the spaciousness I felt must have been more psychological than physical, because her room was just a regular classroom with about twenty-five desks arranged in rows. Perhaps that space came from the love and acceptance she spread liberally around the room. Whatever the source may have been, it brought clarity to my mind, and I could learn things easily.

But even though she was loving and accepting, she wasn't a pushover—not by a long shot. I remember when Danny Littman threw a spitball at the girl in the front row and it missed and hit Mrs. Jeffries. (Danny never was a very good shot . . .) Mrs. Jeffries didn't get excited, scream, or threaten. She just stopped what she was doing, looked him straight in the eye for a good three seconds (which is a long time when you're six years old and your short, brilliant career is hanging in the balance), then she said firmly, "Danny, I don't ever want to see that again." And she didn't.

We never found out what would happen if she did see such things again, but we never wanted to find out. In a way, I guess it was a threat, but it was a threat we could appreciate. When she was happy and we were busy learning, the sun was shining, and it felt like a clear, warm, spring day. Nobody wanted to bring in the clouds and the rain and spoil the picnic.

In the fourth grade, I met the clouds and the rain—as well as the thunder and lightning. I transferred to another school, and my teacher was Mrs. M. One interesting fact about memory is that the presence of a strong emotion—either pleasant or unpleasant—at the time an event initially occurs strengthens the memory for that event. This is why we remember isolated events from years ago, while we forget something that happened yesterday. I can remember Mrs. Jeffries because she had so many pleasant emotions connected with her. I can remember Mrs. M because I had so many unpleasant emotions associated with her.

Mrs. M was not a happy person. As a result, she made a whole class of fourth graders unhappy. I struggled to learn that year, and everything I learned came slowly and with great difficulty. If Mrs. Jeffries was the sun on a warm spring day, Mrs. M was a bitter freeze in the depths of winter. I don't know why she was so unhappy, I only knew that when I was around her I felt unloved, unappreciated, and stupid.

With Mrs. Jeffries, I felt free to make mistakes, so I learned quickly. With Mrs. M, I was afraid of making mistakes, so I became frozen with fear. I started stuttering and became afraid to speak out in class when she called on me. Then she would criticize me for not speaking out, and that made me angry and frustrated. I started drawing ugly pictures of her and passing them around the class. When she caught me, she threatened to call my parents and tell them how mean I was. I became angrier.





The other interesting thing was the sense of space. The sense of spaciousness I enjoyed with Mrs. Jeffries was replaced with a dungeon. With Mrs. M, the room always felt small and cramped. There was a feeling of pressure in the air, as if a big thunderstorm was about to happen. And it usually did. Somehow, I made it through the year, learned a few things, and continued my education.

My purpose is not to condemn Mrs. M or nominate Mrs. Jeffries for sainthood. Over the years, I've learned that we all have good years and bad years, and I can't judge either of these human beings based upon what I experienced in one short year of their lives. I prefer to view them as symbols and as examples from which we can learn more about children and the learning process.

We all have Mrs. Jeffries and Mrs. M within us, and each day they compete for our attention. Which of these teachers we choose to express can make a big difference in the way our children respond to us and the easy way with which they learn.

The longer I live and the more children I teach, the more I am certain that love is the heart of education. Books, maps, pencils, and paper provide the necessary fuel, but love is the spark that lights the fire. Love for what our children are, love for what they can be, and love for the very process of learning itself dissolves the walls that surround us and brings sunlight into our homes and into our children's hearts. In that sunlight of a warm spring day, they begin to show us who they really are, and we discover more of who we really are. 🍄



*Lawrence Williams co-founded Oak Meadow in 1975, along with his wife Bonnie, in order to homeschool their own children. Since then, Oak Meadow's curriculum and distance learning school have helped families around the world create successful homeschooling experiences.*



Dear Families New to Home Learning,

We all know this year has been pretty crazy, and it's caused everyone's lifestyle to change at least a little bit. For millions of families, going to school in person is no longer an option, and they are trying to figure out how to transition and be successful learning from home. As a student who has homeschooled my entire life, I'd say I have quite a bit of experience in this field. So, for anyone who would like some tips, I'm here to offer ideas to parents and students who are new to home learning. I hope you find the following helpful!

## WORK SPACES

First, it's important to have a good space for doing schoolwork. A good space requires enough light, a table or desk that is large enough to spread out your work without feeling too cramped, and a good location in your home that will support learning.

There are multiple factors to consider when deciding upon the best location for a schoolwork space in your home. Of course, the lighting and furniture selection are both very important because students (at least ones in middle to higher grades) can spend a lot of their time working at a desk.

Proximity between home teachers (parents) and students (children) is also very important. When new to home learning—especially if the student is young—they may need frequent parental support. In addition, for many students accustomed to classroom learning with their student peers beside them, learning from home may feel strange and lonely to the point of distraction. This is why having parents' workspaces and children's school spaces close by can be helpful.



At the same time, the needs of everyone in the household must be balanced. Be mindful about choosing a place that is not isolated but also one that doesn't pose too many distractions. Distraction might mean something different to each individual person. Phone or Zoom calls from either the parent or student can be disruptive to the other's work at times. If the student or another household member must be on a video call, make sure there are established places where others in the household won't be seen in the background, accidentally caught on camera.

## ROUTINES

I will be the first to say I thoroughly enjoy the freedom that homeschooling gives me as far as routine. It's not uncommon for me to sleep in late (yes, yes, typical teen, I know) or totally change my school schedule around. At the same time, I try to keep to a general routine or rhythm most weeks by staying mindful of a few anchors:

- I make sure to get dressed and ready for the day (even if the time I do this by varies a little).
- I plan out my school assignments each week on Sunday or Monday.
- I make sure to spend some time every day being active in some way.
- I also try to reserve some time for myself to relax by reading, creating art, watching TV, cooking for fun, etc.

These routines help keep me grounded and feeling like there's something normal in the world.



## COMMUNITY

Feeling like you're a part of a community is extra tricky during a pandemic, but this is important. Speaking from personal experience, I did pre-professional ballet for many years and felt a strong sense of community through that. When I quit ballet, it was hard for me to adjust to not having that community of people my age but, in time, I discovered that not doing ballet so many hours each week allowed me to make new connections and participate more actively in communities I had previously not had much time for. For example, I love being a part of the Oak Meadow community and having the time to enjoy being more involved with other students. We have email "homeroom" groups, Hangouts chats, pen-pal programs, as well as student-organized social calls. I've made several lovely friends through all those.

I think it's important to nurture connections within your own home as a family. Keeping in touch with friends via video calls, instant messaging, and of course snail mail are great ways to stay connected with friends and family you don't live with.

## FIND THE JOY!

My last tip is to find your favorite parts of home learning and build upon those. Allow your students the freedom to dive deeper into their personal interests and passions. It's certainly one of my favorite aspects of home learning and what really has helped me find a lot of joy in learning in general.



Find little traditions or favorite parts of your day and make sure to nurture these types of things to make what's not your favorite more pleasurable. Perhaps you ease into your day with a cup of tea and soothing music. Or maybe you have a special snack or treat one afternoon per week to shake up what would otherwise be a typical day.

Maybe every Wednesday is game day, and you can practice some math or expand your vocabulary by making a game selection that will challenge you to do something like this. In my family, some of us enjoy using special pens, which makes the task of taking notes less of a chore. Whatever you believe could elevate your day-to-day routine experience, try it!

Find the joy in as many little things each day as you possibly can, and keep looking for the joy no matter what life brings.

Best wishes,

Jillian



*Jillian Bauer is an Oak Meadow junior. She has never attended school and loves how learning from home offers flexibility for her as a student and person. It also allows her to spend a lot of time with family, as well as time devoted to exploring interests, cultivating creativity, and developing a variety of skills. Jillian enjoys reading, writing, painting, cooking, and baking. She has a passion for animals, the environment, sustainable and mindful living. Jillian speaks fluent feline and can't remember the last time she was bored.*

# Making Peace with Zoom

By E.R. Zarevich





I have a student who changes his Zoom background every time he logs in for class. The enthusiasm once reserved for showering praise on the crayon drawings my students made for me has now been redirected to this.

"Wow, is that Ancient Egypt?! So cool! This is your best background yet, buddy!"

This typically would be followed by an excited explanation from my student about which god is in the picture because he's going through the same Ancient Egypt-mania we all went through when we were kids. And I think to myself, "It's almost the same."

But it's not.

I consider myself lucky that with my teaching job I have the option of working from home. I'm not faced with the anxieties and tedium of having to sterilize every square inch of my teaching space after every class, because it's my own bedroom. It works, but it's not really a classroom. The walls aren't painted with bright colours. The students' artwork isn't on display. There are no shelves conveniently stocked with supplies. There are no clusters of little kids giggling, and no other teachers or even a receptionist to chat with. It's just me, my limited resources, and my dresser with the broken handle my students can see behind me. It's just . . . not the same.

My first experience with Zoom was a finicky one. This was way back in February 2020, when the pandemic was just starting to creep into our lives. The father of one of my students had just returned from a business trip in China, and the whole family was responsibly quarantining for two weeks. We decided to hold our class with Zoom, which I'd never used before, had received no training for, and regarded with the reluctance of a nervous preteen being dragged by their friends onto a roller coaster that goes upside down. I was tall enough, but oh my goodness, I wasn't ready. But the seatbelts were on and the roller coaster was already moving forwards, with my panicking self strapped in against my will.

I know that sounds dramatic, but I really did feel like someone had marched into my classroom, swiped all my materials off the table with their arm, and plonked down a laptop, my only instructions being, "Deal with it."

Zoom, those first few times, was a nightmare.

I messed up everything. When I had to share my screen, I shared the wrong tab. In the chat box, I would send the message to the wrong student. On the Zoom whiteboard, playing around with the functions, I just barely managed to create something that sort of resembled the brainstorming bubbles my students and I used to create in the actual classroom.

I reminded myself, "This isn't permanent; this will be over soon," and pressed on.

Then full lockdown went into effect. Luckily, I wasn't laid off, but I was sent home to work with Zoom only. That's when Zoom became my detested roommate, upgrading gradually into a visiting cousin that I could tolerate because they were occasionally amusing.

The ongoing mishaps on Zoom with my students became a joke. I learned to say "Uh oh, it's a technical difficulty" in a funny voice to make my eight-year-olds laugh. With my older students, every malfunction on Zoom was a puzzle to solve, a problem to work around. "Okay, let's try doing this instead . . ." I learned (well, honestly, I am still learning) not to panic when something goes wrong, and so are they. I am proud of them for it, and I am proud of myself. We are coping. We are making peace with Zoom.

For teachers working from home and parents whose children are doing online learning at home, here is some advice:

- Don't take Zoom too seriously. Let your kids have that Ancient Egypt background, or the field of poppies, or the planet Mars, if it makes them happy.
- If you're a teacher who frequently has to share your screen, don't have too many tabs open, and use website pages that aren't littered with distracting ads.
- Look for sites with free reading comprehensions—my personal favourite is ReadingVine—and be patient with students who are still in the process of becoming tech savvy.
- Parents supervising kids online, this applies to you too. Be patient with your child if they're still learning how to type. Most likely they're using the chat box feature in Zoom to respond to teachers, and if they've only just learned to print neatly, chances are they're not typing at lightning speed just yet. So, every day, have them practice typing something on Microsoft Word or Google Docs. A little story, perhaps, or a paragraph on a topic they like. Watch their posture in the chair and start timing them when they're more confident. Make it a game with sticker rewards. Make it fun.
- Respect their privacy too. With my students, there are occasions when they don't want to turn on their cameras because they don't want me to see their room. Maybe it's untidy, or maybe there's a sibling wandering about. That's fine with me, as long as their audio's on, and we can communicate smoothly.
- And parents, you don't need to be sitting next to your child the entire time unless they're very young or have special learning needs.

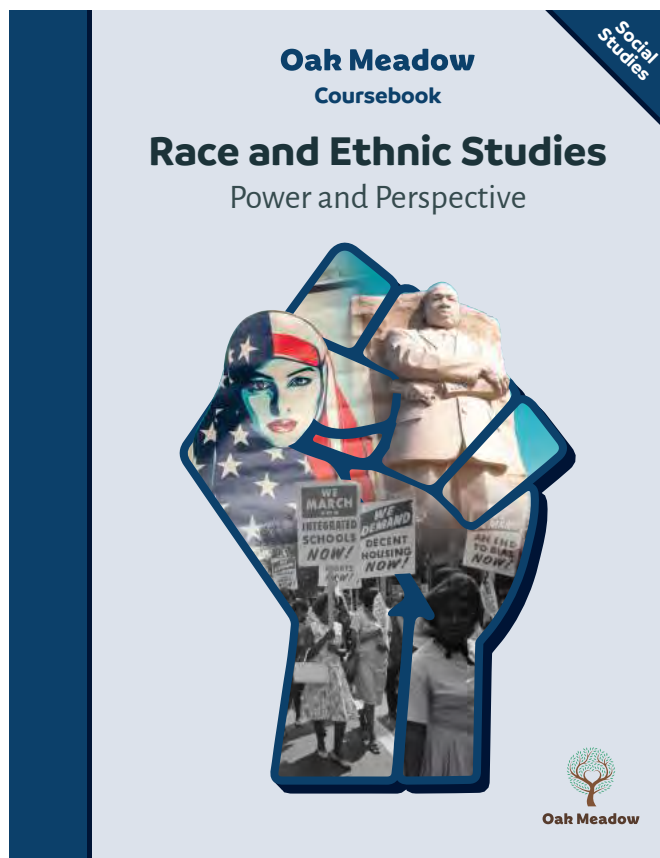
Hopefully, you, too, can find a way to make peace with Zoom. 🥜



*Emily R. Zarevich is an English/ESL teacher and writer from Burlington, Ontario, Canada. She has been published in Understorey Magazine, Dreamers Creative Writing, and Wild Roof Journal.*

# Curriculum Spotlight

In the spirit of our theme of reimagining, here are two new Oak Meadow courses that take a fresh look at the world.



## Think About It

Public schools in the United States are funded by property taxes and state and federal funding (which comes from income taxes and other sources). Therefore, schools in low-income towns and cities have less funding for things like computers, music programs and the arts, tutors, school nurses, and other key resources. Does this seem fair? What are the alternatives? Ask someone who pays taxes to share their opinion about inequities in funding among different school districts.

## Assignments

1. Complete journal entry #12. Reflect on what you've learned so far about critical race and ethnic studies, and think about how it applies to hidden curriculum. Can you identify things you've learned that are part of a hidden curriculum? What invisible and implicit messages are embedded in how and what you learn?

Are any assumptions made or implied regarding . . .

the roles of men and women?

nonbinary individuals?

the abilities or potential of students who are economically disadvantaged?

the abilities or potential of those with physical disabilities?

characteristics of a particular ethnic group?

what should be taught to students of color?

what should be taught to affluent students?

Write down anything that comes to mind about this topic, whether it is something that you have personally experienced or something that you are aware of in the wider community.

2. How do U.S. history textbooks paint a particular picture of U.S. history and for what purpose? Do you remember the first time you learned about the history of your ancestors in school? What did you learn? Were histories of other ethnic groups taught? Were they positioned as part of U.S. history or in another history class or lesson?

Think about what you wish was taught in school regarding U.S. history. Do you feel important information is missing or inaccurately portrayed? What would you add or change if you could? What do you think all children need to know?

Create a list, outline, infographic, or creative/artistic piece that expresses your thoughts.





### Federalist Paper No. 47: James Madison

*The accumulation of all powers legislative, executive and judiciary in the same hands, whether of one, a few or many, and whether hereditary, self appointed, or elective, may justly be pronounced the very definition of tyranny.*

### Federalist Paper No. 51: James Madison

*If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: You must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place, oblige it to control itself.*

### Federalist Paper No. 78: Alexander Hamilton

*If then the courts of justice are to be considered as the bulwarks of a limited constitution against legislative encroachments, this consideration will afford a strong argument for the permanent tenure of judicial offices, since nothing will contribute so much as this to that independent spirit in the judges, which must be essential to the faithful performance of so arduous a duty.*

3. In 1948, the General Assembly of the United Nations created the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which you'll find in the appendix of this coursebook. Read this document in its entirety. Compare it to the U.S. Bill of Rights. Where are there areas of overlap? Where do these important documents differ? Why do you think those who wrote and adopted it felt it necessary to make a universal declaration of human rights? Do you think it is still necessary?
4. Imagine you have been chosen to help establish the first human colony on Mars. Your team is in charge of setting up the governance of the new colony. Your first task is to develop a proposal for a new constitution. What are the key elements that will help this new society thrive? You might use elements of the U.S. Constitution as a basis for the Mars Constitution, or you might research constitutions from other nations and use parts of many different ones.

In your Constitution Proposal, outline the basic structure of the new Mars government and the key elements related to citizens' rights and freedoms. What are the essential features of a civil society? Use the political philosophies you've learned about to defend and support your proposal. Make sure to cite where your ideas come from, whether they are constitutions from other countries or political philosophers. Feel free to use as many modern sources as you like, including political figures from current and recent history.

## Assignments

1. The Federalist Papers were written to encourage the ratification of the Constitution. Read the following excerpts. Choose one, and write a brief reflection on whether the ideas are still relevant today. (Read all of them before deciding which one to write about.)

#### Federalist Paper No. 1: Alexander Hamilton

*... a dangerous ambition more often lurks behind the specious mask of zeal for the rights of the people than under the forbidden appearance of zeal for the firmness and efficiency of government. History will teach us that the former has been found a much more certain road to the introduction of despotism than the latter, and that of those men who have overturned the liberties of republics, the greatest number have begun their career by paying an obsequious court to the people; commencing demagogues, and ending tyrants.*

#### Federalist Paper No. 21: Alexander Hamilton

*The natural cure for an ill-administration, in a popular or representative constitution, is a change of men.*

#### Federalist Paper No. 22: Alexander Hamilton

*The fabric of the American empire ought to rest on the solid basis of THE CONSENT OF THE PEOPLE. The streams of national power ought to flow from that pure, original fountain of all legitimate authority.*

# Craft



## ***Here's a craft in honor of all the juggling everyone has had to do in the past year!***

Juggling is great fun, bringing together mind and body in a whirlwind of physics. This noncompetitive challenge is also an excellent activity for groups — the more the merrier! Juggling even makes a perfect study break.

Here's a simple way to make a set of juggling balls that won't roll away when you drop them (a real plus for the beginning juggler). Make a set for each person in the family, experimenting with different amounts of rice so that each set is just the right size for the hands that will use it.

You can find this and more great ideas in *Oak Meadow Crafts for the Early Grades*, available in both print and digital formats.

## What you need:

- Plastic bags (like grocery store produce bags)
- Rice
- Three balloons (water balloon size) per set
- Scissors

## Directions:

1. Put about 1/2 cup rice in a plastic bag. Push out as much air as possible, then knot the top of the plastic bag so it's tied snugly around the rice.
2. Cut off the stem of a balloon. Stretch the balloon over the plastic bag, making sure the knot of the plastic bag doesn't show through the hole of the balloon.
3. Take another balloon and cut off the stem. Stretch this balloon over the first balloon.
4. Take a third balloon in a different color and cut off the stem. Make tiny circular cuts of varying sizes in a few other places around the balloon. Stretch this balloon over the juggle ball. The holes you've cut allow the color of the balloon beneath to show through, making a colorful polka dotted ball.







Wherever your  
student is going,  
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get them there.



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