

# Living Education

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# FLOW

*In this issue:*

*Great Learning Experiences Flow from the Heart*

*Teaching Students to Find Their Flow*

*Homeschooling from the Middle*

*10 Ways to Flow Through Your Days*

## Flow: Real Life in Real Time

When we started tossing around ideas for this issue of *Living Education*, we realized that flow can be interpreted in oh-so-many ways. Most people think of it as being “in the zone,” when everything comes together with synergy and energy. Flow brings to mind an athlete, artist, or musician who is totally focused and performing optimally. Flow can also relate to how the seasons flow into one another, or how the phases of our lives (or our careers) flow from one to the next. Flow is seen in the stages of parenting, and the relationships between family members. Think of the unfolding development of a child, which flows like a river, sometimes tumultuous, sometimes calm. Flow is the fusion of self and life.

For most of us, it's impossible to maintain that optimum state where everything just clicks. Some days it's enough of an accomplishment just to stay afloat as the current of our busy lives rushes us headlong around the next bend. However, we can learn how to encourage more harmony in our lives and develop a way into that lovely flow state.

We can become more aware of the natural flow of the seasons and the stages of our lives, and we can explore ways to navigate the inevitable changes that can unbalance the flow of our lives. We can discover how reflective practice—like a reset button on life—can bring a sense of calm to our days and help us refocus and get centered. That's what this issue is all about.

Happy reading!

*DeeDee Hughes*  
Editor

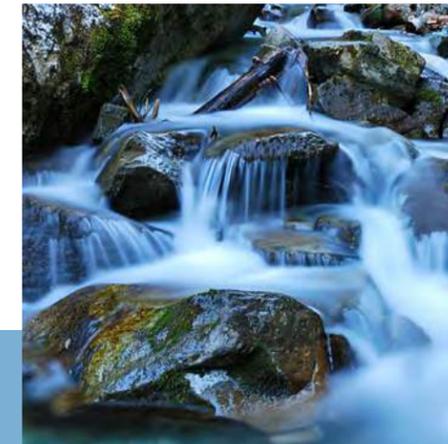
### Haiku

*Lesley Arnold*

each season finds us

flowing through the stream of life

endless turns on Earth



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# Teaching Students To Find Their Flow

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By Marissa Baker

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**Time stands still. You're so focused, immersed, and engaged that you're giving 110 percent with ease. You speed through tasks. When you look up, you're shocked to see so much time has passed, to realize how much you accomplished without even noticing you were working.**

That state is called flow. Sociologist Dr. Christine L. Carter describes the deep concentration of flow "as our 'sweet spot,' where we have both great strength and great ease; it's the mental state when our best work emerges without strain or anxiety" ("3 Steps to Finding Your Flow," *Psychology Today*). If you've ever tried to engage a bored 10-year-old with a book below her reading level or fought an anxious

teen who's frustrated that he can't grasp algebra, you know how hard it is to teach when kids are not comfortable, confident, and engaged. Helping our kids find flow in their study makes learning easier and more enjoyable. Exploring how to encourage and engage in a state of flow can benefit all of us throughout our lives.

Photo credit: Bevis/An Oak Meadow family



## 1. Balance stress and boredom.

According to the theory popularized by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in the late 1990s, flow happens when our skills line up with the challenges we're facing. If our skills don't equip us to meet our challenges, we get stressed and anxious. But if the tasks we're given are too simple to engage our skills, we become bored and apathetic. Balance is key to flow. Even when academic course work doesn't line up with our students' interests, we can still guide them toward flow by finding the right level of challenge.

I was once that teen who didn't "get" algebra. I just couldn't seem to grasp the math my book was trying to teach me, and the further I read the more lost I felt. That was a challenging time for my mother as well, who spent hours trying to figure out the math problems so she could explain them to me. For the last three years of high school, we kept trying out different math curriculum until we found one that clicked and brought my skills up to the challenge. I wasn't bored, but I also wasn't anxious anymore.

## 2. Provide choices.

Homeschooling provides a unique opportunity to cater to each student's individual learning preferences. Not everyone gets into flow the same way, nor do we all have the same learning styles. Some of us are visual learners who need images or models to study. Others are aural learners who prefer to listen, while some are verbal and learn best when speaking or writing. Physical learners engage with a subject best when they can move around and use their sense of touch. Logical learners want to reason and understand systems. Social learners work best in groups, while solitary learners enjoy studying when they're alone.

Giving our students the opportunity to use their dominant learning styles helps build an environment where they can find their flow. While we won't be able to get students into flow for every subject, we can give them as many opportunities as possible to make choices about how to engage with the material and make the projects their own. If your students feel invested in their study, they're much more likely to experience flow.

## 3. Cut out interruptions.

To get into a flow state when doing school work, kids need a clear goal and the opportunity to concentrate. For our younger children, we can encourage focus by giving them only one task at a time and providing a place to work where they won't be interrupted by siblings, toys, or games. Give kids a snack and a glass of water, and let them go to the bathroom, before starting a task so they'll be less likely to get distracted and interrupt themselves.

For older kids, it can help to set aside technology-free times for school work. Checking Facebook or texting friends are the kinds of interruptions that make it impossible to find the focus necessary for flow. As Carter succinctly puts it: No focus, no flow. If students are working on computers, try downloading focus-boosting programs that block certain websites for a specific period of time so students can work without interruption.

## 4. Teach focus techniques.

Ultimately, flow isn't something we can force kids into. We can provide conditions that encourage flow, but it largely depends on the child's desire to find their own flow. When they're young, this means letting them enjoy learning for its own sake rather than emphasizing grades or bribing them to finish a task.

As our kids get older, they'll need techniques to help themselves focus and follow through on projects independently. These include taking deep breaths to signal the brain to relax and carving out interruption-free time to work. Also, keep in mind that flow doesn't last forever. Let your kids know that it's okay to take a break when their focus starts to drift and come back to the job a little later.

Experiencing flow is extremely rewarding and motivating. Beyond the classroom, psychologists link flow to cultivating happiness and success in life. Talk with your kids about the idea of flow, share your own flow experiences, and encourage them to remember times when they were in flow. They'll be able to use this skill in their studies now and long after your homeschooling ends.

### Read more about flow:

"Eight Tips for Fostering Flow in the Classroom" by Jill Suttie (*Greater Good in Action*, April 17, 2012)

"Creative Kids: 7 Ways to Teach Flow" by Susan K. Perry (*Psychology Today*, November 8, 2009)

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# Great Learning Experiences Flow from the Heart

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By Karen Doll

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**I love learning—when I'm passionate about a topic. Great learning experiences happen naturally when they flow from the heart. When passion fuels learning, learning becomes personal. It matters.**

As an adult, I became fascinated with the country of France—the culture, the people, the geography, and the language. I immersed myself in books about my new special place. I began learning French. And, even though I may never be fluent, my goal is to be able to speak conversationally someday. I also searched for a pen pal. Several years ago I met my friend Bea Chaussade, a native of a small, quaint town just kilometers away from Paris, through an online pen pal organization. We write “real” letters to each other. Writing letters to a friend is quite a different experience than filling in verb conjugations in a textbook or following “repeat after me” audio lessons. Bea is my kindred spirit. We have a connection. Communication flows easily from our mutual passion to get to know each other better and to help each other become more fluent in a foreign language. It's interest-led learning. And there is nothing like walking out to the mailbox and discovering a new letter. It makes me practically giddy just thinking about it.

As homeschool parents and mentors, we have many opportunities to nurture our children's passions in creative and unique ways. One of the beauties of homeschooling is the freedom we have to give our children the gift of interest-led learning—learning experiences that flow from the passions in their hearts. Passion-fueled learning moves forward like gentle streams and mighty rivers—slowly or rapidly, ever changing, ever flowing.

So, I made a decision to incorporate more interest-led learning into our program. Home education programs that flow never fall under a spell of stagnation. I wanted to tap into my children's personal interests and make learning exciting and engaging. Communities overflow with opportunities for children to explore their interests; we looked for ways they could serve the community, enrich the lives of others, and learn from professionals and tradesmen.

My adult daughter, Emily, loves children. From an early age, she was able to easily relate to their unique world and needs. Children are drawn to her. As Emily grew, she became a much sought after babysitter. This led us to explore other ways in which she could share her gifts. Enter Schoolhouse Christian Preschool. They welcomed Emily with open arms and wide smiles. The teachers took her under their knowledgeable wings and she thrived.

Emily continued to learn and grow. During high school, we added Child Development, Early Childhood Education, and Psychology classes to our homeschool curriculum. Textbook principles became clearer as she observed and gained hands-on practice. She wanted to know more, though. She wanted to dig deeper into what makes little ones tick. So, she eventually earned a Master's Degree in Developmental Psychology. Her career path flowed directly from her early passion for working with children.



My son, Jeremy, developed a love for horses while in high school. Thankfully, we are surrounded by local farms, including Flint Hill Farm Educational Center. Owner, friend to the earth, and farming enthusiast Kathy welcomed Jeremy with a traditional farmer's welcome—a nice pat on the back. Jeremy learned how to feed and water the animals, the importance of cleanliness, how to groom horses, the gentle art of collecting chicken eggs without spurring the ol' rooster into battle, how to care for and nurture the environment, and so much more.

At home, we created an accompanying curriculum. We learned about animal behavior, agriculture, best breeding practices, and all sorts of related topics. In a short time, his passion grew. After graduating from high school, Jeremy found a job working with horses at Dreamfield Manor Farm, where things clicked into place for him.

Today, Emily is a speech therapist. She strives to improve the quality of life of the children in her care by engaging them in fun, interesting, and practical activities to better prepare them socially, emotionally, and physically. She LOVES her job. These days find Jeremy going with the flow of farm life. Talk about

ever changing! Daily life on a farm is a whirlwind of activity and change where an understanding of the circle of life takes on a deeper meaning. He LOVES his job.

I believe that each of my children experienced a strong sense of in-the-zone learning early on that catapulted them directly into a career path—an ever-flowing path whose source is passion. When individual interests are nurtured and allowed to flow naturally, there are no limits.

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# Getting Grounded

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By Michelle Simpson-Siegel

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## “You are grounded.”

I delivered this proclamation to my thirteen-year-old daughter with sternness and grace. I was measured but emphatic. Cool and unruffled. Controlled. Unemotional. Later that day, I sent her an email outlining the terms of her grounding:

- No devices. No screens. Books and music only.
- No friends, no plans, no phone calls.

But, in addition to what she couldn't do, I was sure to include what she was expected to do:

- Participate in family activities
- Do chores with a joyful spirit
- Complete homework
- Exercise

I also sent her to her room with an imperative: “I want you to think about what you've done.” As I was shutting her door, I swiftly remembered that when I was grounded at that age, I did not use the time to think about what I'd done at all. Instead, I stewed for a bit about my parents, life, the whole stinkin' world, and then I likely put on music, started doodling, looked at photos, or made a collage.

My teenage brain was not quite disciplined enough to actually sit and think about what I had done, certainly not in the same way I assess my choices as an adult. But in those grounded moments alone in my room as an adolescent, with no TV, phone, or video games—the “devices” (or are they vices?) of the time—I was contemplating something. By turning off and tuning out, I was changing my daily reality. Interrupting the patterns of my days forced me to see the world through a different lens and possibly think about the world in a different way. Even if I wasn't ruminating on the error of my own ways, I was certainly contemplating the world—and my adolescent place in it.

This break, this pause, is so essential. As adults, we crave it: time to unplug, time to unwind. Time to get grounded. Literally, getting “grounded” means to reconnect with the Earth. “Grounding yourself is a way to build a relationship with Earth. Grounding means to make a conscious connection between your self and the source of your life force energy... Earth energy is life force energy.” (“Get Grounded,” *Psychology Today*)

Adolescents don't know they need to get grounded, until they crash up against something and an adult in their lives who loves them says, “Yo! Slow down! You better go check yourself, before you wreck yourself, kid.” A reflective practice is critical for humans to develop wisdom. Reflection can make learning more effective and experiences more productive. In “Learning By Thinking: How Reflection Improves Performance” (*Harvard Business School*, March 2014), the authors note that while “In our daily battle against the clock, taking time to step back and engage in a deliberate effort to learn from one's prior experience would seem to be a luxurious pursuit,” performance, learning, and self-confidence often increase with time for reflection. The authors conclude, “our results reveal deliberation to be a powerful mechanism behind learning, confirming the words of American philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer John Dewey (1933:78): ‘We do not learn from experience. We learn from reflecting on experience.’”

My daughter's imposed break in daily routine seemed to work. She even missed a community wide, multi-school dance. Maybe “getting grounded” isn't like clipping the wings of a free flying bird. Maybe we can see it as supporting the process of being more reflective, of getting Earth-bound, centered, refocused. And maybe we both needed it. See, what my daughter had done shocked me. In our household, we monitor and limit screen time. We live in Vermont, and she attends an independent school that is modeled after a homeschool cooperative; up until five

years ago, each classroom was heated with a woodstove and the students were responsible for bringing in the wood and feeding the fire. We eat whole foods that we often buy directly from the farmer, and have dinner together every night as a family. We attend “community resiliency” meetings with our neighbors, who are just as likely to live in a million-dollar eco-home as they are a double-wide. If our recent election and current political climate highlighted that there is a national divide, we are solidly enjoying the privilege of living in our progressive “bubble.”

So, when my daughter told her younger brother that if he and his friend made any noise, came into her room, or bothered her in any way that she would “stab you two little bitches,” I nearly fainted. She didn't deny it. In fact, she seemed to take a sassy pride in having said it. How had this language and tone infiltrated my home? Hadn't I striven to do all the “right” things for my kids? No sugary drinks? No “inappropriate” media? Consistent communication with her friends' parents? For anyone who has raised a teen knows, their favorite thing at this stage of their development is to test boundaries. It's their job, and they take it seriously. (“Teenagers: Why Do They Rebel?,” *WebMD*)

Before I spiraled into a pit of parenting-fail despair, I recollected that while I was I growing up in a large family, we threatened each other with violence all the time. My siblings and I certainly said “I'll kill you!” to each other often enough, but my daughter had delivered her threat with a certain 21st century flair that I can assure you was not aligned with our values.

In a frenzied, media-saturated world of reactive tweets and instant gratification, we have effectively normalized aggressive, sarcastic, threatening speech. Even though my husband and I had done our due diligence in protecting our kids from the negative influences of mainstream culture, it seeps in like toxins in a wetland. Hearing world leaders speak disrespectfully on a

regular basis only exacerbates the murk.

One antidote to this acrimony is a reflective practice. Our children, our families—and our nation—need to adopt a reflective practice. We must take time to contemplate the consequences of our speech and of our actions. Right Speech, one of the tenets of the Buddhist Eightfold Path, asserts that communication that is hateful breeds disharmony and can engender physical violence. We often think of violent language as being less harmful than violent action. However, violent words, thoughts, and actions are intertwined. Kind words, thoughts, and actions similarly arise together to take flight into the world.

My daughter benefited from getting grounded, and it will likely not be the last time she will receive this gift. Meditation and mindfulness are popular alternatives to detention in schools around the globe. Perhaps it is time for parents to reinvent the discipline of “grounding” kids, without guilt, but with gratitude and intention. Perhaps we simply need to reframe and redefine it as a powerful tool in the discipline towards an educated mind and a compassionate heart.

Perhaps children and adults can adopt a reflective practice to assist us in looking outside of ourselves, beyond our bubbles.

F. Scott Fitzgerald said, “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.” A reflective practice allows us to exercise our minds and build our imaginations to hold multiple perspectives. This is the path to wisdom and peace.

*Oak Meadow Executive Director Michelle Simpson-Siegel lives in rural Vermont with her family, where she embraces the challenges and joys of parenting.*

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# Homeschooling From The Middle

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By Lisa Renee

**When I began our home education odyssey, I had read all the requisite inspirational literature regarding the endless possibilities. Examples of exceptional homeschoolers are everywhere—the family with their star academic progeny, the national spelling and geography bee winners, the kids who sail the world and write about their amazing adventures. And we’ve all seen the lists of famous homeschoolers, from Ben Franklin to Leonardo da Vinci. I was duly inspired. Homeschooling offers the freedom and independence, the creativity and the time, to let talents blossom.**

Many years later and still in the trenches, I realize I may have been under the spell of false advertising. Homeschooling has been a wonderfully rich and eye-opening experiment, it has provided us all with a surprising amount of experience and education, and I wouldn't hesitate to do it all over again. But...we are undeniably normal.

There, I said it. My kids are brilliant, accomplished and marvelous individuals (of course), but there isn't a Mozart or an Einstein (both homeschoolers) among us—not yet, anyway. This revelation—that success isn't necessarily defined in superlatives or related to fame and power—would have been a welcome relief to me 20 years ago, early in my homeschooling tenure. It would have somewhat assuaged the intimidation whipped up by the many accounts of frenzied superachieving that goes on in some homeschooling quarters. It has, unfortunately, taken me years to realize that my approach is perfect for me and mine: basically learning to live in the world kindly, responsibly, and with curiosity.

I have known many homeschoolers who insisted that the project is about rising to the top. The mother with a PhD in education whose kids were so tyrannized by her forced

march to success they begged to go to school, the 15-year-old lunching with Hillary Clinton, the 14-year-old performing Bach at the Ivy League school, and the family that does everything better than you. I ran into their 13-year-old daughter at a book sale. She was wearing a stunning, floor-length crocheted dress of many colors. "Emily, that's gorgeous! Where did you get it?" I asked. Silly me. She made it, of course. This is the same family whose young daughters arrived at a dance, each topped with a jaunty, one-of-a-kind hat. "Love the hats! Where did you get them?" (You would think that I had learned.) Yes, they sheared the sheep, carded the wool, dyed the wool, felted the wool, and made the hats. On the weekend. Probably before I got out of bed.

I'm sure that some of you see yourselves in this. One of the great things about home education is the lack of limits. You can go where your curiosity, motivation, and determination take you. High achieving, accomplished homeschoolers are fairly common. I applaud you and am endlessly impressed by your kind. But someone needs to speak up for the rest of us. Those of us just doodling along in the middle of the road and happy to be there.

I tried to keep up with the race-to-the-top pace for a while, but it wasn't working for me. I learned that we needed less running, less competition, less friction, less pressure. I found that we

needed to seek our middle ground, our own space, the place where we could breathe and grow best, at our own pace. We opted for more open spaces and more time to think. Perhaps that's why there are so many high achieving homeschoolers. They've had time and space to let their ideas blossom.

Here's what we do: cook, read, write, play, watch movies, argue, paint, draw, garden, noodle on instruments, and dabble in life.

And here's what we haven't done (yet): write concertos, build barns, chair committees, cure diseases, keep bees, or save the world.

My kids are all bright and capable, each in a perfectly quirky way, and they are finding their own interesting and promising paths to success. The possibilities of homeschooling are truly endless, creating a broad, open approach to learning and growing.

When the mainstream mentions homeschoolers, we hear about the winners and the losers, the fringe dwellers, the

prodigies, and the problems. Most of us, however live somewhere in the middle. We've had shining moments of triumph and crashing bouts of failure, just like most of the kids in the schoolhouses. Not every member of the school population can have the lead in "Oklahoma" or win a national science competition or give the valedictorian speech.

We live proudly in the middle, happily toiling away in the world, finding paths to illumination, passion, kindness, and—ultimately—ourselves. This is something to encourage and celebrate.

There really is plenty of room for all of us.

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Photo credit: Acosta-Delgado / An Oak Meadow family



# Healthy Days, Healthy Ways: Try A Condiment Tray

By Cydney Smith



It's easy to get caught in the dinnertime rut where you begin cooking the same quick and easy meals. Dinner can seem like another task or chore, and we can forget the important role it has for nourishing body and mind. It also offers a space to take a break from the day and to connect as a family.

It doesn't need to be a burden though. No need to go gourmet or to create elaborate meals. Here's a simple boost to dinnertime flow that will add variety and spice while allowing individuals to personalize their meal without placing extra demands on the cook!.

Create a condiment tray, a collection of spices, oils, sauces, and herbs that are easily accessible for all to use. In our house, we keep one by the stove and one by the kitchen table. A lazy susan is a fun way to make choices available. A small tray or serving basket will do, too.

A simple bowl of brown rice or quinoa can be turned into a personalized flavorful meal seasoned to each family member's liking. Broiled fish, baked chicken, or tofu take on a new variety. Even soups, scrambled eggs, or pasta dishes can be enhanced with a little condiment flair. Depending on taste buds and preferences—and even moods—everyone at the table has an option to add some variety to a simple meal. The family cook can take basic, tried-and-true weeknight dinners and breakout of the same ol', same ol' rut by switching up the flavors. A few shakes from the condiment tray and the meal has gone from mundane to magnificent.

Some ideas for your condiment tray:

- tamari
- gomasio (sesame seeds and salt ground together)
- Himalayan salt
- mixed pepper
- curry paste or powder
- cinnamon
- garlic powder
- onion powder
- hot pepper sauce
- coconut oil
- sunflower seeds
- hemp seeds
- sesame seeds
- nutritional yeast
- sliced almonds

Start with a few family favorites. Pick up a new spice, sauce, or oil when you shop. Keep adding variety as your family experiments with new tastes. Kids love the independence of adding their own flavors, and it's a great way to have them try new tastes.

Adding a condiment tray is an easy way to offer healthy food choices while creating delicious meals that everyone can enjoy.

*Cydney considers herself a bit of a wellness cowgirl. As a health coach certified in Integrative Nutrition, she draws from many wellness traditions and dietary theories, sprinkling in yogic wisdom and spiritual teachings with the latest research and practices in personal development. Learn more about her work at [DedicatedTable.com](http://DedicatedTable.com) and [SpiritedNutrition.com](http://SpiritedNutrition.com).*

# Earth Cycles: Flowing With The Seasons

**As winter lingers, we oftentimes find ourselves, along with our children, experiencing a sense of “tiredness.” The cold and gray days only enhance this feeling. Rather than looking at this feeling of tiredness in a negative way, it's important for us to recognize the winter season as a significant time of contraction. It is a time for all of us to turn inwardly and reflect within.**

Perhaps some of the ways we can help our children through this time of contraction is by doing quiet activities together that do not require a lot of expansiveness. Reading chapter books or listening to audio books together, completing a jigsaw puzzle, writing letters to friends and extended family members, singing songs or playing music in the evening, doing rhythmic handwork projects, or just staying close to home are all perfect examples for exploring one's inner life and honoring the quietude of the season. Before we know it, springtime and boundless energy will once again renew our lives, and we will be so thankful that we took the time for ourselves and for our children to experience that “quietness” within.

## Shadow Puppets

Shadow puppets are a great way to pass an evening at home. You can use your hands to make shadows of different shapes, telling a story, and making the shadows move to act out the story. All you need is a strong light and a blank space of wall. Or you can follow the directions below to create stick puppets and a puppet theater for more elaborate productions.



Credit: [jimmiehomeschoolmom, Flickr](https://www.flickr.com/photos/jimmiehomeschoolmom/)

## Materials

- Lightweight cardboard (like a cereal box) or construction paper
- Scissors
- Glue and/or tape
- Sticks or chopsticks
- White tissue paper
- Large cardboard box
- Flashlight or light source

## Instructions

1. Use cardboard or construction paper to cut out simple puppet shapes. The shapes do not need color or detail as they will only be seen as shadow outlines. Animal shapes are fun to make.
2. Glue or tape the shapes to sticks. Puppeteers can hold the sticks below the bottom edge of the screen so their hands are not visible as the puppets move across the screen.
3. Cut a large square hole from one side of the cardboard box to make the screen. Depending on the size of the box, you may want to trim the sides to make it easier to hold the puppets near the screen.
4. Glue or tape a single layer of white tissue paper over the hole to create a screen. This lets the puppets show up as shadows. Make sure the tissue paper is flat and tight across the hole.
5. Aim a flashlight or lamp toward the back of the screen. Hold the puppets between the screen and the light source. The lights, puppets, and puppeteers are positioned behind the screen, while the audience is positioned in front of it.
6. Experiment with making the shadow puppets move and interact. If you place a mirror in front of the screen (where the audience will be), the puppeteers can see what it looks like as they experiment and perform their play.

## More ideas for winter activities

- Tell stories by candlelight
- Play music together or learn a musical instrument
- Knit or sew something warm
- Make a cozy fort in the living room and sleep in it
- Cook over a fire or make soup on the woodstove
- Make door and window snakes out of old socks or knitted sleeves from cast-off sweaters (just stuff with dried beans, rice, or sand and tie or sew closed)
- Look through seed catalogs and plan your spring garden

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# The Yearly Cycles of Expansion and Contraction

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By Lawrence Williams  
(excerpt from *The Heart of Learning*)

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**Each yearly cycle contains four seasons, but the basic polarities of the seasons are summer and winter. Summer is the expression of expansion. Winter is the expression of contraction. Spring and fall are the transitions between these polarities. Just as summer follows winter and day follows night, there is an everlasting, predictable, and nurturing rhythm to these cycles of expansion and contraction.**

During summer, we experience expansion. Everything is warm and growing, the days are longer, and light predominates over darkness. We want to go outside more often, to take leisurely strolls in the woods or enjoy picnic lunches at the beach. We could say that the basic feeling of summer is light and warm, and the direction of movement is up and out. These are also the feelings and direction of the cycle of expansion.

When we expand, we immerse ourselves in the flow of life and focus upon the whole, rather than the part. When this happens, we forget our limitations, and tend to be less aware of time, space, and our personal physical or emotional concerns. Instead, we become more aware of the world around us. There is a very social aspect to this expansiveness. We explore possibilities freely, with no feeling of boundaries either within ourselves or in our environment.

Summer gradually gives way to fall and then to winter. During winter, we experience contraction. The trees are bare of leaves, and plants lie dormant in the ground. In many places, the rivers and lakes are frozen, and snow covers the landscape. We don't go outside as much as we did in the summer. The days are shorter. Darkness prevails over light. We could say that the basic feeling of winter is dark and cold, and the direction of movement is down and in. These are also the feelings and direction of the cycle of contraction.

When we contract, we immerse ourselves in specifics rather than the whole. When this happens, we become aware of our limitations, and also more aware of time, space, and our personal physical or emotional concerns. During this phase, we may not feel very open to new possibilities, but we are often intent on attending to details and getting things done. Our attention and intention gain intensity and purpose.

In our personal lives, the cycles of expansion are the times in which we reach up and out beyond ourselves to explore more possibilities, to discover more of who we are, to realize our potential. The cycles of contraction are those times when we dig down and within ourselves, fully integrating these new experiences and realizations into our lives. We develop new skills, transform limiting patterns, and forge new ways of expressing ourselves in the world.

Neither polarity is better than the other. Both are necessary, just as the two phases of the breathing process are essential to our health. Which is more important, inhaling or exhaling? They are both an integral part of breathing, and both are needed to keep us alive and healthy. Expansion is the broad landscape strokes of the paintbrush, and contraction is the careful refinement of detail. Both are vital to painting a masterpiece, and both are vital to a balanced life.



Photo credit: Brandaw / An Oak Meadow family

## Managing Transitions

How can we take into consideration the cycles of contraction and expansion and be responsive to each child's rhythms? While some children may need lots of quiet, alone time, make sure this is balanced by lively conversation and hands-on activities. Likewise, the student who has trouble sitting and focusing for more than 15 minutes can have a timer set to give a three-minute break every 15 minutes, with the goal being to slowly increase the length of focused activity as the child matures. Make sure the break is an active one: do jumping jacks or push-ups, run to the mailbox and back, play with the dog.

While moving between these cycles may come naturally to an adult, children often need help navigating these transitions smoothly. To do this, we can't have personal preferences for one or another. If a child needs to contract, then we help her contract; if she needs to expand, then we help her expand. Instead of being caught up in our own preferences, our own likes and dislikes, we view each polarity as just another expression of our innate being.

Creating a recognizable signal (singing a song or ringing a bell) or specifying a certain time ("Five more minutes!") to transition from a social or physical activity to focused work will cue your child to move to the next activity. If your child needs help transitioning from contraction to expansion, again, setting a timed goal can help.

Making an agreement about what comes next ("When you finish that chapter, it's time to rake leaves") puts the activity into her consciousness so she's ready for it and can transition smoothly.

If children are to remain balanced, they must be given opportunities in their lives for both expansion and contraction many times on a daily basis. Expansion could be in the form of physical activity (playing outside, biking, climbing, jumping, swinging), entertainment (putting on plays and puppet shows, singing and dancing, silly games), or just "doing nothing" (relaxing in a hammock, exploring in the yard, or spending time with friends).

Contraction provides time for inwardly assimilating experiences such as writing, knitting or handcrafts, working on a puzzle or challenging project, playing strategy games, or doing detail-oriented activities. The best approach is to seek an environment which enables them to move frequently throughout the day back and forth between contraction and expansion.

*Lawrence Williams, EdD, is the cofounder and president of Oak Meadow. Since 1975 when Oak Meadow was founded, he has been a pioneer and innovator in the homeschooling movement.*

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# Big Transitions For Little Beings

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## How can we help children move through the big transitions, such as moving, death in family, divorce/remarriage, or a new sibling? Oak Meadow teachers share their experiences.

**Leslie** It's essential to help a child move through big transitions by taking some time just to BE together, along with spending quality time doing what the family most enjoys sharing. Perhaps it is taking a family hike, enjoying game night, reading books aloud, or just sitting quietly together as a family. Extra hugs help, too!

Allowing the child to talk about his/her own personal grievances with a genuine listening ear is also important. When my son was attacked by two strange dogs and hospitalized, I remember allowing him the opportunity to share his fears and concerns when he felt the need. I would give my full attention and listen very carefully. I would often "parrot" (or repeat) what he just told me. And then when he felt he had said enough, we moved on to other activities. I didn't try to embellish or keep talking about it. Allowing this organic approach was the key to helping him process, heal emotionally, and lessen any fears that might have been instilled from the experience.

Another important part of moving through big transitions is to reestablish a rhythm and routine in the household. This provides a sense of security that helps with the transition.

**Eden** Seeing as my family is moving next week, this particular topic is especially relevant to me. My husband and I hemmed and hawed about what to do with our twins for school during the week we moved. We twisted this way and that, and finally, we decided we would talk to THEM. It was amazing how simple an act that was; as our home was being upended, it gave them a bit of control in a situation in which they had felt very little. I found that letting them choose even the "little things" made a difference in their attitudes (like whether to pack their clothes in a box or a bag). I've worked to remain focused on the positive, on new friends, and new activities (swim class next year!). And lately I've answered "yes" to almost every request to snuggle after bedtime. I think it does all our hearts good.

**Sarah** Families can visit their local children's librarian and ask about titles related to what they are going through that they can read together when snuggling in bed. There are so many wonderful and sensitive books dealing with tough issues. These stories can help to start a conversation or help children to find words to put to their fears.

**Anna** I had quite a few deaths in my family growing up, and many of the things I remember most are interactions with adults outside of my family, like music or Hebrew teachers: either the incongruous absurdity of feeling that the world had ended but they didn't know and were talking to me just as usual, or the relief and support when they did know and connected with me through the disorientation. When I became a teacher, I had an eight-year-old student who had just lost a grandfather. He

and I told stories about our relatives, and a few days later I left him a relevant book and a note in his cubby. His mother, who was a colleague and in the midst of grieving her father, thanked me profusely for both interactions, and expressed great relief that her family was held by this kind of web of support.

Major transitions often affect the whole family, and it can be very important for a child to have the option of being themselves in the midst of a transition around adults who are not affected. Families might reach out to various adults in their children's lives who can connect with them and recognize what they are going through.

**Linda** Combining heart-to-heart talks with an active or silly time can facilitate sharing of emotions with some release and relaxation. Goofy follow-the-leader "fun runs" following a serious discussion can help balance mixed emotions around big transitions. Whether moving to a new classroom, a new home, or new (dreaded even) subject/assignment, allowing the child to have a voice is key. It can be designing a nameplate for a cubby or desk, decorating an outdoor wall of the new home's garage, or deciding what aspect of the assignment will be tackled initially.

**Shannon** Try starting new traditions that honor the old things that kids want to remember while celebrating the new. For example, when we were moving around a lot (even between continents), we made it a family tradition to go find the best ice cream—or gelato—in that town. Just a fun thing to take the pressure off the tough situations can help a lot!

**Claudine** Younger children take in stories much better than intellectualizing events. When we were going through great transitions when my children were younger, I learned to make up stories with characters who are going through the same, but veiled, transitions and making it through safely to the other side. What are their fears? Loneliness, missing familiar things/people, meeting up with danger or the unknown? For instance, for a child who had to leave one school for another, I made up a story of children in the forest, going on a journey because they needed to leave home. They met up with all sorts of troubles and magical help such as their tears turning into crystals which helped to lead them through the tangled forest. We would revisit these characters over and over throughout the year, making up stories with lots of twists and turns to help the children process their feeling and find their balance.

**Gwen** When my kids were younger and we had too many deaths and a divorce in the same year, I encouraged them to write letters about how they felt. If they wanted me to read their letters I would. But they didn't always want someone to read them, which was fine. It still provided a safe outlet that they later said really helped them to process.

**Jessica** I think that it's important for the adults in the situation to separate out their own fears, anxieties, and concerns from their children's and to be careful not to project them. Sometimes I find I am almost subconsciously making assumptions about what is bothering my kids, when it might actually be my own issue! Make sure to talk to your kids and really listen to what they are saying.

**Lesley** I'm a Navy brat and moved almost every two years of my life. I got very good at packing. Of course, packing involves more than the household items. You pack up your feelings, too. Thinking back on those days, I realized how much I depended on my mother's strength when I was little and we were moving and going through these upheavals. We had to wait until we got there to really see what was going to happen. Waiting is part of the experience! My mother prepared us for the move to a new place by showing us on the map where we were going and how we were going to get there, and also what the weather would be when we got there. But more than all that, we were each given a small box to carry in the car or on the plane that contained our own very special items. A rock, a shell, a necklace, a lock. I still have them! My granddaughter will have a new sibling at the end of February and I plan to prepare a small box with her, her own treasure box of things she might want to keep to show the new baby.

**Michelle** One of the first and most beneficial things to do is dive right back down to basics: warmth, food, warm baths, snuggles, hot water bottles, comfy clothes, movement, and time in nature. This helps the parent as well because, in addition to physical soothing, you are sending the strong message that changes happen and life goes on, you will be cared for, and love has not changed.

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# The Empire In The Woods

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By Sophie Bady-Kaye

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**Behind the building where my old homeschool group used to meet lay a forest. It was one of those places that was gorgeous in every season. In the spring the whole woods smelled like wildflowers and overflowed with green. The winter reached out with icy fingers, holding the trees in a glittery embrace and making each twig look as if it was encased in glass. In the summer, warm air flooded the forest, and in the fall the ground filled with crispy leaves that we piled high and cannonballed into with a satisfying crunch.**

Our little group loved these woods: Mischievous Owen, a tall, dark-haired boy a few years older than I who, along with his friend Erica, always seemed to be in charge; two sets of identical twins—Kaelan and Aja, and Harry and Dean—who always became the minions of one of the elders, following behind them like very small bodyguards; Liam, an outdoorsy kid with incredibly red hair and a fairly chaotic attitude, and his younger brother Gealan, who had white blond hair and an impressive love for dinosaurs. Assorted other characters rounded out the clan.

Whenever we got the chance, we would leave the indoor parts of homeschooling behind and disappear into the trees. We saw these woods as an opportunity.

During our many wood romps, someone pointed out that the particular geography of this woods made them very inhabitable, and thus our “Empire” was born. The main part of the woods we occupied spanned about two acres, and we furnished every inch of it. There was a long, wide path filled with small shops, outlined in walls made from rocks and sticks. In these shops, we sold sea glass, cool stones we had found, pictures and crafts we had brought from home, handmade jewelry, you name it. Across from the path was a steep hill, nearly impossible to climb, with hand and foot holds carved into the dirt. If you managed to scale this hill, you would find The Palace. Our palace was constructed of sturdy branches and sticks stacked log-cabin-style among the trees. It had at least 10 rooms, a bedroom, an armory, and a throne room. The floor of each room was covered in fresh pine needles, their dark green shine standing out against the dirt of the forest floor.

Our government system was just as essential as the geography of our little town. We were definitely a monarchy. This might

have been because the older kids were naturally more bossy, but I think it had more to do with the fact that we were all at an age when we were really into *Lord of the Rings* or *The Chronicles of Narnia* or some other complicated fantasy series where there is always a monarchy. Owen and Erica elected themselves Emperor and Empress, and no one disagreed. They were probably 11, and we were about 8, so they seemed to have a right to the throne. They ruled their empire strictly, but usually pretty well. For example, we had an entire currency system. There was an abundance of slate in the woods, and someone discovered that if you rubbed it against a sidewalk for long enough, you could make a perfectly round coin. There were three basic sizes, and the larger the coin, the more valuable. I spent many long afternoons rubbing a coin against the sidewalk till my hands were raw, just trying to get rid of the tiny jagged edges. Owen was incredible at making them and had hundreds, one of the reasons he was emperor. One day he gave me a shoebox-full, and I was forever rich. I still have a few dusty coins sitting on my bookshelf.

However, we were not a utopia. We had our issues, the biggest one being war. You put a bunch of fantasy-obsessed kids in the woods together and let them start their own society, and you can bet there will be a lot of war. Someone would get bored, and the next things we knew we would be siding up and picking our weapons. We highly enjoyed partaking in epic battle sequences. It wasn't unusual for a parent to walk into the woods and have to duck out of the way as 20 screaming eight-year-olds, stick swords drawn, came charging down the hill towards their waiting enemies. Our wars usually lasted about a day, but they were truly splendid.

Although war was our biggest problem, it was not the only one. Like every government, we had a certain level of corruption. One

day, Owen decided to start collecting taxes. There was no particular reason for this. I'm guessing he knew there were taxes in the “Real World,” and he wanted his domain to be realistic as possible. But unlike “Real World” taxes, the money he took from us shop owners went directly into his pocket. Literally: he collected our coins and then deposited them directly into the pocket of his jeans.

I had been watching him collecting our money, and since I found it so hard to make the coins in the first place, I was outraged. Both of my parents are political activists, so my first instinct was to stand on one of the rocks making up my shop wall, and give an impassioned speech about unfair tax collection. I was promptly arrested by the twins.

Here, we reached a roadblock. Complex and awesome as our little kingdom was, we did not yet have a jail. (Later we would build one, a stick structure attached to the palace. Looking back, this was not the best idea, as you could easily jump out of the jail and land smack in the middle of the Emperor's living room.) They were at a loss as to where to put me. We wandered around the woods, kicking red and orange leaves out of our way, while Harry and Dean held stick swords to my back to make me walk. Like I had anything better to do than be arrested.

Owen kept stopping and looking around, suggesting good places that would make a good jail. The shopkeepers were mostly my friends, so we couldn't use one of their structures as

a temporary prison. Eventually, they decided to tie me to a tree. Then another problem arose. No rope. After they had spent half an hour trying to tie me to the tree with a vine, they gave up and decided to let me go.

I went back to those woods a little while ago. Most of the structures are still there, but they feel quiet and abandoned. The path by the shops is still lined with logs that I helped drag. The huge hill is a bit smaller than I had remembered, but a quick scramble up the wet dirt proved that it's still a hard climb. As I walked through the woods at the top of the slope, moments that I had completely forgotten came flying back. I passed a big stick and log structure that served as a kind of community center/army barracks/bomb shelter. I noticed the little white puff mushrooms growing along the ground, and remembered how Liam and Owen used to run around popping them in people's faces. The brush pile next to what used to be my store reminds me of Liam, Gaelen, Owen, and my highly corrupt thief group, “The Black Velvet Gang.”

Although our empire has fallen, the forest is still full of memories that come rushing like a trampling army of tiny homeschoolers who were given the freedom to create their own world.

*Sophie Bady-Kaye grew up as a homeschooler in Vermont, and believes that freedom to create is one of the most important parts of education. She is a lifelong writer, and currently lives in Boston, Massachusetts.*

Photo credit: Schuurman / An Oak Meadow family



# 10 Ways To Flow Through Your Days

By Amanda Witman



**1** Make time to center yourself. Even if the only possible time for this is just after you wake up or right before you drift off to sleep, find that moment and make it a daily habit.

**2** Move slowly. Let the movements of your body reflect the rhythm that you'd like to experience. If you move with hurry, you'll experience hurry. Slow down and enjoy a more easygoing tempo.

**3** Develop rhythms and routines that free you from having to make incessant microdecisions about what to do in each moment. Let these rhythms carry you through the day, the week, the season.

**4** Build small comforts into each day. Warm mug of coffee? Hot shower to start off the day? Fuzzy slippers that make your feet feel great? A cozy shawl to drape around you as you go about your day? Be good to yourself! Anything soothing that helps you feel good and relax will help set the tone for all of the things you do that day. A soothing bedtime routine and a full night's rest help the daytime work flow easily.

**5** Banish clutter. Flow happens most easily when irritations and distractions have already melted away. Clear a space for working or resting before you begin.

**6** Listen to soothing music. Soft, relaxing strains can sweep you away.

**7** Encourage everyone in the family get a good night's sleep. With family members of varying ages and needs, this can be challenging. What routines do your family need to help everyone get a full night of rest?

**8** Observe different kinds of flow in everyday life. Ask your children to be on the lookout for it, too. What does it look like? What does it feel like? Water, the breeze tickling a flower, the way a fish swims, the way one sibling hands something to another without needing to be asked, special traditions observed year after year. What else?

**9** Take note when things are flowing well and feeling good! Try to remember what you were doing when the flow began and what happened as it continued. See if you can use those observations to set the stage for something similar to happen another time.

**10** If you get stuck, take a deep breath and start again. Remember or imagine what it feels like to experience flow. Is that feeling possible in this moment? What could change to make it more likely? Ask and see what happens!

*Amanda Witman is a lifelong learner and an enthusiastic homeschooling mother of four. She enjoys writing, playing fiddle, tending her garden, organizing community events, learning new things, having family adventures, and connecting with other homeschoolers. She manages social media at Oak Meadow.*

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## Curriculum Spotlight

# Word: The Poet's Voice

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In our new poetry course, high school students experiment with the power of language and self-expression. Try this writing assignment from the unit on love poetry.

### Writing Exercise

Find the plainest room or part of a room in your house where you can sit and write, either holding your notebook in your hand, or your computer in your lap. Make sure that the spot you choose is truly plain, such as a section of a wall that has no pictures hanging on it, or a spot in your basement or attic. The key to this exercise is finding a place that doesn't feed your imagination so that you have to summon your own ideas and images, calling on your poetic gifts to create your verse. This is like a meditative writing exercise in that by not focusing on a single thing except the bareness of the space before you, you are actually attempting to paint the wall with your own imagination.

Now that you have found the right space, take a seat and set your gaze ahead, focusing not on the wall, but on the emptiness of the wall, the vast expanse of space before you. Keep in mind that vastness is not determined by size when you are using your imagination. Even the smallest corner of an attic can become an ever-expanding field when you use your imagination to fill in the blanks.

Once you have gazed at the emptiness for a minute, think of the word love and write down the first thoughts or images or feelings that you have. Return your gaze to the wall for another minute and repeat

this exercise, introducing the word love into the emptiness of your thoughts and once again write down whatever comes to you. By now you should have a bit of a list going.

Now reread your list and determine which of the things might in some way be sacred to you. If there is more than one, or all of them, that's great. If nothing on the list is even remotely related to love in your opinion, try the exercise again and see if your list is different. Remember that something sacred doesn't have to be holy in a religious or divine sense. If you have written down the word "kitten" because you adore a new kitten you have, this is fine to use for the poem you will create. Not judging your own creativity and inspiration is extremely important when composing poetry, or creating art of any kind.

Choose one thing from your list and write about the love you feel for it. Do not censor yourself here. If you just love that kitten with all of your heart, try to express this love in five different lines using your imagination to come up with unique ways to explain it to your reader. Capturing the essence of an emotion in an imaginative way is one of the keys to writing beautiful love poetry.

When you have composed five lines, find ways to connect them into a poem that expresses what you believe is the purest reflection of the love you feel.



## Curriculum News

We revised our math program for grades 5–8 to help students develop a stronger foundation of skills necessary for high school math. Courses include expanded instructions, review lessons, and learning assessments. Extra practice worksheets, divided by skill, allow students to customize their learning so they spend less time on skills they grasp easily and have more time to practice skills they find challenging. Consumable math workbooks include all math worksheets and answer keys.



We now offer textbook-independent social studies courses that are designed to encourage students to use a wide variety of resources rather than relying on one specific textbook. This allows students to develop their research skills and explore new and up-to-date sources. Check out our new World History and U.S. History. Teacher manuals are available for both courses.



## Welcome to New Director of Admission/College Counseling: KD Maynard



KD has held roles in college admissions, college counseling and financial aid, academic advising, teacher training/curriculum development, and a variety of administrative/leadership positions. The institutions she's worked for include Brown University, World Learning, Marlboro College,

The Putney School, Community College of Vermont, and University of Massachusetts Amherst. KD's liberal arts background (AB from Brown in Linguistics and Classics, and a MALS from Dartmouth focusing on Women's Studies and Writing) provides her with a worldview that seeks to make connections between and among people, ideas, and a sense of a greater good. She loves living in southern Vermont, spending free time in nature (especially hiking and kayaking), volunteering with the homeless, and spending time with her brand new grandchildren.

## Virtual Open Houses

Are you an online learner or homeschooler looking for more support, focus, and creativity? Sign up for one of our virtual open houses to learn more about Oak Meadow's flexible, teacher-supported distance school. Visit [oakmeadow.com](http://oakmeadow.com) for more information and to sign up.

## College Counseling Webinars

Applying to college can be a daunting prospect. Resources abound, but without a little structure and support it's easy to get overwhelmed and off-track. Oak Meadow's series of college counseling webinars is open to all. The sessions are designed to break down the process into manageable pieces. Many are targeted toward seniors, but they are useful prep for younger students too, with some specifically addressing the earliest steps of college application preparation. Sign up on our website!

## New to homeschooling?

**Foundations in Independent Learning**, an online parent-teacher certification training course, will get you off on the right foot. And we're now offering it at a new, low price!

**Homeschool Support**. Looking for more personalized support? We also offer hourly, one-to-one consultation sessions with an experienced Oak Meadow teacher.

Look for **Foundations in Independent Learning** and **Homeschool Support** in the Resources section of our online bookstore. Visit [oakmeadowbookstore.com](http://oakmeadowbookstore.com).

## Colored Ice Building Blocks

Build a colorful ice fort for a fun and beautiful outdoor play structure. This works best if you can freeze the water outside because you'll be able to make more ice blocks at once.

### What you need

- ½ gallon milk or juice containers
- Food coloring
- Water
- Freezer or freezing temperature outdoors

### What to do

1. Rinse out the containers and fill them with water.
2. Put a few drops of food coloring in each one.
3. Allow to freeze. Once frozen, tear off the container.
4. Stack the blocks to create a fort, igloo, or any other structure or sculpture.



## Winter Wreath

Create a winter decoration for your house or to hang in a nearby tree.

### What you need

- Bundt pan (or other wreath-shaped mold)
- Red berries, pine boughs, vine twigs, and other seasonal plants
- Water
- Freezer or freezing temperature outdoors

### What to do

1. Collect a variety of seasonal items from nature, and cut or break them into pieces that will fit into your wreath form.
2. Put the berries on the bottom of the pan and then layer other items on top (this will allow the berries to show best when the ice wreath is taken out of the mold).
3. Carefully fill the pan with water and place it into the freezer (or outside, if temperatures are below freezing).
4. Once frozen solid, run warm water over the bottom of the pan to release the ice from the mold.
5. Tie a string around the mold and hang it outside a window or from a tree.

You can also add birdseed to your winter wreath, and as it melts, the birds will find food to eat. For a hint of spring to come, add flower blossoms to your wreath.