

Becoming God's Naturalists

Jill Novak

"As soon as he is able to keep it himself, a nature diary is a source of delight to a child. Every day's walk gives him something to enter " -Charlotte Mason

I remember the first time that I nature journaled with my children. It wasn't hard to convince them to come outside and draw. A balmy summer morning beckoned us to abandon our indoor routine. Elizabeth, 6, headed up to the garden and picked a few ripe strawberries with the leaves still on. Eric, 11, found a tiny monarch caterpillar on a milkweed leaf in the field. Claire, 15, snapped off some purple coneflowers from the flowerbed next to the house-those were our first specimens.

We spread blankets on the ground and opened our sketchbooks. The three older children, heads bent and eyes fixed, immediately began to draw. Anna, 3, ran and tumbled in the grass before plopping down on a blanket next to me. I picked up a strawberry leaf and looked intently at the serrated edges. Timidly, I applied pencil strokes to the paper.

As the sun warmed our shoulders, I wasn't aware that my children's education had just been enriched beyond anything I could ask or think. Nature journaling is the course of study that the Lord has used to make my children more aware of His abundant creation and the ability He has given each one of them to capture it on paper.

Nature Journaling: A Method of Drawing Instruction

Even though I grew up in a creative home where drawing was encouraged, I didn't know which method to use to teach my children how to draw. What could I use that would keep my children - all of them - captivated and wanting to draw for a lifetime?

The answer was nature journaling. Could art really be so simple? Was drawing from nature the very thing that would inspire all of my children to want to draw? In the months that followed, the answer to that question was a resounding "Yes!" God's awe-inspiring creation was right outside of my window the whole time! How could I have been so blind? Children love nature - they love to touch it, hold it, catch it, collect it, grow it, smell it, preserve it, draw it, and let it go.

It's been amazing to hear Anna, now 5, say, "Bring that in the house, Mom, so we can draw it!" She has spontaneously drawn spiders, leaves, and sunflowers. Elizabeth, now 9, is enthralled with nature and loves to draw from it anytime. She loves collecting insects and making herbarium (plant) collections. It has been gratifying to see Eric, 13, become a more confident artist as he trains his eye by drawing from life. And Claire, 18, didn't know that she could draw anything other than horses until we started drawing from nature. All of us have become sensitized to plant, animal, and insect life for the purpose

of recording it in our journals.

The Skill of Observation

Learning how to draw is a process, yet it's rarely viewed as such. People often think you "have the gift" or you don't. The truth is that everyone has the ability to put marks on paper, but they must be willing to take the time to observe and practice. There is a vast difference between looking at something and really seeing it. Seeing takes time. The definition of the word observation is "the act of observing or taking notice; the act of seeing or fixing the mind on anything." In order to observe something, we have to look at it for a sustained period of time.

When you nature journal, life comes to a screeching halt. It's so relaxing to fix your eyes on a specimen and try to recreate it on paper. When you teach your children the quiet art of sitting and sketching from nature, you teach them to see what others miss—a God who loves color, variety, and design. There are many valuable lessons to learn in the pages of your nature journals!

Drawing from Life

When children are young, 5 to 6 years old, they draw symbols to represent objects. They may decide that a green triangle represents a pine tree. Children in this age range are happy to draw out of their imaginations, using the same symbols repeatedly to represent everyday objects.

Around the age of 9 or 10, however, children become more visually aware of the world around them. They want their drawings to look realistic. During this phase, they can become overly critical of their work if they can't make their drawing look "just right" in terms of detail and proportion. This is the stage where many children stop drawing. That's why nature journaling is such a powerful tool for helping children see the way an artist sees. It requires them to develop the observational skills needed to move out of the symbolic stage to drawing realistically.

The Process Is More Important Than the Product

One of the hardest concepts to teach children about journaling, whether writing or drawing, is that the process is more important than the product. For writing, the process is thinking. For drawing, the process is seeing. We live in a product-oriented society. We want quick, measurable results - that's how we know we're a success - but you can't expect a perfect drawing every time you nature journal, especially if you've never drawn realistically before. Drawing from life is a process that can only be developed over time—through practice.

Is this an area of study that you want God to bless? Then ask Him for growth. God loves

to give His children gifts and bring them to fruition. If you and your children haven't had these skills in the past, it doesn't mean you can't have them in the future. By faith, make it a goal to learn, grow, and draw from nature alongside your children. It is never too late to learn how to draw and become God's naturalists.

Biographical Information

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Jill Novak is an inspiring workshop and conference speaker, having a passion to help parents impart the God-given gifts of writing and drawing to each of their children. She and her husband, Robert, have been blessed with five children. Together they have produced The Girlhood Home Companion and The Gift of Family Writing. You can visit her family's website at www.giftoffamilywriting.com.