

# High Tide

Melissa Wiley, Portland, Oregon

IT'S FALL, AND I'M SHOPPING MY SHELVES. Our books did a lot of jumping around over the summer—my family relocated from San Diego to Portland, Oregon—and nothing's quite where I expect it to be. Half the poetry books are in the dining room, and half are in the basement. Historical fiction and fantasy are jumbled all together, *The Great Horn Spoon* bumping elbows with *The Great Glass Elevator*. The box of *Muse* magazines is buried somewhere in the new garage, and the Narnia books seem to have vanished entirely. Maybe I ought to look in the closet behind all the coats.

Nothing's where I expect it to be, and this is making one of my favorite activities even more enjoyable. I love exploring our family library at the start of a new season, hunting books I want

to put in the path of particular kids. After twenty-ish years of homeschooling (I never know when to start counting—when we first decided to homeschool, back in 1995 when our firstborn was a baby? Or 1999, when she would have reached official pre-K age?), I don't have to overthink this part of the process. I know our books, I know my kids, I know the rhythm of structured and unstructured learning that works for our family.

I call it "tidal learning," this ebb and flow that occurs in our family homeschooling life. During "high tide," I chart a course; I captain the ship on our metaphorical fishing expeditions. "Low tide" looks a lot like unschooling or project-based homeschooling—the kids explore the shores of knowledge in any direction





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they wish. I'm there to provide (metaphorical) sunscreen, snacks, and snorkels—whatever they need to aid their explorations.

I love our low tides, our long stretches of time devoted to deep dives and long rambles. But I adore high tide, too, and filling the baskets I keep near our best reading nooks is one of the best parts of my job. This year, my three homeschoolers are 8, 11, and 16. (Our two oldest girls are in college, and our 13-year-old goes to public school.) Eight and 11 are old enough for big, meaty read-alouds, and still young enough for picture-book cuddles. I roam the shelves, seizing treasures their older siblings loved but which the younger ones haven't yet discovered. These two still haven't met *The Penderwicks!* Or *The Mysterious Benedict Society!* Or *Watership Down!*

*The Evolution of Calpurnia Tate* goes into the basket. I know they'll be captivated by Calpurnia's quest to figure out what's up with the big yellow grasshoppers on her family's Texas ranch. Hmm, that book pairs beautifully with *The Wheel on the School*—another tale of kids trying to solve a nature mystery in their own backyards—and then there's *Charles and Emma*, that excellent middle-grade bio of Darwin. This reminds me to ask the 16-year-old if she's read *Beak of the Finch* yet; I know she'll love it.

Way leads on to way.

Years ago, describing our high-tide shift on my blog, I wrote these words:

*I used to waffle about methodologies: was I a Charlotte Mason homeschooler? An unschooler? Something in between—eclectic, perhaps? But it was all just groping for a label—and not even a label for my kids; it was about how to characterize myself in conversations with other homeschoolers, so that we might better understand one another. All the while, my kids and I went on simply doing what worked for us.*

*If something stopped working, we did something else for a while—usually this has meant facilitating a child's need to immerse deeply into a single passion or pursuit. I understand that; it's how I love to learn, too. In fact, my blog is a chronicle of*

*my own sudden immersions, some of them finite, some recurring at intervals: bread baking, gardening, sewing, Irish penny-whistle, British period drama... it's a long list. My kids have lists of their own, each one different, some interests overlapping.*

*Always, always, after one of these immersions, the diver comes up for air eventually. And there's a restlessness, a pacing at loose ends, that has, for us, always been cured by a return to morning lesson time. Rose has told me she likes having the structure there to push against: knowing there are things she is expected to do fills her with ideas for things she longs to do. One of my jobs is to keep ears open for the longings, and drop resources and opportunities in her path to help her realize them. I love that part of the job.*

After this summer's upheaval, we're all craving a bit of order in our days. This morning we lit a candle—green, beeswax, possibly the only one to survive the move—and gathered in our old/new places. Same old sofa, same old book basket. New house, new street, new town. I reached for *Favorite Poems Old and New*, whose insides seem to have detached from their cover somewhere between SoCal and the Pacific Northwest. I made a mental note to look up how to repair a broken binding—a project, perhaps, to add to our fall list. We read a poem about the seasons, because now we live in a place that has them. Outside the window, a squirrel paused on the fence with a green-hulled walnut in its paws. We didn't have squirrels in our old neighborhood, so this is hugely exciting for my younger set. I went back to the shelves and hunted out *Miss Suzy* (one of my own childhood favorites) and *The Tale of Timmy Tiptoes*.

It's fall, and the tide is coming in.

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