

Homeschool Hygge

Melissa Wiley; Portland, Oregon

OVER THE SUMMER, my family moved to Portland, Oregon, after nearly 11 years in San Diego. That means my three youngest kids have just experienced the first true autumn of their lives. Over and over during October and November, nature dazzled them. Red and orange leaves! Squirrels! Mushrooms! Northern flickers! *Rain!*

One day my 8-year-old son Huck hollered for everyone to come see the rainbow. This kid's whole life up to this point had coincided with a severe drought in Southern California. Rainbows were things you only read about in books. I found him at the kitchen door staring in wonder at a spectacular double rainbow arching over our backyard.

"It's my first time being the first one to see a rainbow!" he said. "Do I get to make a wish?"

And thus a new family tradition was born: rainbow wishes. We've had lots of opportunity for wishing since that day. The long, dark, wet season is upon us.

Like many a homeschooling parent, I have a keen awareness of the importance of *atmosphere* in our home. It's a topic I often discuss on my blog and in conference talks: how to cultivate a mood and space in which joyful learning can flourish. We're together in our home for a lot more of the day than is typical for most non-homeschooling families. And in our case, the home-centered aspect of homeschooling is intensified by the fact that both my husband and I work at home. Sure, we have activities that take us out and about, but we're still all here together for a lot of the day, most days of the week.

As winter approached, I began to think about how a long stretch of dark, rainy, or icy days might affect our family mood, our home atmosphere. Surely, at some point, the wonder and novelty would give way to weariness and cabin fever. Like everyone else on the internet, I've bumped into a zillion articles on *hygge* these past few years, the Danish word describing the homey, cozy feelings sparked by certain household items and experiences, especially warm moments of closeness shared with friends or family. It's connected to a belief that the small

actions of domestic life can be an art form—whether you're pouring a hot cup of tea or picking lemons off your backyard tree in February.

(Full disclosure: in 10 years, that darn tree gave us one lemon. *One*. But in theory, we could have experienced *hyggelig* feelings while picking our lemons, if the tree had deigned to produce them in plural.)

In the 20-odd years I've been homeschooling, I've often found myself sitting down to contemplate steps I might take to improve the atmosphere in our home. Perhaps we've had a stretch too crammed with activities, and I need to scale back and make sure the kids have some down time. Or perhaps—speaking totally hypothetically, ahem—a child's LEGO bricks have overtaken our main living spaces, and tempers are fraying due to multiple devastating jabs of pain in the soles of our feet. There are any number of factors that can introduce stress or crankiness into a home. Just as classroom teachers spend time setting up their rooms with learning stations and bulletin boards, I consider it part of my job as a homeschooling mom to give regular attention to the spaces in which our family learning adventure takes place.

And with a Pacific Northwest winter peeking around the corner, my November thoughts turned to strategies for keeping my SoCal kids happy and cozy in the atmosphere of our new home.

(Step one: massive shopping expedition prompted by the revelation that one teenaged child's only functional pair of shoes were flip flops.)

I thought back to the years we lived in Virginia. We had a house in Crozet, near Charlottesville. I remembered lighting beeswax candles in the evenings and curling up around our gas-powered fireplace. I remembered winter treks through the snow, and juncoes beneath the feeder. I remembered pressing leaves and making acorn-cap dolls, and long, happy afternoons spent over jigsaw puzzles while listening to audiobooks or *Snoopy: The Musical*. I remembered how my friend Eileen, in Ivy,

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Melissa's son, Huck,
looks out at a rainbow.

Photo by Melissa Wiley

would stir up a batch of peanut butter cookies on a moment's notice, serving them warm and wonderful. I remembered baking bread. In San Diego, even in winter it was often too warm for us to want the oven heating up the house.

I dug up the name of the beeswax candle supplier I used to order from. Still in business, hurrah! My husband scoured thrift stores for used (and mostly intact) puzzles, and he found a cheap card table on Craigslist. I began researching therapy lights and made sure everyone was getting enough Vitamin D. I bought boots and coats and rain gear, and I dipped into some favorite Charlotte Mason writings for her rousing descriptions of brisk daily walks, rain or shine. I filled the bird feeder and replenished the art supplies. I dug out the bin of quilting fabrics we'd hauled from coast to coast in 2006, and from SoCal to the Pacific Northwest this summer.

None of these were revolutionary notions. Candles, puzzles, blankets: there's nothing groundbreaking here. But that's how you cultivate a cozy atmosphere—attention to small details that make home feel *right*. This can mean tangible objects like a mug of cocoa or the intangibles of nourishing activities, like family

read-alouds or puzzle time. Atmosphere includes the scarf that keeps an icy wind off the back of your neck, or a bedtime practice of listing good things that happened each day.

Cultivating a peaceful, joyful atmosphere, which sometimes feels like my most important work as a homeschooling mom, can mean observing cherished family customs like our tradition of biscuits and chocolate gravy for birthday breakfasts.

Or it can mean allowing new customs to flourish, like making a wish when you're the first one in the family to spot a rainbow arching over the trees.

Melissa Wiley is a homeschooling mother of six, a Brave Writer instructor, and the author of more than a dozen books for kids, including The Prairie Thief, Fox and Crow Are Not Friends, and the Inch and Roly series. She blogs about her family's reading life and Tidal Homeschooling adventures at Here in the Bonny Glen. Melissa will be the Keynote Speaker at the 2018 VaHomeschoolers Conference and Resource Fair. In addition to her Keynote Address, she will speak about atmosphere, habits, and joyful homeschooling.

Brannon Family Recipe for Chocolate Gravy

(Used with permission of Melissa's father, Murray Brannon)

¼ cup cocoa
¼ cup flour
1 cup sugar
1 ½ cups milk

Mix dry ingredients first, right in your saucepan, then stir in the milk.

Heat slowly, stirring constantly. You want to bring it just to a bubble, but you don't want to let it scorch.

Take it off the heat, keep stirring. It will thicken upon standing.

Spoon over hot, buttered biscuits.

The butter is vital—the magic of this dish is in the delectable combination of warm chocolate and melted butter. Trust me.



Photo by Erin Scherger