

Worksheets or Wonder: A Story

The sky was a bright blue, clear with wispy white clouds and a strong June sun. My four children were ankle-deep in ocean water, shrieking with excitement each time they spotted a hermit crab or a sea star or a snail as the tide retreated.

We were at “rocky beach,” the made-up name my kids call that stretch of coastline near Cape Cod. It is a favorite family spot, a place we spend hours together from spring through fall marveling at the critters living precariously along the shore. The beach was quiet that day, but for the crashing waves and seagull squawks. It’s a good half-mile wooded walk to the public beach from the parking lot in this state-managed nature preserve. The short hike and the rocky coast keep the number of beach-goers to a minimum even at summer’s peak.

On that late-spring morning, the beach was nearly empty for the first hour of our visit. Then, a busload of middle-schoolers from the town’s public school arrived—worksheets and pencils in hand. I overheard the teacher, a pleasant, middle-aged man, giving instructions. The students, he said, were to explore the immediate beach area searching for the items listed on the worksheet. When found, they were asked to write their observations and cross the item off the list.

I watched the students scatter with joyful enthusiasm, delighted to be at the beach on a warm day on the cusp of summer. While my children continued their exploration and discovery of the tidal critters, shouting now and then when they spotted something new or fascinating, the middle-schoolers consulted their worksheets. I sat on a rock, noticing: the schooled children with their worksheets and instructions and inevitable assessment, and the never-been-schooled children with the wide-open beach and all its treasures as their natural learning space.

One of the students ran past me toward a classmate shouting that she had found something really cool along the beach, a critter of some sort. She wanted to show it to her friend. “It’s not on the worksheet,” the friend replied matter-of-factly and turned to walk away. Her enthusiasm deflated, the girl dropped the critter and caught up to her classmate to find the next item on the list.