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A shorter version of this essay was published in *The Christian Science Monitor* and in *Home Educator's Family Times*.

1022 words

Spring Harvest for a Long Winter

Laura, our daughters, Juniper, and Amanda, and I drove the winding gravel road up Mt. Ireland, in the Blue Mountains of northeastern Oregon, in spring, when Juniper and Amanda were nine and seven. As far as we knew, wild mushrooms grow wherever they grow. They often grow profusely the year following a forest fire, but there had been no recent fire on the mountain, so we followed our instincts.

I pulled off the main road and parked. I said, "I think this will be a good spot."

We opened the doors and climbed out into spring sunshine. Amanda looked around, her golden red hair shining in sunshine. She asked me, "Why is this a good spot for mushrooms?"

I said, "Because there's room to get the pickup off the road and park it without having it roll down the mountain."

We decided to climb above the road rather than heading down the mountain. "Because," Juniper said, "if we do find mushrooms, it'll be easier to carry them down coming back than if we climb with them, and there's more meadow up there than below the road."

We climbed the exposed dirt and rock bank cut into the mountain to let the road through, stood in green grass, and surveyed the forest of ponderosa pine trees, Douglas fir trees, lodgepole pines, and aspens, with open areas of grass and low, scattered bushes and wildflowers throwing many colors and delicious smells into spring air.

We scattered out and wandered between bushes of the meadow until Juniper called, "Here's something," and we converged to see

what she had found. In the shade of huckleberry bushes starting to blossom, a large, long clump of fungus growth had pushed green grasses aside and stood white above the rocky soil. I said, "Looks like cauliflower mushroom to me." I reached into our lunch sack and got the mushroom book. We grouped around the book and studied photos and text. Cauliflower mushrooms are distinct. They look like cauliflower, though with smaller, more spread out heads than cauliflower. Coral mushrooms are the only poisonous mushroom close in appearance, and the corals have gelatinous flesh rather than the white, mushroom-like flesh of the cauliflowers.

"Looks definite to me. These are cauliflower mushroom and good to eat." Everyone agreed. I broke off a small piece and tasted it. "Very good. Similar to commercial button mushrooms, but much better, because we found and harvested them." All tried a sample and liked the mushrooms.

We pulled plastic sacks from our lunch sack and harvested, a family enterprise in clear mountain sunshine, accompanied by songs from mountain bluebirds and various other small song birds, sometimes the raucous call of a steller's jay, and our own happy chatter.

Laura said, "Some of these are wormy. Look at this one. They're everywhere in this one."

We broke away pieces from large growths projecting up from the earth, inspected the pieces carefully, cleaned away dirt and wormy parts, and saved the good parts into our sacks. We put our sacks in shade, ate our lunch, explored more of the meadow, and looked over green eastern Oregon forest stretching out for miles below us.

We carried sacks full of cauliflower mushrooms down to our pickup and drove down the mountain, over one summit, and home to Whitney Valley, where we cut up cauliflower mushrooms, cooked some into spaghetti sauce for dinner and spread other

pieces on screens to dry, above the stove and scattered around the house wherever there was room for screens. Over the next several days, as they were ready, we bagged dried mushrooms and stored them in the cupboard above the sink.

We rationed out dried mushrooms over many months and ate them in gravy and in sauces.

More than two feet of snow covered the ground in Whitney Valley. Our outside thermometer read twenty degrees. We stacked books, papers, and partially-completed projects together so we had room to eat on the kitchen table. Midday sun shone through our large south window and warmed us at our lunch. We served spaghetti noodles onto our plates and ladled on Laura's own spaghetti sauce, generously laden with wild mushrooms.

We remembered the warm day in spring when Amanda and Juniper dug around cauliflower mushrooms with their hands and with sticks and harvested the white growth from rocky soil. A mountain bluebird sang in spring sunshine. A red-tailed hawk soared above us. A steller's jay objected loudly to our invasion of its mountain and then flew higher up the mountain, away from unwelcome human company. Laura held mushrooms up, inspected them for dirt and worms, trimmed them with my pocket knife, handed me the parts that passed inspection, and I filled another sack.

Before our winter lunch at the kitchen table, I thought of talking about how we could have dried the worms too. Though they aren't usually eaten in our culture, they are good, nutritious food. I looked at my wife and daughters in sunlight streaming in the window, happily chatting and getting our food onto our plates and the plates put at their places on the table, and I decided not to bring up the subject. My family loves me and allows me my individuality, which often includes my propensity to turn many of our moments toward education, but they would probably appreciate it if I leave the discussion of nutritional value of insects and worms

and what other cultures gratefully accept for food for another time.

We sat together in winter sunshine through our south window, between classes at the kitchen table, and ate spaghetti with mushrooms in the sauce. We talked about how we had walked on Ireland Mountain in sunshine in spring of the year. Our class that warm day of harvesting mushrooms from the mountain, of harvesting learning from the mountain, of appreciating the forest, the meadow, and life around us, blended with our lunch at home.

We expressed gratitude for the sustenance we brought from the mountain to our winter table, for our lives, and for warm memories we would carry with us through a long winter and through all our lives.