

EDITORIAL NOTE

Of Swallows, Smiles, and Saving the Earth

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Swirling, zooming, rising and diving in a multi-hued blur: I was beset by an energized gaggle of swallows. I loved it. I want kids to love it, too.

Actually, I both loved and understood it. I am far-beyond-fortunate in my retirement, as at that moment I was mowing little walking paths through the hayfields of our Vermont hilltop farm. The big lawn tractor was doing all the real work, so I could watch the fun. Barn swallows and Tree swallows were the players: small, colorful insectivores (insect eaters) that fly with grace, speed, and exceptional maneuverability. “Insect eaters” was the key to understanding the scene. The spinning mower blades were stirring scores of insects out of the hay; the swallows knew a feast when they saw one. Their twisting, erratic flights were their feeding behavior: catching tiny insects on the fly, gulping them down, and coming back for more.

However, *explaining* nature’s beauty and wonder is very different from *feeling* it. And at that moment I was indeed (per today’s vernacular) feeling it. First and foremost in my awareness was delight, not knowledge. I couldn’t help but smile – literally – at the beauty and kinetic energy of those six or eight birds churning around me, like atoms gone wild within a molecule. My head was spinning to follow the commotion, but it was my heart that was being moved, not my brain cells. Understanding the phenomenon was just for bonus points.

For many years I have been quick to tell early childhood audiences that I am an environmental educator, not an early childhood educator. The two realms fit perfectly together for young children, of course, and over the decades I have gained a decent working knowledge of child development. But my primary perspective has always remained that of an environmental crusader: focused on preserving the natural world that we all depend upon, regardless of our mastery of executive functions or our social/emotional skills. Nature bats first, and last.

In 1980 Thomas Tanner of Iowa State University published his groundbreaking research about the life history of conservation leaders, searching for what commonalities they might have. Tanner found those to be childhood experiences in natural settings. This was the first prominent step in a long journey that has come to rework the core paradigm of environmental education and steer it into a happy collision with early childhood education. The gestation period for this understanding was long, but it gradually gained momentum through vehicles such as Robert Michael Pyle’s book, *The Thunder Tree* (1993), and Dr. Louise Chawla’s extensive published research in what has become known as the field of significant life experiences (e.g., “Life Paths Into Effective Environmental Action”). Early on, a smattering of environmental educators began to seriously ponder the implications of this nascent research and commentary: that emotional connections to nature, forged in the context of relatively unstructured play and recreation, have more power and lasting personal impact than does cognitive learning about the environment. No one questioned the ultimate importance of combining the two, emotion and cognition. But there was an emerging case for crucial sequencing.

Then, in 2005, Richard Louv's much-praised book, Last Child in the Woods, brought the issue of children's declining time in nature into the broader public's eye – as well as to a larger audience in environmental education (EE) and to initial attention from the early childhood education (ECE) community. Since then, there has been a rising trend line of new initiatives to connect children to nature, in greater numbers and more-varied ways. That trend seems to be accelerating rapidly, and I am personally delighted at the myriad wonderful efforts underway and the growing chorus of effective voices advocating for children's unstructured time in nature. Also expanding is related research, and thus far it seems to consistently support the premise that frequent, positive, childhood experiences in nature are the most common source of life-long conservation values. We now usually call these experiences "nature play."

Perhaps inevitably, the term "nature play" has come to encompass a very broad range of activities and approaches. Ideally, I consider nature play to be children's self-directed play and explorations in a natural or naturalized setting, whether expansive or tiny. It is play without goals; play and exploration for their sheer, inherent joy – but which guides children towards comfort in, and affection for, the natural world. Yet some see nature play as just a new name for the game-based environmental education activities that have been used for decades. Others see it as denoting virtually any activity that gets kids outside. Still others view it as outdoor play that's done on logs and rocks made of fiberglass, with lifeless "streams" made of concrete, or amidst the cacophony of outdoor musical instruments and noisemakers. And some teachers simply take it as motivation to create a nature-themed classroom activity center, without any correlating outdoor experiences. None of these are bad for kids; they all have developmental value. But are they actually nature play?

Personally, I'm more inclined to see it as swallows and smiles.

I am neither a researcher nor an academic; I'm just an old EE practitioner. As such, I offer here no compelling data sets or dizzying lists of references. Instead, I speak of what I believe. No one will ever conclusively prove the dominance of heart over head, or beauty before brains, or emotion trumping science. But 40+ years of professional experience, combined with 60+ years of life, have thoroughly convinced me of the supremacy of the first of each of those three dualities. Nevertheless, I will never dismiss the importance of environmental knowledge. Indeed, given the complex nature of current environmental issues, it is more vital than ever that the public grasp at least the basics of ecological science. But faced with limited time and limited resources – as EE and ECE operations inevitably are – I advocate for the fostering of children's emotional connections to nature as the keystone piece in the creation of a more environmentally concerned and active population.

On my office shelf I have a well-worn spiral notebook from my college lab course in environmental science. It is 45 years old; no other college work has escaped my recycle bin. This surviving notebook holds outstanding explanations of basic ecological concepts, combined with many wonderful little examples and anecdotes about nature. I can flip through it productively even today. But it is not top-of-mind when I consider what has fostered and fueled my love of nature. Instead, I'll recall the lizards, beehives, and black widows in Grandpa's Arizona yard. The family travels to National Parks. The quiet hours spent catching mostly small, inedible fish in the C & O Canal. Off-season teenage tenting on the sands of nearly deserted Assateague island. Spectacular, hard-earned trail views from atop the Green and White Mountains. Eating a camp dinner beside a wilderness pond, while a beaver cautiously chews his own supper of shoreline tubers, barely six feet away. Cowering amidst too-close lightning in the Tetons' Hurricane Pass. And rocking gently in a solo kayak in a Boundary Waters lake, savoring a midnight moon and a musical score from yodeling loons. These are what stir my soul, not scientific equations or survey percentages. These are what make me give a damn.

Careful review of the significant life experiences research will reveal that despite the influential preeminence of nature play and caring mentors, cognitive learning is nevertheless the factor that stirs *some* people into personal conservation values. Others are similarly moved by participation in outdoor-oriented youth groups, by their early employment experiences, or by witnessing wanton environmental destruction in their own lives. We humans are not all the same, thankfully. Thus, it is important for the early childhood environmental education profession to incorporate multiple approaches to connecting children and nature, just as it is important for all teachers to understand and apply different learning styles. But these diverse strategies should never be used to the exclusion of

intentional efforts to foster emotional attachments to nature. These need not be as grand-scaled or spectacular as some of the personal examples I cite, but they must be *authentic, first-person experiences with real nature*. They can be the magical spectacle of watching a Monarch emerge from its chrysalis, the delight of a child growing her first carrot, or just quiet moments lying in the grass, watching the clouds drift by. Is there an elementary school or an early childhood center in the country that couldn't facilitate some or all of these, with but minimal effort and expense? I doubt it.

This summer – our first at our new Vermont home – seems to have zoomed past. Happily, I didn't miss out on the bubbling songs of Bobolinks in the fields, the glimpses of our local foxes and deer, the mist rising in front of the distant mountains, and night skies overflowing with stars. Perhaps more important than my own delights, though, were the moments when our visiting, five-year-old, urban granddaughter was able to experience similar bits of authentic nature. She can't yet speak powerfully about them, other than perhaps her pleadings to her butterfly-net-armed Nana to "catch bigger ones with pretty patterns!" But I have no doubt that she will remember these days. Nana's and Grandpa Ken's Vermont farm will help shape her childhood and her life.

I know – and try to never, ever forget – that I am fortunate to live where and how I do, both now and in decades past. But I know, as well, that authentic nature experiences are available to *all* young children, urban or rural, given a parent or mentor who will guide them outside and share their own love of the natural world. They do not need facts or fears; they need chances to fall in love with nature. The famed American naturalist, John Burroughs, put it perfectly over a century ago: "Knowledge without love will not stick. But when love comes first, knowledge is sure to follow." If you work with children and nature, emblazon that wisdom in your mind. Or better yet: in your heart.

References

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