

October 18, 2009

What the World Needs Now

Yesterday, was such a beautiful day wasn't it? It evoked a somewhat wistful feeling in me- reminding me of the days when my brother, sisters and I spent long hours outside. We lived in a newly built suburban neighborhood- the houses were close together- but our house bordered 16 acres of undeveloped woods on the back side of the development. I spent hours exploring them... walking on the old 2 wheeled rutted roads- we were told they were old farming roads- the ruts were made by wagon wheels. They were used by farmers, taking their goods to market. My brother and his friends used the rocky outcroppings to fight mock battles. My friends and I domesticated the mossy spaces between those rock outcroppings among the trees making homes for our stuffed animals and dolls. I wondered at the lady slippers and Jack in the pulpits that only grew outside the bounds of our parent's gardens. As the oldest of 4 children all born within 4 years and 11 months, our house was a busy one. My mother would send us out with the cry, "It's a sin to be inside on a day like this!" So even now... when the day is as beautiful as it was yesterday, but I have inside work to do- I yearn to heed my mother's theology. The woods were a favorite sanctuary of mine. The early solace found there continues today... and there is nothing better than a woods wander to help make me whole again.

I wonder if you experienced abundant time in nature as I did while you were growing up. Richard Louv, author of the book, *The Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* describes similar kinds of memories. One evening, his 10 year old son asked him- quite seriously- "Dad, how come it was more fun when you were a kid?" When Louv asked what he meant, he replied... "Well, you are always talking about your woods and tree houses, and how you used to ride that horse down near the swamp."

Louv points out that Baby boomers or older seemed to enjoy a kind of free natural play that seems in this era a kind of quaint artifact. Within the space of a few decades, the way children understand and interact with nature has reversed. I didn't understand the ecological connections of my backyard forest with other forests- hadn't heard of holes in the ozone layer or global warming. But I could give you a tour of my woods. Today, your children might know about global warming and the importance of recycling and using less gas and turning off the lights and not littering. But could they tell you about the last time they explored the woods in solitude or lay in a field listening to the wind and watching the clouds change shape and move by?¹

Louv writes about the new relationship between children and nature and he begins with words from someone from our Unitarian Universalist tradition. Henry David Thoreau said< "Here is this vast, savage, howling mother of ours,

Nature lying all around, with such beauty, and such affection for her children, as the leopard;
And yet we are so early weaned from her breast to society, to that culture which is exclusively an interaction of man on man.”

How we have come to this place where we as a culture and society are so emotionally removed from the nature and the earth that we depend on is the subject of another sermon. In my studies with other colleagues, I’m exploring the thinking of Emerson and Thoreau, their friendship and their need for each other’s perspectives on nature. We are curious why some of us feel such urgency to act on behalf of the planet and others do not feel that urgency. So more on that another time.

Today, I want to encourage our reflection as parents, family and congregational community on all that nature offers our children- aside from the very obvious one of offering them food from which they draw their daily physical sustenance.

“For children, nature comes in many forms... a newborn pet, a pet that dies, a worn path through the woods, a mysterious edge of a vacant lot- whatever shape nature takes, it offers each child an older, larger world separate from parents. Unlike television it doesn’t steal time, it amplifies it. Nature offers healing for a child living in a destructive family or neighborhood. Nature inspires creativity in a child by requiring full use of the senses. Given a chance, a child will bring the confusion of the world to the woods, wash it in a stream creek, turn it over to see what lives on the unseen side of that confusion. Nature can frighten a child, too and this fright serves a purpose- the purpose of developing a capacity for creative problem solving or simply being still and observing the face of the unknown. In nature, a child finds freedom, fantasy, privacy: a place distant from the adult world, a separate peace.”²

Nature is also a spiritual necessity for children. Many of us would describe the role of nature in our spiritual development. Time in nature inspires awe... and the connection with something greater than ourselves- yet something we are a part of all at the same time. Call it a moment of transcendence or an experience of the divine... the holy... an experience of God. Professor Abraham Joshua Heschel says that our goal should be to live in radical amazement. We should get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed.”

Edward Hoffman, a clinical psychologist has wrote: “Visions of Innocence: Spiritual and Inspirational Experiences of Children”... he found that many children and adults recount their spontaneous childhood experiences of ‘great meaning, beauty of inspiration... apart from institutional religion... many adults report that

they had tremendous peak- even mystical experiences during their early years. Some of these experiences arise from heartfelt prayer, dream experience... or simply an ordinary moment of daily life that suddenly became an entry point for bliss. But Hoffman found that most transcendent childhood experiences happen in nature.

Gretel Ehrlich wrote, “To trace the history of a river or a raindrop...is also to trace the history of the soul, the history of the mind descending and arising in the body. In both, we constantly seek and stumble on divinity...”

More and more, I'd like us to offer opportunities to be outside together- we begin our each year with a retreat at Ferry Beach- weather permitting, we experience as much time outside together as possible. Occasionally we do hikes together. This past summer our first ever summer camp had as its theme “Journey for a Planet.” When the children came out to visit my husband's and my beginner farm- it was such a delight to see them thrill with pulling onions, digging potatoes, wondering at the compost worms, feeding the lambs and chickens.

In Richard Louv's book, he makes the case that not only are children at risk of losing the emotional and spiritual grounding that time in nature nurtures, we are at risk of losing a critical number of people who understand our interconnections with the natural world and all the gifts that a healthy planet gives us. I know that my deep passion for caring for this earth grow out of my deep feeling that my life – spiritual and physical depends on it.

And yet the very work I feel called to do to serve the world... sometimes keeps me removed from nature- and I suffer from my own “nature deficit disorder.” EB White said it best: “I arise in the morning torn between a desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy the world. This makes it hard to plan the day.”

When we think about caring for our children and the earth... there is that paradox- isn't there? That paradox between saving the world and savoring it. As caregivers for children... we must do all we can to care for the particular children in our charge- and of course – all of us are responsible... but the day to day, moment by moment responsibility falls to those parents, closest family members and friends. But what good is our loving nurture of our children if they live in a world that is not hospitable to them- a planet that can no longer support life in a way that will allow them and their brothers and sisters- human and animal- around the globe- to thrive.

Some of us heard John Perkins speak at the Peterborough Lyceum this past summer about the control that corporations have on national and international policy. He pointed out that never before has everyone on the earth shared a common crisis as we do now. We've been concerned about the state of earth- because of pollution for a long time. But now our planet is changing at such a fast

rate- due to our carbon emissions that we can't count on this home as a hospitable place for our children, our grandchildren or their children. Whether violent storms challenge us here or in far away places- they bring suffering that our children will need to respond to. Wars precipitated by scarce resources like water are already being fought. And ironically, we send some of our young people into harms way now to procure oil, which we use beyond our fair share. Then we put all our young people in harms way for years to come by emitting that oil in the form of carbon into the air.

On a beautiful day like yesterday, all these bleak thoughts about the state of nature and our earth are easy to ignore. And we should allow our spirits to be buoyed by reveling in amazing orange red trees against a true blue sky. We must savor those moments in order to know what we are saving for our children. Caring for our children crosses most of the boundaries that typically divide us: religious, political, economic circumstances, race and culture. Parents of growing children have so much on their plates- every day brings joy- but also brings the immediate demands of providing moment by moment physical and emotional nurture- along with calls to volunteer in your children's schools and congregation. As the saying goes, it does take a village to raise a child. This morning as we dedicated children, we made promises to do what we can as part of each child's village.

As children experience fear, they take their cues from us- the adults in their lives. Their hope for their lives is based on a sense of hope we keep alive in ourselves. One of the ways to keep that flame of hope burning is to see where we can be of service in helping to make our community and the world a better place. We balance keeping our consciousness informed of the larger picture by educating ourselves – along with savoring what we have here and now to be grateful for. And occasionally there are opportunities to involve our children in taking action...they can become a part of the solution. This afternoon and next Saturday is just one such opportunity.

It is just 7 weeks until the international Conference on Climate and the Environment in Copenhagen- where people from around the world will gather to grapple with the problem of climate change. An important part of the agreement reached there will be to set the goal of 350. That's the level of parts per million carbon to atmosphere that scientists tell us we need to achieve in order to save life on this planet for our children, grandchildren and their children- not to mention a multitude of other species. We are currently at 390 parts per million. This coming Saturday, October 24, around the world, people will gather to call attention to this goal- letting our leaders know that we want them to have this specific goal in the Copenhagen agreement. We are hosting an intergenerational and interfaith event here at our church this coming Saturday at 10am. There will be short worship service at 10am- with our youth group, musicians and 7 clergy and

congregations participating, then we'll parade down to the oval- we'll be at the oval for a short time and then return back here for music, children's activities and a simple harvest lunch of soup and bread. I hope you will all join us on Saturday, with your children and grandchildren. This afternoon, as we share cake to celebrate the children we have dedicated today... you will also have a chance to make prayer flags and posters for those children, animals and places you cherish.

To honor the 350 goal, my Unitarian Universalist minister colleague, Fred Small, has created a 350 Anthem. We'll be singing it on Saturday, so we thought we'd warm up for that day's event by singing it together now. The words are in your order of service.

¹ Richard Louv. *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 2006. Quotes, paraphrases and ideas from Louv's book appear in the previous two paragraphs. From introduction.

² Ibid. some quotes (not exact), paraphrase and ideas. Pages 7-9.