

Inner Life of the Child in Nature

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It's hard to pick up a newspaper or magazine these days without reading at least one article on the plight of the earth. What can we do? Will it *ever* be enough? Is the answer to be found in driving a hybrid car, installing solar panels, using compact fluorescent light bulbs? Although these practices can be wonderful acts of environmental stewardship, Thomas Berry, author and self-described "geologian" – historian both of religion and of the earth – writes:

"There is a certain *futility* in the efforts being made – truly sincere, dedicated, and intelligent efforts – to remedy our environmental devastation simply by activating renewable sources of energy... The difficulty is that the natural world is seen primarily for human use, not as a mode of sacred presence (...) to be communed with in wonder, beauty, and intimacy. In our present attitude, the world remains a *commodity* to be bought and sold, not a sacred reality to be venerated... Eventually, only our sense of the sacred will save us."

Perhaps it's a sad day when a former environmental engineer like myself admits that engineering might *not* be the key to solving our environmental woes. I remember back to almost 12 years ago, while sampling monitoring wells at a hazardous waste site in western North Carolina, when a co-worker geologist remarked to me: "You know, I became a geologist because I wanted to work outside, and I wanted to put my hands on the earth. Now, here I am, suited up in protective tyvek, unable to breath the air, and unable to touch the earth except with protective gloves." Shortly after that day, I left my career as an environmental engineer to become a high school science and math teacher. Although there was some satisfaction in working to remediate toxic sites, the whole endeavor was leaving me too demoralized about the future of our planet, and the inability of my engineering skills to really get to the heart of the matter. If engineering is not the solution, what is?

This past year, I completed the first half of a two-year co-research program titled "The Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice." The group that runs this program, The Center for Education, Imagination, and the Natural World, was established as a non-profit organization eight years ago. The Center is partnered with Timberlake Farm, a 165-acre earth sanctuary located in Whitsett, North Carolina, between Burlington and Greensboro. The program I'm participating in was designed to:

"prepare educators to develop capacities to nurture the deep inner faculties of imagination and intuition in children and young adults, and to create contexts within which children and young adults are given the opportunity to develop a bond of intimacy with the natural world".

Sounds complicated, doesn't it? But really, all of us who have ever done the simple act of taking a child on a "being walk" have already done this. A "being walk" as environmental educator Joseph Cornell describes in his book, *Listening to Nature*, is a walk at a child's pace, going where a child wants to go, stopping and looking at what a child wants to stop and look at, and spending as much time enjoying nature as a child wants to. Now, as we may well know, too many "being walks" can drive even the most well-meaning adult to distraction, but that's why Cornell also introduces "time hikes" – where the adult sets the pace. And while "time hikes" can be a great way to spend time in nature with children, it's important to allow for some "being walks" as well. As Rachel Carson reminds us in her book *The Sense of Wonder*, "If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder...he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement, and mystery of the world we live in."

Along with "being walks", I find assurance for our abilities to develop intimate bonds with the natural world in the Old Testament lesson today, Psalm 104, as well as the words from John's gospel when Jesus says: "I am the vine, you are the branches." Our intimate bonds with the natural world, much like our intimate bonds with the

divine, are *already* in place. It's only up to us to behold them, to allow ourselves to be grasped, to allow ourselves into "being" to actually notice a presence that is already entwined with us.

In my work with the Center this past year, I have had time to revisit my earlier questions about environmental devastation and the shortcomings of engineering solutions. Perhaps it really *is* only our sense of the sacred that will save us. How do we shift away from viewing the natural world as "a commodity to be bought and sold" to recognizing it as a "sacred presence primarily to be communed with in wonder, beauty, and intimacy"? How can we claim our sense of the sacred?

Perhaps the answer is not so much *claiming* our sense of the sacred, but rather *re-claiming* it. It's time to tell the *great* story that our children asked of us at the Call to Worship today:

"A story told by humans to one another that will also be the story that the wood thrush sings in the thicket, the story that the river recites in its downward journey."

What are our stories of when the natural world is viewed not as a *collection of objects*, but rather as a *communion of subjects*?

Such stories are the core of psychologist Tobin Hart's book, *The Secret Spiritual World of Children*. In the following excerpt, Mark and his eight-year-old daughter, Miranda, were at a quiet beach one warm, sunny day: Miranda soon wandered into the soft and steady waves, just moving back and forth with the waves. Ten or fifteen minutes passed, and Mark thought that her eyes were closed. Thirty minutes went by, and she was still swaying in the gentle surf in the same spot. After an hour, he found himself swaying with her as he sat and watched her from the beach. It was as if she were in a trance. He wanted to make sure she was all right. *Is this some kind of seizure? Does she have enough sunscreen?* he wondered, but he managed not to intrude.

It was nearly an hour and a half before she came out of the water, absolutely glowing and peaceful. She sat down next to him without saying a word. After a few minutes, he managed to gently ask what she had been doing. "I was the water," she said softly. "The water?" he repeated. "Yeah, it was amazing. I was the water. I love it and it loves me. I don't know how else to say it." They sat quietly until she hopped up to dig in the sand a few minutes later.

In this story, we are given a glimpse of the Inner Life of the Child in Nature. Miranda experiences a full communion with the water, and Mark creates the context where this intimate bond can occur. He does this in a way that may seem unfamiliar to us hyper-vigilant, attentive, over-scheduling parents of the 21st century, myself included. *He doesn't interfere*. What would *you* have done if that was your 8-year-old standing still for over an hour at the ocean's edge? I'm sure I would have walked over to check in after just few minutes... and what would have been lost?

Hart shares another story of the Inner Life of the Child in Nature, this time a six year old boy, who:

"...was walking in a large open meadow when a huge dark rain cloud filled the sky above him. Looking up, he saw the flight of white cranes passing across the dark cloud. In this moment, he was completely overwhelmed, 'seeing light, feeling joy, and experiencing the upsurge of a great current in one's chest, like the bursting of a rocket. Since that day, I have been a different [person]. I began to see another person within me.'"

That boy was Ramakrishna, born in 1836, who went on to be a great spiritual leader of India. Much like the vine and the branches, perhaps a communal moment in nature can allow us to feel God firsthand; to experience God through us, with us, in us.

Our story of communion with the natural world can even serve to fundamentally alter the course of our lives. Thomas Berry in his book, *The Great Work: Our Way Into the Future*, recalls a childhood experience in the natural world when he was eleven years old:

“My family was moving from a more settled part of a small southern town out to the edge of town where the new house was being built...Down below [the house] was a small creek and there across the creek was a meadow. It was an early afternoon in May when I first wandered down the incline, crossed the creek, and looked out over the scene...The field was covered with white lilies above the thick grass. A magic moment, this experience gave to my life something that seems to explain my thinking at a more profound level than almost any other experience I can remember.”

Berry goes on to say that he has returned and continues to return to this moment,

“and the impact it has had on my feeling for what is real and worthwhile in life...Whatever preserves and enhances the meadow in the natural cycles of its transformation is good; whatever opposes this meadow or negates it is not good. My life orientation is that simple. It is also that pervasive.”

What are our stories of feeling part of the communion of subjects in nature? In what ways do these stories reveal our “inner lives” and affect our daily choices? Maybe our stories are not something we consider daily, but imagine these intimate bonds with the natural world as a stream that might sometimes meander and vanish into the ground, only to later find its way back to the surface of our lives. Clearly, engineering solutions are crucial components of sustainable earth stewardship, but reclaiming the natural world as a sacred reality, re-connecting with our own stories and continuing to allow for *new* moments of “being” and “beholding” with the natural world – *these* are the essential elements that are at the heart of our shift away from environmental devastation.

May we all go forward from this place today, remembering, sharing, and rediscovering with our children and grandchildren the “Great Story” of our Earth:

A story that will be my story as well as the story of everyone and everything around me, a story that brings us together in a valley of community, a story that brings together humankind with every living being in the valley.

Amen.