

"Look Dick, Look Jane"

by Helen MacDonald

L'auteure offre des conseils, en tant que mère et activiste, afin d'apprendre aux enfants à respecter la nature et vivre en harmonie avec elle.

We live in a rapidly changing world. No one of us can keep up with technology which, many once believed, would free us from the chains of labour, disease, injustice, and poverty, and which would spawn a society of poets, artists, and philosophers. This myth, however, reflects little of the reality.

A few in the 'first world' labour for wealth and power, while the many labour simply to survive. Civil strife and warfare are a legacy from one generation to another. Women, children, and the environment continue to suffer obscene injustices as victims of greed and power. Violence and pornography sells...poetry, song and dance is for 'wimps'.

This is not the world in which I wish to raise my children, Kyle (age 8) and Garrett (age 5). Parenting is, to me, an extension of my desire to ensure good health, peace, and justice for my family, and the protection and preservation of heritage and the environment.

As it is, we take on the most important task of our culture, parenting, without the benefit of 'experience' or 'training'. How, in the chaos and race for wealth and power, can we guide our children, particularly during their formative years, without losing them entirely to the dominant social (Ninja Turtle and Big Mac) paradigm?

Margaret Mead, anthropologist, says: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed it's the only thing that ever has." (Durham Environmental Network)

I believe change can occur, particularly if we raise our children to know the wonder and beauty of the planet, and to appreciate and respect all its parts.

When Kyle celebrated his first birthday, I rented a video camera to record the milestone. At the time, we were living in a village in a small apartment above the local liquor store. There was no back yard or nearby park. To this point, 'experience' for Kyle was limited to the indoors or a controlled view from a 'snuggly', stroller or sleigh.

It was spring, and I decided to film him exploring the library grounds across the street. After a time, he no longer sought my face behind the camera. He forgot I was there, becoming completely absorbed in the experience. Then, while crouched, and intent upon the movement of an insect, his eyes carried him to the ground until his body was thrust into a somersault. His private interaction with the bug became an important lesson in seeing nature whole, and the 'experience' of oneness.

I then reflected on his first-year experiences; how he began to explore the world around him. First smelling, touching, looking. Then, reaching, grabbing, and putting everything into his mouth. Tasting was a part of 'seeing' nature whole.

Crawling on the ground, in the dirt, on the grass, he explored the environment with all senses. He knew no names of living things. Bugs were alive and interesting. They moved this way or that and came in different shapes, sizes, and colours. Birds sang. Dogs barked. Leaves rustled and tripped along the ground, stirred by an unseen hand. Dirt and rocks felt, tasted, and smelled different from

grass and flowers. The space beyond my smile moved and breathed also, as he saw clouds drift by.

Water was wet, cold or warm. It made a nice noise and felt good all over his body. 'Mom' and 'Dad' smelled a certain way, and made certain noises. This is when the foundation of respect for the environment and perception of it as an extension of ourselves, as a part of the web, is laid.

Several months after my 'bug lesson', my friend Susan Erskine-Elgear taught me the next valuable lesson. Kyle discovered a toad in the window well of our new home on the fringes of the Ganaraska Forest. He wanted to pick it up, but couldn't reach it. I was disinclined to touch it ("Oooh...yuk!"). Sue reached for it, and cupping it gently in her hand presented the 'new' creature to Kyle.

I watched my child and Sue speak the silent, but powerful, language of awe and wonder. I was an outsider, illiterate and ignorant. It was 'just' a toad...drab, repulsive, without value... or, was it?

John Fowles writes that to name things in nature is to lose them. Once you 'know' that the thing is 'a toad', or 'a tree', you lose sight of the fact that toads and trees... "are social creatures, and no more natural as isolated specimens than man is as a marooned sailor or a hermit."

At first, children see nature whole—the tree is part of the hills, which are part of the sky—blending like a watercolour landscape. But, once named, separated, and compartmentalized in our vocabulary, the tree is no longer part of nature's mozaic, but a single, disconnected entity.

In her study of experiential education as conducted in outdoor education pro-

grammes, Susan Erskine-Elgear draws together the work of authors such as John Fowles, Edith Cobb, Richard Coe, John Livingston, and others to delve into the total experience of 'being'... "within the unknown landscape of place and self." And, she laments that "few researchers related the sense of total being to the presence of nature or acknowledge the importance of this sense of being in later life" (Erskine-Elgear, 89).

What happened between the time I was a child, full of wonder at the universe, and now, as mother, 'protecting' my child from a 'yukky' toad, and displaying disgust at a creature so fragile, so beautiful? What was I doing robbing my child of the quintessential 'nature' experience? Not only that, I robbed myself of the 'moment of experience' with my child. I was frustrated, and envious.

Robert Fulghum reminds us 'grown-ups' of what we know to be meaningful:

All I really need to know about how to live and what to do and how to be I learned in kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate-school mountain, but there in the sandpile at Sunday School. These are the things I learned:

Share everything. Play fair.
Don't hit people.

Put things back where you found them. Clean up your own mess.
Don't take things that aren't yours.
Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody. Wash your hands before you eat.

Flush.

Warm Cookies and cold milk are good for you.

Live a balanced life—learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day some.

Take a nap every afternoon.

When you go out into the world,



Laurie Swim, *Where the Heart Is....* 14 x 14"
From *World of Crafts: Quilting*. Friedman Group, 1991.

watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.

Be aware of wonder. Remember the little seed in the Styrofoam cup: The roots go down and the plant goes up and nobody really knows how or why, but we are all like that.

Goldfish and hamsters and white mice and even the little seed in the Styrofoam cup—they all die. So do we.

And then remember the Dick-and-Jane books and the first word you learned—the biggest word of all—Look (4).

We must also listen. Chief Dan George tells us something which few in our euro-western, urbanized, secularized culture know:

The beauty of the trees,
the softness of the air,
the fragrance of the grass,
speaks to me.

The summit of the mountain,
the thunder of the sky,
the rhythm of the sea,
speaks to me.

The faintness of the stars,
the freshness of the morning,
the dew drop on the flower,
speaks to me.

The strength of fire,
the taste of salmon,
the trail of the sun,
And the life that never goes away,
They speak to me.

And my heart soars (83).

As we look and listen, we cannot help but see and feel and hear...the mess, the pain, the destruction, the injustice, the retrogressive spin of the consumer treadmill, and the resulting feelings of loss and loneliness.

There is a Cree prophecy (source unknown):

Only after the last tree has been cut down
Only after the last river has been poisoned
Only after the last fish has been caught
Only then will you find that money cannot be eaten.

The generally unknown and misunderstood histories and cultures of indigenous people are rich with wisdom, patterns of social and economic organization, and traditional insight into the human relationship with the land.

This year, 1993, has been declared 'Year of Indigenous People' by the United Nations. From them, we can learn to look, see, and to hear the voices. It is within us to 'experience', and to use 'experience' as a tool for living in harmony with nature. A kinder, gentler culture just might emerge.

Having felt the sense of loss of 'experience' with my own child (the toad episode), I began a conscious effort to seek opportunities for my children which would inspire wonder and awe—in them and in me (for the second time).

Having already lined the shelves with nature and poetry books, we took out a subscription to *Chickadee Magazine*, and purchased some helpful guides, such as:

Nature for the Very Young, Green Parenting, and The Canadian Green Consumer Guide. We covered the walls with posters of various flora, fish, fowl, and beasts.

'Experience', though, and the sense of 'being', do not come from books; they come during hikes in the forest, frolicking in fields, splashing in ponds and rivers, and working together in the garden.

Initially, I was frustrated by my inability to name a bug, plant or bird. When asked "What is it?", "Where does it live?", "What does it eat?", "Why does it make a nest shaped like that?", I was unable to explain. My desire to become a wildlife biology expert, along with all other areas of expertise in which a supermom might wish to excel, was quickly tempered by the observation that the 'experience' seemed to be more significant to my children than the 'knowing'. And, the art, poetry, and music of nature became inspirational.

Now, both of my children are primary students. The age of technology, urbanization, consumerism, and satellite communication in which we live, renders information obsolete before it reaches school children. Still, our culture depends heavily upon the education system to ensure our children are not 'left behind' in the race for wealth and power. Few ask why members of our society are running away from the techno-reality in a drugged or drunken haze, however, or why there is such a huge industry in human counsel and therapy.

It is now generally accepted that early experience is important for proper cognitive growth. Susan Erskine-Elgear identifies four barriers which stand in the way of linking children and nature: the current education system, ill-prepared and overstressed teachers, the dominant social/political climate, and a lack of inter-organization communication and cooperation. She states that "the barriers identified are not those created by children or nature but by adults and culture" (131). I would also add, that opportunities to 'experience' nature are few and far between for most children.

These ideas are not new. Aldo Leopold was one of the few to lead the way in advocating inter-disciplinary education as well as more field and outdoor education, and the development of a greater under-

standing of living relationships of plants and animals. "...The ability to read the land [is] every bit as important as the ability to read books and...too much of the latter [can] be worse than none at all. ...Science and poetry are not antagonistic orientations of the mind" (qtd. in Callicott, 229).

The important place of Nature in the education of a child, and ultimately the emerging adult, is a recurring theme expounded by other, more recent, authors. Paul Shepard writes: "Wide-eyed wonder, non-judgemental response, and the immediate joy of being are beautiful to see. I hope some kernel of them remains in the heart of every adult" (122). Thomas Berry adds: "Children need a story that will bring personal meaning together with the grandeur and meaning of the universe" (131). These stories exist.

In *The Fall of Freddie the Leaf*, Freddie asks:

"Does the tree die, too?"

"Someday. But there is something stronger than the tree. It is Life. That lasts forever and we are all a part of Life."

"Where will we go when we die?"

"No one knows for sure. That's the great mystery!"

"We will return in the Spring?"

"We may not, but Life will."

"Then what has been the reason for all this?" Freddie continued to question. "Why are we here at all if we only have to fall and die?"

"It's been about the sun and the moon. It's been about happy times together. It's been about the shade and the old people and the children. It's been about colors in Fall. It's been about seasons. Isn't that enough?" (Buscaglia).

Susan Erskine-Elgear writes: "The sciencing of nature overlooks the mystery, the unexpectedness, the wondering about things which cannot and need not be explained, the feeling rather than the fact...kids remember experience rather than content" (70). And, quoting John Fowles: "Science may understand nature; but it can never understand what nature requires of man. Of that poets like Wordsworth and Keats knew more in the tips of their little fingers than all the biolo-

gists in creation" (qtd in Erskine-Elgear, 122).

Two voices are there; one is of the sea,
One of the mountains; each a mighty Voice,
In both from age to age thou didst rejoice,
They were thy chosen music, Liberty! (Wordsworth, 277).

As an environmental activist, mother, partner, and student, I search for creative ways to aid in the work that must be done, as an individual, but also in the collective efforts of all of us to work towards a healthy planet and a healthy future for our children. Feeling strongly connected to my children and my community motivates me in the environmental movement. Not all environmentalists, though, are women, and not all women are mothers. But, we all have a stake in the future.

It is my feeling that women should challenge the power to establish and enforce domination. After all, we know about giving life, caring, and nurturing. And, we should co-operate with our male partners in our collective efforts to protect life on this planet.

There are three things that I can do as a parent [mother]. The first, as Winnie-the-Pooh would say, "requires some very large remembering" about the wonder and awe there is to be found in nature.

The second is to ensure that nature education encompasses all areas of my children's lives. This includes home life, school life, and extra-curricular activities and entertainment.

I am encouraged by my children's teachers' efforts to incorporate environmental concerns into classroom discussion. In addition, most school boards, including the Northumberland and Newcastle Board of Education (my 'home' Board), are developing system-wide curricula on environmental issues.

Kyle and Garrett will have annual visits to the outdoor education centre, but it is clear to me, and reinforced in Susan Erskine-Elgear's study, that a child's daily experiences must include nature education which is not simply science education, but that which is the 'experience of being'.

And, third, I must ensure that music,

dance, art, and poetry are kept alive. Imagine my delight when Kyle arrived home from school one day last winter with a "Contract" in hand. His poem, "The World," was chosen for the Northumberland and Newcastle Board of Education's 9th poetry anthology.

The World

The world is in danger
 The world is in trouble
 We've got to save it
 On the double
 So clean up the water
 Don't pollute the air
 Let's show the world
 That we do care (35).

The best that I, as Kyle and Garrett's mother, can do is to remember what I learned in kindergarten and ensure there are many opportunities for my children to experience nature, and, maybe, they will retain in their hearts a kernel of wide-eyed wonder and awe of the universe, and rejoice in 'being'.

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