

Alexandria Times | My View

By Sissy Walker

Children Need Nature

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This past Saturday, I went hiking with a group of old pals – four couples, actually, who became fast friends more than two decades ago when all of our children went to the same parent co-operative preschool here in Alexandria. Fast forward 28 years and here we are, still hiking, biking and camping together. There was something about that preschool, with its emphasis on outdoor play in its natural wooded environment, that drew us there and shaped us over time. It provided the gestational environment for an enduring friendship built on many outdoor experiences that we enjoyed with our preschoolers.

As to this particular hike and what got me pondering the child-nature connection, the day promised glorious warm weather after many days of sub-freezing temperatures. Our path, the Potomac Heritage Trail, starts off rather easily if a bit too close to cars zooming by on the Parkway. From the Chain Bridge there's an absolutely stunning view of the Potomac below, and indeed we stopped to watch a couple of kayakers running the rapids and an eagle circling above. As we navigated the twisty, frozen and root-gnarled path we saw huge boulders to our side with iced waterfalls running down them. There were little, half-frozen rills of water coming through the large rocks on the shore. Patches of ice floated down the river, recently frozen over and now melting. A fair amount of ice and granular snow covered the ground and many of the rocks we had to traverse. The footing was definitely tricky. I was reminded of how magnificent and complex a forest environment is!

In no time I was conjuring up scenes and emotions from my childhood: the pure clarity of the ice with its small holes and magical dainty filigree, the rivulets of water running underneath, the impulse to step ever so lightly on an edge to see if it would crack, the pleasure in hearing that precise cracking sound, and an appreciation for nature's delights—and dangers. A feeling of exhilaration arose within me, a mixture of pleasure at the raw, stark beauty of winter, apprehension because the footing was quite challenging and anticipation for what might lie ahead. One had to pay attention! Nature! Wild!

Unpredictable! Multi-textured! Movable!

Me, in nature, mastering the tricky footing, keeping my balance, inventing passages over the ice-coated rocks, figuring out how to get back to the path, feeling a complete and total mind-body connection. My childhood returned to me with an intensity of

memory: how it felt to problem solve and conquer uncertain terrain, to bring brain and brawn and coordination into a unified whole, to be one with nature. It was a transcendent revelation. I sat atop the huge boulder I had navigated (quite well, thank you) and proclaimed myself “king of the mountain” for I had indeed conquered it. For a few hours, I was once again living my childhood.

Think back to your own childhood. What was your typical day like? What stands out in your memory? Most adults, if asked this question today, will remember their outdoor experiences. If you grew up in the 50s and 60s, as I did, you spent almost all your time outside of school outdoors. We lived in rural New Jersey (there is a reason it’s called the Garden State), where pastures, ponds, streams, woods, fields and pathways abounded.

In winter, we would go into the woods to the stream to see what the ice formations looked like as the water trickled over the rocks in the streambed. We’d test the ice to see how thick it was and toss rocks to see if we could break it. We’d notice how the twigs broken off the trees above lay on the snow, and scope out rabbit, deer and fox footprints.

In summer, we were in the woods making little micro-worlds out of twigs, pine needles, small stones and whatever else we found. We dug in the dirt. We gathered small wildflowers and wild strawberries that we ate out of hand. We pulled the onion grass and held it close to our noses. Remember that smell? Around the house, we looked for small toads in the window wells, dug for worms in the garden (everyone had a garden), climbed the cherry and dogwood trees, felt the sticky blossoms of the mountain laurels and stuck our noses clear into lilac clusters.

We were drunk with the smell and buzzing of spring, brought to alert by the crispness and starkness of winter, enchanted by the colors and decay of fall, enervated by the laziness of summer. Where there were fences, we climbed them. There was no separation between us and the things of the earth. We used all our senses to know our surroundings intimately. Our sense of place in the world was secure, and as a result we possessed a sure knowledge of ourselves.

What was not present was adults looking over our shoulders. We had raw, unfiltered access to the natural world around us, with only a few cautions as to where we could not go. We checked in when we left, told our moms (usually) where we’d be playing, and listened for the dinner bell or simply checked the sky to know when to come home. This is a profoundly different experience than what many of our children experience today, at least those who live in urban environments, which is about 80 percent of the U.S. population.

Today, our little ones usually seem to be strapped into strollers, even the 3- and 4-year-olds capable of climbing over rocks and low walls. The older ones hop off the school bus and head straight inside the house, or are enrolled in structured activities with rules and schedules and people with whistles and flags exhorting them to run, kick or throw this way or that. And at schools and parks, the typical playgrounds seem to consist of

incredibly dull and predictable climbing structures made of metal and molded plastic. These play structures are so uninspiring, offer so little challenge and require so little in the way of body-mind problem solving that children on the one hand become careless and on the other take additional risks in order to “up” the stimulation factor.

These impoverished play environments ask very little of children in the way of skill development, cognitive problem solving, sensory awareness and social interactions, and as an added “bonus” deliver very little by way of joy and a connection to the natural world. In school, where they spend the majority of their waking hours, they are at desks, with perhaps 30 minutes of recess time to “blow off steam” (important as that may be, recess is no substitute for experiences in nature).

I’m actually very alarmed. What are the long-term implications of this separation from nature on the next generation of scientists, poets, inventors, mathematicians, artists, politicians? Instead of spending most of their free time exploring, observing and transforming the world around them they are either at a desk in school, at home in front of a screen with a virtual version of that world, or engaged in structured and adult-mediated athletic pursuits. This is a huge cultural shift.

The lack of free exploratory time in natural environments brings with it a narrowing of fields of endeavor, arenas where our kids can test their competencies, exercise their creative and critical problem solving abilities, sharpen the full range of their senses, develop qualities like persistence and resilience, and deal with constantly shifting and unpredictable situations. E. O. Wilson tells us that we’re all endowed with a universal affinity for nature, or biophilia, as a result of our evolutionary journey. Indeed, he states that “to explore and affiliate with life is a deep and complicated process in mental development.” Wilson warns us that “our very existence depends on this propensity.”

There are many valid reasons today’s urban youngsters can’t play as many of us did. Be that as it may, there are always ways to address our “nature deficit disorder” (Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods*), and begin to feel a part of the natural world. It may seem obvious, but the first step is a small one: GO OUTSIDE yourself. Turn off the video screens. Carve out even a few minutes of mindfulness: breathing the air, listening to the wind, taking a walk, noticing what’s around you.

Choose a small patch of turf and start probing it with a twig or screwdriver. Get curious! There’s far more than we might assume, for example worms and larvae, dandelions growing in cracks in the sidewalk, even those ridiculous sweet gum balls, all of which Mother Nature has provided free of charge. Pick things up and smell them, test them, and you’ll be pleasantly surprised at how rich our urban environment is in textures, smells, sounds, temperatures, colors, shapes, sizes and characteristics of life. Everything is bound together; after all, we’re made of the same basic elements as every other part of creation.

Once we take time to really see what’s around us, we can begin to better understand

our place on the planet. And as children attend to what their parents notice and find valuable, you will find these same strategies work beautifully with youngsters. Give them a spoon and tell them to go dig in the yard and see what they can find. But beware – you may not hear a peep out of them for hours.

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