

I. Gifts of Nature

When I see birches bend to left and right . . .

I like to think some boy's been swinging them.

—ROBERT FROST

IF, WHEN WE WERE YOUNG, we tramped through forests of Nebraska cottonwoods, or raised pigeons on a rooftop in Queens, or fished for Ozark bluegills, or felt the swell of a wave that traveled a thousand miles before lifting our boat, then we were bound to the natural world and remain so today. Nature still informs our years—lifts us, carries us.

For children, nature comes in many forms. A newborn calf; a pet that lives and dies; a worn path through the woods; a fort nested in stinging nettles; a damp, mysterious edge of a vacant lot—whatever shape nature takes, it offers each child an older, larger world separate from parents. Unlike television, nature does not steal time; it amplifies it. Nature offers healing for a child living in a destructive family or neighborhood. It serves as a blank slate upon which a child draws and reinterprets the culture's fantasies. Nature inspires creativity in a child by demanding visualization and the full use of the senses. Given a chance, a child will bring the confusion of the world to the woods, wash it in the 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. In nature, a child finds freedom, fantasy, and privacy: a place distant from the adult world, a separate peace.

These are some of the utilitarian values of nature, but at a deeper level, nature gives itself to children—for its own sake, not as a reflection of a culture. At this level, inexplicable nature provokes humility.

As the preeminent nature poet Gary Snyder writes, we attach two meanings to the word “nature,” which comes from the Latin *natura*—birth, constitution, character, course of things—and beyond *natura*, material world and all of its objects and phenomena; by this definition, a machine is part of nature. So is toxic waste. The other meaning is what we call “the outdoors.” By this connotation, a man-made thing is not a part of nature, but apart from nature. On its face, New York City may not appear natural, but it does contain all manner of hidden, self-organizing wild places, from the organisms secreted within the humus of Central Park to the hawks that circle above the Bronx. In this sense, a city complies with the broadest laws of nature; it is natural (as a machine is part of nature), but wild in its parts.

When considering children in nature, one hungers for a richer description, a definition with more breathing room—one that does not include *everything* as natural or restrict nature to virgin forest. Snyder is drawn to poet John Milton’s phrase, “a wilderness of sweets.” “Milton’s usage of wilderness catches the very real condition of energy and richness that is so often found in wild systems. A ‘wilderness of sweets’ is like the billions of herring or mackerel babies in the ocean, the cubic miles of krill, wild prairie grass seed . . . all the incredible fecundity of small animals and plants, feeding the web,” he explains. “But from another side, wilderness has implied chaos, eros, the unknown, realms of taboo, the habitat of both the ecstatic and the demonic. In both senses it is a place of archetypal power, teaching, and challenge.” When we think of children and the gifts of nature, this third, more bountiful understanding is helpful. For the purpose of this book, when I use the word “nature” in a general way I mean natural wildness: biodiversity, abundance—related loose parts in a backyard or a rugged mountain

ridge. Most of all, nature is reflected in our capacity for wonder. *Naszi*. To be born.

Though we often see ourselves as separate from nature, humans are also part of that wildness. My earliest memory of using my senses, and sensing wonder, came on a cold spring morning in Independence, Missouri. I was perhaps three years old, sitting in a dry field behind my grandmother’s peeling Victorian home. Nearby, my father worked, planting a garden. He threw down a cigarette—as many were likely to do in that age, when Midwesterners habitually tossed refuse on the ground, or launched beer bottles and soda cans and cigarette butts from their car windows, sparks flying in the wind. The dry grass caught fire. I remember the exact sound of the flames and smell of the smoke and the *wibboosh* of my father’s leg and foot as he stamped and stepped quickly to chase the fire as it skipped across the field.

In this same field, I would walk around the fallen fruit from a pear tree, hold my nose and bend at the waist, a careful distance from the small mounds of ferment, and then experimentally inhale. I would sit down among the decaying fruit, attracted and repulsed. Fire and fermentation . . .

I spent hours exploring the woods and farmland at the suburban edge. There were the Osage orange trees, with thorny, unfriendly limbs that dropped sticky, foul fruit larger than softballs. Those were to be avoided. But within the windbreaks were trees that we could shinny, the small branches like the rungs of a ladder. We climbed fifty, sixty feet off the ground, far above the Osage windbreak, and from that vantage looked out upon the old blue ridges of Missouri, and the roofs of new houses in the ever-encroaching suburbs.

Often I climbed alone. Sometimes, lost in wonderment, I’d go deep into the woods, and imagine myself as Rudyard Kipling’s Mowgli, the boy raised by wolves, and strip off most of my clothes for the ascent. If I climbed high enough, the branches thinned to the point where, when the wind came, the world would tip down and up and around and up

and to the side and up. It was frightening and wonderful to surrender to the wind's power. My senses were filled with the sensations of falling, rising, swinging; all around me the leaves snapped like fingers and the wind came in sighs and gruff whispers. The wind carried smells, too, and the tree itself surely released its scents faster in the gusts. Finally, there was only the wind that moved through everything.

Now, my tree-climbing days long behind me, I often think about the lasting value of those early, deliciously idle days. I have come to appreciate the long view afforded by those treetops. The woods were my Ritualin. Nature calmed me, focused me, and yet excited my senses.

"Where All the Electrical Outlets Are"

Many members of my generation grew into adulthood taking nature's gifts for granted; we assumed (when we thought of it at all) that generations to come would also receive these gifts. But something has changed. Now we see the emergence of what I have come to call nature-deficit disorder. This term is by no means a medical diagnosis, but it does offer a way to think about the problem and the possibilities—for children, and for the rest of us as well.

My own awareness of the transformation began in the late 1980s, during research for *Childhood's Future*, a book about the new realities of family life. I interviewed nearly three thousand children and parents across the country, in urban, suburban, and rural areas. In classrooms and living rooms, the topic of the children's relationship with nature sometimes surfaced. I think often of a wonderfully honest comment made by Paul, a fourth-grader in San Diego: "I like to play indoors better, 'cause that's where all the electrical outlets are."

In many classrooms I heard variations on that statement. True, for many children, nature still offers wonder. But for many others, playing in nature seemed so . . . Unproductive. Off-limits. Alien. Cute. Dangerous. Televised.

"It's all this *watching*," said a mother in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania.

"We've become a more sedentary society. When I was a kid growing up in Detroit, we were always outdoors. The kids who stayed indoors were the odd ones. We didn't have any huge wide-open spaces, but we were always outdoors on the streets—in the vacant lots, jumping rope, or playing baseball or hopscotch. We were out there playing even after we got older."

Another Swarthmore parent added, "Something else was different when we were young: our *parents* were outdoors. I'm not saying they were joining health clubs and things of that sort, but they were out of the house, out on the porch, talking to neighbors. As far as physical fitness goes, today's kids are the sorriest generation in the history of the United States. Their parents may be out jogging, but the kids just aren't outside."

This was the mantra among parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, teachers, and other adults across the country, even in places I would have expected to have a different view. For example, I visited a middle-class neighborhood in suburban Overland Park, Kansas, not far from where I spent my teen years. In the intervening decades, many of the woods and fields had vanished, but enough natural landscape remained to at least provide the opportunity for outside play. Surely kids still played in nature here? Not often, said several parents, who came together in a living room one evening to talk about the new landscape of childhood. Though several lived on the same block, this was the first time that some of these parents had met each other.

"When our kids were in third or fourth grade, we still had a little field behind our place," said one mother. "The kids were complaining about being bored. And I said, 'Okay, you guys are bored? I want you to go out to that field, right there, and spend two hours. Find something to do there. Trust me; just try it one time. You might enjoy yourselves.' So, begrudgingly, they went out to the field. And they didn't come back in two hours—they came back much later. I asked them why, and they said, 'It was so much fun! We never dreamed we could have so much

fun!' They climbed trees; they watched things; they chased each other; they played games like we used to do when we were young. So the next day, I said, 'Hey, you guys are bored—why not go out to the field again?' And they answered, 'Nah—we've already done that once.' They weren't willing to let themselves do it again."

"I'm not sure I understand exactly what you're saying," responded a father. "I think that my girls enjoy things like a full moon, or a pretty sunset, or flowers. They enjoy the trees when they turn—that sort of thing."

Another mother in the group shook her head. "Sure, the little things, they notice," she said. "But they're distracted." She described the last time her family had gone skiing, in Colorado. "It was a perfect, quiet day, the kids are skiing down the mountain—and they've got their *headphones* on. They can't enjoy just hearing nature and being out there alone. They can't make their own entertainment. They have to bring something with them."

A quiet father, who had been raised in a farming community, spoke up. "Where I grew up, a person was just *naturally* outdoors all the time," he said. "No matter which direction you went, you were outdoors—you were in a plowed field, or woods, or streams. We're not like that here. Overland Park is a metropolitan area now. Kids haven't lost anything, because they never had it in the first place. What we're talking about here is a transition made by most of us who grew up surrounded by nature. Now, nature's just not *there* anymore."

The group fell quiet. Yes, much of that once-wild land was being graded and built upon—but I could see woods from the windows of the house in which we were sitting. Nature *was* still out there. There was less of it, to be sure, but it was there just the same.

A day after talking with the Overland Park parents, I drove across the Kansas-Missouri border to Southwood Elementary School in Raytown, Missouri, near Kansas City. I attended grade school at Southwood. To my surprise, the same swings (or so it seemed) still creaked above the

hot asphalt; the hallways still shone with the same linoleum tile; the same pint-sized wooden chairs, carved and initialed with black, blue, and red ink, sat waiting in crooked rows.

As the teachers gathered second-through fifth-graders and escorted them into the classroom where I waited, I unpacked my tape recorder and glanced out the window at the blue-green ridge of trees, probably pin oak, maple, cottonwood, or perhaps pecan or honey locust, their limbs shivering and swaying slowly in the spring breeze. How often, as a child, had those very trees inspired my daydreams?

During the next hour, as I asked the young people about their relationship with the outdoors, they described some of the barriers to going outside—lack of time, TV, the usual suspects. But the reality of these barriers did not mean that the children lacked curiosity. In fact, these kids spoke of nature with a strange mixture of puzzlement, detachment, and yearning—and occasional defiance. In the years to come, I would hear this tone often.

"My parents don't feel real safe if I'm going too deep in the woods," said one boy. "I just can't go too far. My parents are always worrying about me. So I'll just go, and usually not tell 'em where I'm going—so that makes 'em mad. But I'll just sit behind a tree or something, or lie in the field with all the rabbits."

One boy said computers were more important than nature, because computers are where the jobs are. Several said they were too busy to go outside. But one girl, a fifth-grader wearing a plain print dress and an intensely serious expression, told me she wanted to be a poet when she grew up.

"When I'm in the woods," she said, "I feel like I'm in my mother's shoes."

She was one of those exceptional children who do still spend time outside, in solitude. In her case nature represented beauty—and refuge. "It's so peaceful out there and the air smells so good. I mean, it's polluted, but not as much as the city air. For me, it's completely different there," she said. "It's like you're free when you go out there. It's your

own time. Sometimes I go there when I'm mad—and then, just with the peacefulness, I'm better. I can come back home happy, and my mom doesn't even know why."

Then she described her special part of the woods.

"I had a place. There was a big waterfall and a creek on one side of it. I'd dug a big hole there, and sometimes I'd take a tent back there, or a blanket, and just lie down in the hole, and look up at the trees and sky. Sometimes I'd fall asleep back in there. I just felt free; it was like my place, and I could do what I wanted, with nobody to stop me. I used to go down there almost every day."

The young poet's face flushed. Her voice thickened.

"And then they just cut the woods down. It was like they cut down part of me."

Over time I came to understand some of the complexity represented by the boy who preferred electrical outlets and the poet who had lost her special spot in the woods. I also learned this: Parents, educators, other adults, institutions—the culture itself—may say one thing to children about nature's gifts, but so many of our actions and messages—especially the ones we cannot hear ourselves deliver—are different.

And children hear very well.

2. The Third Frontier

The frontier is a goner. It died with its boots laced.

—M. R. MONTGOMERY

ON MY BOOKSHELF is a copy of *Shelters, Shacks and Shanties*, written in 1915 by Daniel C. Beard, a civil engineer turned artist, best known as one of the founders of the Boy Scouts of America. For half a century, he wrote and illustrated a string of books on the outdoors. *Shelters, Shacks and Shanties* happens to be one of my favorite books because, particularly with his pen-and-ink drawings, Beard epitomizes a time when a young person's experience of nature was inseparable from the romantic view of the American frontier.

If such books were newly published today, they would be considered quaint and politically incorrect, to say the least. Their target audience was boys. The genre seemed to suggest that no self-respecting boy could enjoy nature without axing as many trees as possible. But what really defines these books, and the age they represented, is the unquestioned belief that being in nature was about *doing* something, about direct experience—and about not being a spectator.

"The smallest boys can build some of the simple shelters and the older boys can build the more difficult ones," Beard wrote in the foreword of *Shelters, Shacks and Shanties*. "The reader may, if he likes, begin with the first [shanty] and graduate by building the log houses; in doing this he will be closely following the history of the human race,