

Exploring Children's Spiritual Expression of 'Wonder' in the Natural World

Childhood is a very significant stage of human development. Anna Freud describes the primary school age of children as 'the age of conscience...the age that a child's conscience is built - or isn't; it is the time when a child's character is built and consolidated, or isn't'¹. Children need to live and grow in rich communities with a depth and breadth of activities that stimulate them to test and develop their physical, emotional and spiritual health². The church and society have an important task in the proper care, nurture and education of children. Outdoor experiences in the natural world have an important place in the life of children. This paper seeks to encourage churches to engage their children in such activities.

A scout leader on a camping trip was awoken one night by a nine year old. She had to go to the bathroom. We stepped outside the tent and she looked up. She gasped and grabbed my leg. She had never seen the stars before. That night I saw the power of nature on a child. She was a changed person. From that moment on, she saw everything, the camouflaged lizard that everyone else skipped by. She used her senses. She was awake³.



The experience described here is common. When children's senses are stimulated by the beauty and strangeness of the natural world they are nearly always awoken and aroused with a sense of awe, wonder, excitement, joy and enthusiasm. Maria Montessori writes how children notice and respond with joyous shouts and exclamations of wonderment even to the smallest bugs and the finest detail that adults often miss⁴. Children have a natural desire to observe which Maria Montessori believed can be described in Dante's words as the 'intelligence of love'⁵, where love of surroundings is a 'spiritual energy, a moral beauty which accompanies creation'⁶.

Hart argues that this moment of awe and wonder in which a child is captivated by a new insight or natural phenomenon is an expression of spirituality⁷. Montessori agrees and described this observing poor city children sponsored by the Queen of Italy to live in a Franciscan convent. The children, upon experiencing the 'spacious gardens, wide paths, pools of gold fish and beautiful beds of flowers,' were bright, happy and delighted. This she described as a 'conversion' or spiritual renewal in terms of the 'spiritual character of the remarkable phenomenon that was apparent to all', where the children moved from a state of grief to happiness and joy⁸.

Sallie McFague's '*Ecological model and the Community of Care*', explores the relationship between humanity and the created world⁹. The model is framed in the context of subject-subject relationships as opposed to the common western relationship of subject-object, which models hierarchy and subjugation. The subject-subject relationship is one of equality and mutual respect. It focuses upon interconnection, interdependence, friendship, justice and care. McFague argues that nature is the 'new poor'¹⁰ and that Christians are called to form relationships with the natural world based on love, mutuality and respect. A spiritual experience within the natural world, therefore, has a significant place.

Relationship is a fundamental theme in creation texts of the Hebrew Bible¹¹. Moltmann sees relationship as basic to God's involvement in creation¹². He says that 'life is communication in communion' and that 'isolation and lack of relationship, means death'¹³. Dempsey, in speaking of redemption and ecological crisis, emphasises the call to be in 'right relationship' with the created world, acting from a place of respect for others and mutuality¹⁴. In the light of her work *The Body of God*¹⁵, where the earth and cosmos might metaphorically be viewed as the body of God, McFague alludes to the potential of forming an intimate relationship with God through relationship and connection with plants and animals of the natural world.

However, children growing up in urban society are being distanced from the natural world by their physical surroundings, commercialism and popular culture presented in dynamic electronically based multi-media. This has the effect of retarding their natural growth to maturity¹⁶. This phenomenon is observed in urban children's imaginary worlds being dominated by electronic pets and toys. Addictive¹⁷ electronic communication is more and more taking the place of intimate face to face conversation¹⁸. Children take on adult behaviour and image at increasingly younger ages through dress, substance abuse and even medical procedures¹⁹. Urban children are also significant consumers who influence adults and their spending and consequently are pressured by advertisers to shop and consume^{20, 21}. Commercialism takes advantage of children and their sexuality²².



At the same time urban backyard gardens in Australia have steadily become smaller as house sizes increase²³, where designs of urban backyards most suit the needs of adults with less play space for children²⁴. Many children growing up in urban society do not have the opportunity of interacting with the natural world. Research suggests that children are increasingly spending most of their time indoors²⁵. Richard Louv reflects upon a conversation with a young boy in the late 1980s who said 'I like to play indoors better, 'cause that's where the electrical outlets are'²⁶.

I believe the church has an important place in reconnecting children with the natural world. Maria Montessori describes how outdoor 'physical activity connects the spirit with the world'²⁷ and a lack of physical outdoor activity can lead to psychic depression and poor spiritual health²⁸. The Victorian State Government²⁹ reports that the number of overweight children in Australia has doubled in recent years. The article highlighted the social and health problems this trend threatens with a quarter of Australian children considered to be overweight or obese due to consumption of unhealthy food and lack of physical activity. Research commissioned by the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program, undertaken by Deakin and Melbourne Universities, indicates that children involved in growing vegetable gardens make better food choices³⁰. The St Vincent's Institute of Medical Research in Melbourne has found that gardening and playing outdoors improves heart health in children³¹.

Louv suggests there is growing evidence that the increasing incidence of attention disorders in children is directly linked with their disconnection from nature³². Consequently the prescribing of antidepressant medication for children is on the increase³³. White's response is to suggest that we need to treat the social and cultural world to which our children belong, rather than medicating children to make them function in a dysfunctional world³⁴.



White also argues for 'safe play and adventure' where children have the opportunity of safely playing to extremes. Children must take risks if they are to learn, for a 'world purged of all risks and dangers would be so sterile that it would probably prevent children's growth and maturing'³⁵. A degree of risk affords the opportunity for children to learn to measure and recognise their vulnerability and strength and gain a realistic awareness of hazards and likely scenarios.

My research interviewing community groups who work with children indicates that children involved in gardening, care of animals and play in natural surroundings gain a greater awareness of self in relationship with others as they experience wonder. Offered the opportunity to 'attend' to their surroundings children recognise beauty and experience a greater sense of place and belonging, which is particularly evident in children from poorer socio-economic backgrounds. Children become more empathetic and compassionate and also exercise creativity and imagination. Children are less stressed. Through gardening and environmental care projects they are empowered to offer hospitality and healing to an earth currently experiencing loss of biodiversity and environmental degradation. Naturalist Gary Nabhan in describing the importance of teaching children about nature suggests that when we are young we need people to take us by the hand and 'initiate us to the delight of encountering the other in the form of lizard, hawkmoth, or bat'³⁶.

- ¹ Coles, R. (1997). *The Moral Intelligence of Children*. New York, Random House.
p98
- ² White, K. J. (2008). *The Growth of Love: Understanding Five Essential Elements of Child Development*. Abingdon, The Bible Reading Fellowship.
- ³ Louv, R. (2008). *Last child in the woods : saving our children from nature-deficit disorder*. Chapel Hill, N.C., Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill.
p154.
- ⁴ Montessori, M. (1966). *The Secret of Childhood*. New York, Ballantine Books Inc.
p64-5
- ⁵ Ibid.
p103
- ⁶ Ibid.
p103
- ⁷ Hart, T. (2003). *The Secret Spiritual World of Children*. Maui, Inner Ocean.
- ⁸ Montessori, M. (1966). *The Secret of Childhood*. New York, Ballantine Books Inc.
p140-1
- ⁹ McFague, S. (1997). *Super. Natural Christians*. Minneapolis, Augsburg Fortress.
- ¹⁰ McFague, S. (2000). An Ecological Christology: Does Christianity Have It? *Christianity and Ecology*. D. R. R. Hessel, Rosemary. Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press.
p30.
- ¹¹ Fretheim, T. E. (2005). *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation*. Nashville, Abingdon Press.
p13.
- ¹² Moltmann, J. (1985). *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation*. London, SCM.
- ¹³ Ibid.
p3
- ¹⁴ Dempsey, C. J. (2004). Creation, Evolution, Revelation, and Redemption: Connections and Intersections. *Earth, Wind and Fire: Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Creation*. M. M. P. Carol J. Dempsey. Collegeville, Liturgical Press.
p19.
- ¹⁵ McFague, S. (1993). *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Augsburg, Fortress.
- ¹⁶ Moore, R. C. (1997). "The Need for Nature: A Childhood Right." *Social Justice* 24(3).
p206
- ¹⁷ <http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2010/s2945356.htm>
- ¹⁸ Australian Bureau of Statistics. <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Products/4901.0~Apr+2009~Main+Features~Internet+use+and+m+obile+phones?OpenDocument>
- ¹⁹ Queensland Department of Health. http://www.health.qld.gov.au/publications/cos_surg_child.pdf
- ²⁰ Adams, K. H., Brendan; Woolley, Richard (2008). *The Spiritual Dimension of Childhood*. London, Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
p112
- ²¹ White, K. J. (2008). *The Growth of Love: Understanding Five Essential Elements of Child Development*. Abingdon, The Bible Reading Fellowship.
Insightful comments about the issues raised. See pages 122, 191, 194
- ²² Ibid.
p91
- ²³ Australian Bureau of Statistics. <http://www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/abs@.nsf/Previousproducts/1301.0Feature%20Article262005?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=1301.0&issue=2005&num=&view=>
- ²⁴ Timms, P. (2006). *Australia's quarter acre : the story of the ordinary suburban garden*. Carlton, Vic., MUP.
<http://www.smh.com.au/national/education/children-respond-to-call-of-the-wild-20100509-qlqv.html>
http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2005-07-11-pastimes-childhood_x.htm
- ²⁶ Louv, R. (2008). *Last child in the woods : saving our children from nature-deficit disorder*. Chapel Hill, N.C., Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill.
- ²⁷ Montessori, M. (1966). *The Secret of Childhood*. New York, Ballantine Books Inc.
p99
- ²⁸ Ibid.
p98
- ²⁹ http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Obesity_in_children
August 2009
- ³⁰ <http://www.kitchengardenfoundation.org.au/webpages/items/2010/06/234580-upload-00001.pdf>
<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/backgroundbriefing/stories/2010/2921637.htm>
- ³² Louv, R. (2008). *Last child in the woods : saving our children from nature-deficit disorder*. Chapel Hill, N.C., Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill.
p48
- ³³ <http://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMp038248?hits=20&>
- ³⁴ White, K. J. (2008). *The Growth of Love: Understanding Five Essential Elements of Child Development*. Abingdon, The Bible Reading Fellowship.
p127
- ³⁵ Ibid.
p163, see also p197
- ³⁶ Nabhan, G. P. (1994). Learning Herps. *The Geography of Childhood: Why Children Need Wild Places*. G. P. T. Nabhan, Stephen. Boston, Beacon Press.
p.150.