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Environmental Education

Toward an Intimacy with Nature

The increasing seriousness of environmental problems—toxic and nuclear wastes, ozone depletion, acid rain, deforestation, and oil spills, to name but a few—poses us with a pressing educational question: How should we educate our children so that they can best take up the environmental challenges ahead?

To be sure, our schools have increasingly focused on environmental issues. It would be hard not to, for such issues now pervade many of the disciplines, such as government, social studies, geography, and science. Through their studies, students have become more aware of environmental problems, more knowledgeable about causes and effects, and more likely to participate in some environmental activity, such as recycling. Yet, in spite of the importance of these educational efforts, many of us feel the environmental curriculum comes up short.

One reason is that such efforts all too easily remain homocentric, meaning that the underlying justification for protecting the environment centers on self-interested, often economic, human reasons. Consider: from a homocentric perspective, it is often argued that the trees in the Amazon River Basin should be protected because ultimately the quality of the air humans breathe, and thus the quality of human life, depends on the survival of the trees. Now there is nothing wrong with this reason, except that by itself it does not go far enough. Perhaps to agree with Stone (1986) that trees themselves have rights is to go too far. But surely some form of a biocentric position is tenable: that land, animals, waters, mountains, trees, landscapes have inher-

ent value independent of their value as a human commodity. Such biocentrism is what Aldo Leopold (1949–1970) had in mind when he proposed the land ethic, which “changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community” (240). Moreover, Leopold said that it is inconceivable “that an ethical relation to land can exist without love, respect, and admiration for land, and a high regard for its value” (261). Thus Leopold shifts the basis of environmental education—away from human domination over land to an intimate living relationship with it.

We suggest that environmental education should seek to place scientific and social learning about environmental issues within such an overarching context of intimacy with nature. Every child that comes to love a tree, feel empathy with an animal, and appreciate the wonder of natural landscapes moves us, as a biotic community, in the right direction. Granted, such intimacy may be hard to teach, as it lacks a certain tangible basis by which to develop curriculum. But our experience in both inner-city and rural schools is that such intimacy can be nourished.

To illustrate, consider but one set of activities for elementary aged children that we initially encountered in Caduto and Bruchac and have extended in our own use. The activities follow from reading aloud Shel Silverstein’s story *The Giving Tree*. As the reader may well know, the story is about a tree and boy who are friends. When the boy is little, he climbs up her trunk and swings from her branches and eats her apples. Together they play hide-and-go-seek. Yet, as he grows up, the boy begins to request material assistance from the tree. He asks her for her apples to sell for some money. She says she is happy to give. He asks for all of her branches to make a home for him and his family. She says she is happy to give. When he wants to travel to a distant land, he asks her for her trunk to build a canoe. Again, the tree gives. At the end of the story, the boy—now a man—comes back old and tired. He needs something, but the tree replies she has nothing left to offer him except a stump. The old man replies that that is all he needs now and sits down.

It is a sad story. Yet it highlights, albeit in somewhat anthropomorphic terms, the reciprocity and intimacy that is possible with nature; and that while nature gives and gives, it can give too much, and perish, if we keep asking. And we, as humans, have kept asking.

In reading this story to a class of young schoolchildren, we sought

to integrate the experiential, analytic, and emotional in children's learning. Perhaps some of these ideas will also work in your own teaching.

Read the story to the children outside, under a tree. Then generate discussion. For example, What made you happy or sad? If you were the tree, what would you have liked to have happened? If you were the boy, what would you have liked to have happened? What did you like or not like about the ending?

Ask the children why they think trees are important. Talk about the shade and food they provide to animals and humans; the fun of climbing them; when cut, trees provide lumber for human housing; when left standing, trees provide homes for animals. Perhaps sort children's answers into two categories: those that directly benefit humans, and those that benefit a larger biotic community. If the children are young, some of these issues could be developed by showing them pictures of different ways trees provide sustenance to a larger community. Note that it is possible that some of the children's parents make their living through the timber industry, and thus sensitivity is needed here.

Have the children pretend to sit in front of a tree for a whole day. What things might they see, hear, and smell? Have children act out some occurrences: a bird feeding under a tree or flying to the top; a squirrel hopping from branch to branch; an old man taking rest in the shade; a little girl climbing the tree and picking an apple.

Hug a tree! Ask children if they would like to hug a tree. The philosopher Erazim Kohak recently wrote a paper titled "Speaking to Trees"—and that is possible, too.

Make bark rubbings with crayons on the trunk of a tree. Allow the children plenty of time to examine the tree closely. Ditto for leaf prints.

Blindfold some of the children and have them feel the roots, trunk, branches, and leaves of different types of trees. Ask them to describe to classmates what they feel. How do trees differ? How are they the same?

Ask children to keep their eyes open to the beauty of trees, and to pick out an image that they would like to draw for a class mural the following day.

There are of course many extensions of this activity, or others like it, that can be worked into the more normal part of a school day. Stu-

dents can, for example, write real or imaginary stories about their experiences with a tree, or about any aspect of nature, or write letters to local and national officials on environmental issues of concern. They can investigate the destruction of rain forests or of local parks, examine the effects of soapy water on germinating seeds and growing flowers, test local water for pollution, and so forth.

What we wish to highlight are not any set of activities per se, but the spirit behind them. Kohak (1984) gently captures this spirit in his philosophical treatise on the moral sense of nature:

Though philosophy must do much else as well it must, initially, see and, thereafter, ground its speculation ever anew in seeing. So I have sought to see clearly and to articulate faithfully the moral sense of nature and of being human therein through the seasons lived in the solitude of the forest, beyond the power-line and the paved road, where the dusk comes softly and there still is night, pure between the glowing embers and the distant stars. . . . In writing of those years, I have not sought to "prove a point" but to evoke and to share a vision. Thus my primary tool has been the metaphor, not the argument, and the product of my labors is not a doctrine but an invitation to look and to see. (xii-xiii)

Similarly, though environmental education must do much else as well, it must invite children to look and to see, not so as to acquire another "fact" about nature, but to value it, through experiences lived and intimacy felt.

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