

by Catherine Read

## Connecting with nature

One day in late winter I took my two daughters, then ages six and three, to a bird sanctuary that we had been visiting once a week since the previous fall. We went there to “explore” as part of our Waldorf homeschool kindergarten. Late winter in Southern California means generally sunny days, but also some big storms with high winds. On this day we came into the sanctuary after a storm had gone through the day before. We wound our way down the familiar path, past the pond with the turtles, across the bridge over the dry creek bed below. As we crossed the bridge and looked up, we saw that the big live oak tree that had stood just up the hillside from the bridge was lying on the ground, felled by the wind. We were dumfounded and stood staring. How could this column that had helped hold up the heavens, that raised the earth to the heavens, be lying on the ground? What a shock it was. Months passed of seeing this tree and talking about it before we could get used to it lying on the ground. For the girls, quiet, unstructured time in nature has been an integral art of their coming to earth. Repeated visits to the same place have given us a true sense of the life of that place as it changes and grows. We, in turn, are supported by nature in our changing and growing.

### *Ways of being in nature*

If we watch young children quietly as they wander and play out of doors, we can see that they are unconsciously immersed in the life of nature around them. The life world of the earth surrounds, supports, and enlivens them. They become engrossed in the tiny details of a hole or knot in a piece of wood or they run freely with the wind and blowing leaves. They are the wood and the wind. A poem by e. e. cummings aptly expresses this quality of early childhood.

#### A GIRL

*The tree has entered my hands,  
The sap has ascended my arms,  
The tree has grown in my breast –  
Downward,  
The branches grow out of me,  
like arms.  
Tree you are,  
Moss you are,  
You are violets with wind above them.  
A child – so high – you are,  
And all this is folly to the world.*

The last line of this poem also expresses the loss of this unconscious immersion in the life body of the earth. Around age nine or ten children’s consciousness begins to change. They become, almost paradoxically, more aware of earthly life and more separate from the earth, that is, the nonphysical aspects of the earth. Then a different way of being in nature begins to evolve in which the human beings are aware both of themselves and of what they are observing. Beginning in about the fourth grade children want to notice and think about the details of form and activity in animals and the qualities of plants. By the time of adolescence a more analytic type of observing and thinking develops. As adults we tend either to specialize in some kind of science, experience nature in the context of sport or entertainment, or ignore the natural world. This estrangement from nature is aptly expressed by the following quote from a lecture by Rudolf Steiner (Signs and Symbols of the Christmas Festival, in *Festivals and Their Meaning*, p. 38–39).

*Everything in the cosmos takes its rhythmic course: the stars, as well as the sun, follow a mighty rhythm. Were the sun to abandon this rhythm even for a moment, an upheaval of untold*

*magnitude would take place in the universe. Rhythm holds sway through all of nature. The violet and lily bloom at the same time each year, animals have their regular rutting times. But when we reach the human level, things look rather different. The rhythm which through the course of the year holds sway in the growth, propagation and so forth of plant and animal worlds, ceases when we come to the human being. Our potential for freedom means that the more highly civilized we are, the more this rhythm declines. Just as light disappears at Christmastime, so rhythm apparently departs from our life and chaos prevails. But we must give birth again to rhythm within ourselves, out of our own initiative. By the exercise of our own will we must so order our life that it flows in rhythm, immutable and sure; our life must take its course with a regularity like the sun’s.*

Working with the Waldorf curriculum, with its emphasis on the changing consciousness of the child in daily, yearly, and also in larger cycles, is a tremendous aid in bringing rhythm into our lives. All of this work, of course, requires a tremendous effort of will. Even keeping time in nature as a part of schooling calls for an effort of will in these times of strong emphasis on the intellect.

When one plans and conducts schooling at home using Waldorf curriculum and methods, one can easily overlook the importance of spending time in nature. We think about the circle, lessons, handwork, and stories, and forget about time outdoors. Quiet time in natural surroundings is, however, important both for the parent/teacher and for the child. Such experience renews life energy that is

*Continued on next page*

## Connecting with nature

*continued from previous page*

drained by noise, machines, electricity, and even by concentrated mental work. Events and observations in nature also form the basis of stories, artistic work, and the beginnings of science in schoolwork.

In the four and a half years of home-schooling that we have completed (K–4), I have planned the first day of each week as “exploring day.” We have gone, on almost every Monday, by ourselves or with another family to the mountain canyons near us, or to the beach, or even to secluded streams. In the weeks that we did not have an exploring day I could feel the difference for myself and sense it for my daughters. I felt more tired and worn and they seemed less active, cheerful and able to focus. A friend of mine who attended the Edinburgh Steiner School through high school told me about his memories of school, thinking back from the perspective of age 60 or so. He remembered the early years most distinctly, and of those years he remembered in great detail the frequent walks they took out into the wild hills. Listening to him strengthened my resolve to keep time in nature a core part of our schooling.

Those who live in a secluded rural setting are extremely fortunate, as the best time in nature is in the morning when everyone is fresh and after a quiet non-hurried walk. The year I taught kindergarten for my older daughter (the younger was not quite 3 years old) we lived where we could walk out our back door into unspoiled hills. We often went down into a small arroyo where I would sit quietly while they explored in the sandy stream bed among willows and sage. Or I followed along behind them in their peregrinations up or down the stream bed. Since then, we have moved and we now have to drive to get to quiet unpopulated places, usually 10–20 minutes away. If we are to be renewed in

nature and truly observe and experience the events that meet us there, we must be quiet. To the extent that we bring our daily lives, the experience is lessened. I work to find places where we do not see other people, and where we hear no machine noise. I do not hurry and I do not talk except to answer the children’s questions or comment on something they show me. If another family is present, the adults do not talk except when necessary to coordinate activities. After an exploring day, we spend time indoors, at a library or at home to take the quiet and renewal with us through the rest of the day and into sleep.

Now in the Fourth Grade I have made one change in our time exploring. My older daughter and I now do some systematic observing of whatever animals we encounter in our peregrinations. Any birds, insects, fish, squirrels, or even larger animals we encounter we stop to watch. We watch how they move, what they are doing, what they eat, whether they seem to be aware of us. Then we go on our way. I sometimes bring these experiences into lessons, especially in the human and animal blocks.

I recently have begun working at a deeper level with experiences in nature based on directions given by Rudolf Steiner in *Spiritual Beings in the Heavenly Bodies and the Kingdoms of Nature*. Steiner’s lectures give us directions for contemplating nature in a way that both deepens our connection with the physical earth and at the same time, takes us beyond the physical.

### *Concentration exercises*

In *Spiritual Beings*, Steiner describes the spiritual beings that bring about the processes of nature such as seeds germinating, animals growing, water rising in a mist, and changes in weather.

He also gives directions for bringing to consciousness our soul experiences of these beings. To begin to experience the life world that exists behind the outer physical world which is perceivable by the senses, we must concentrate our attention on certain phenomena in nature. Then after this full concentration is attained we wait until the phenomenon “disappears” in our experience. What then comes to take its place is an aspect of the etheric or life world of the earth.

Briefly described, the first direction is to look away from the earth up toward cosmic space into the blue sky. Do this on a day when there are no clouds to break the azure blue. Yield completely to the blue of the sky; forget everything else. A moment will come when the blue disappears. At that moment turn your attention inward to your own soul mood. A definite mood and perception will arise, a feeling of pious devotion to infinity.

In the second exercise, Steiner directs one to immerse oneself in growing plants. When trees are bursting into leaf and the meadows are green one fixes one’s gaze on the green. Devote oneself to what meets one as green. Immerse oneself until the green disappears and something takes its place. You will understand something of the inmost aspects of the soul, the experience of thinking creatively.

The third direction is to gaze at a wide expanse of white snow; experience the whiteness and then allow it to disappear. In its place will come an experience, a moral feeling for all we call the phenomenon of matter. We begin to feel substance, matter as living and weaving in the world.

The fourth exercise involves giving our attention to changing weather or the play of water in a waterfall. We yield ourselves to clouds forming, rain falling, mist rising, or water tossing out spray

until the phenomenon disappears in our attention. Then we turn to our inner soul experience and we will experience the process, the activities that take place in transformation.

In the fifth direction, Steiner tells us to observe the gradual dying of plants in late summer or autumn. Then we give our attention fully to air as free from moisture as possible; air played upon by the light of the sun. When we hold this awareness until it disappears, we become aware of glints of flashing light that sink into the plant or animal world and bring about their ripening and maturity.

### *Nature experiences and schoolwork*

The parent/teacher not only draws strength and life from meditative time in nature, but also inspiration for the work of teaching. The forms seen in running water can be drawn for form drawing, adjusting the complexity to the grade one is teaching. Colors and patterns can be brought into painting and handwork. Nature stories for the younger grades and plant and animal descriptions for the older grades grow directly out of quiet, extended time in the natural world.

Steiner gave indications for a renewal of education that guide us in teaching children, that is, in our work of strengthening their abilities as they make their way into adult consciousness and the tasks they have chosen for this incarnation on earth. Our primary task as educators is to meet the child's consciousness in the manner and with the material that will speak to them most deeply. Here Steiner's guidance is invaluable.

In the Kindergarten and in First Grade the core of the curriculum is fairy tales, primarily those given by the Brothers Grimm. How do the fairy tales depict nature? The fairy tales reveal a participa-

tory world—everyone participates in forming the events. The beings that form and act in nature are shown in very concrete pictures—as are the forces of good and evil. Moral forces pervade all of the world in the fairy tales. In most fairy tales there is a king, and in all there are kingdoms—the kingdoms of nature. The forces working in the mineral kingdom are shown as gnomes or dwarves—for example, in Snow White and Rose Red where a selfish dwarf who wants to hoard the mineral jewels is finally punished by a prince. The plant kingdom either helps or confronts the people in the fairy tales. In Snow White and Rose Red the roses in a way give their qualities to the girls. Roses are strongly rooted in the earth, and even woody, but are also heavenly in the beauty and scent of the blooms. They are delicate, but at the same time, they endure. The rose trees went with the girls through all their changes, from girls in the cottage to queens in the castle. The animal kingdom, similarly, is shown as helpful or confrontive, sometimes depending on the moral qualities of the human being. In addition, the animal kingdom, as the closest to the human kingdom, is one in which humans can easily become entrapped or enchanted. The bear in Snow White and Rose Red is actually a prince who has been made by the greedy dwarf to run about on all fours in the forest. The fairy tales show that in relation to all the kingdoms of nature, human beings have the responsibility to care for and guide the ones living there. The pictures are quite clear about this responsibility and the consequences of fulfilling or not fulfilling it.

When I was teaching kindergarten for my older daughter, I would tell or act out the same fairy tale for three weeks at a time. Over that period we would have three exploring days. Some times



Sara's song, age six.

amazing synchronicities took place, almost as if the image in the fairy tale were organizing the events in nature that we encountered. At the time that we were working with Cinderella, we went to a pond for exploring day where there were many birds. Suddenly a flock of pigeons (!) descended from above, landed around us, and began pecking at the ground. I said:

*See! You tame pigeons, you turtle doves,  
and all you birds beneath the sky,  
come and help me pick  
the good into the pot, the bad into  
the crop.*

My daughter just gazed at the birds, experiencing the picture from the fairy tale directly. Doves and pigeons live closely with human beings and they form a kind of milk in their crop with which they feed their young (Konig, *Swans and Storks*, p. 39–40). Thus, the picture in the fairy tale shows the power of good to transform evil—the task is given out of punishment, but performed with the aid of creatures who make something good out of the bad.

The participation in the world expressed in the fairy tales accurately captures the experience of young children. One breezy day in August, just before my younger daughter would start First Grade, she lived into the wind and trees with this song that she created.

She sang this song over and over with a very floating open quality. The song is a true expression of the young child's mood and experience of oneness with the world. In the First Grade, nature stories join the

*Continued on next page*

## Connecting with nature

continued from previous page

fairy tales in the curriculum. Nature stories have a seemingly obvious connection to experiences in nature, but nature stories as told in the Waldorf curriculum have certain important and somewhat subtle qualities. Nature stories do not simply have animals or plants for characters that talk and act. And they are not just descriptions of events in nature. Nature stories present for the child the moral aspects of nature as well as participatory consciousness. The plants and animals do talk and act, but they are expressing their true nature and the nature of the spiritual world behind the physical in doing so. Steiner's example of the story of the violet (in *Kingdom of Childhood*, p.58–60) shows these qualities well. The stories are best if they come from the teacher's own direct experience.

Nature imaginations can also be used in teaching practical work, such as in handwork. This last fall I taught a handwork class for homeschooled children, Grades First through Third. I chose a bag woven of wool yarn in fall colors for the project. The bag is woven around a flat piece of cardboard all in one piece, so the children have to turn at the edge and keep the over and under pattern. In planning an image to give them, I thought of what birds do to weave a nest and came up with a short repetitive verse. When I taught the class I talked about how a bird weaving her nice warm nest to keep her treasures in finds a long piece of grass or bark and she begins saying:

*Over and under, over and under*

*When I turn the corner*

*I must remember*

*Over and under, over and under.*

I made the corresponding gestures in the air as I said this. A few days later for an exploring day with my daughters we went to a new county park and visited the nature center before walking in the

canyon. In the nature center was a display of local bird's eggs and nests and there it was—an oriole-like hanging pouch nest! I showed this to my First Grader and said, "See, they have to turn the corner." She just took it all in; I never fail to be amazed at these synchronicities.

In the First Grade, the outdoor world can also show the forms of the consonant letters, which can be brought back into the school work as a picture. The mountains show "M", the waves show "W", the mesa, a rock rolling down an incline and then stopping, shows "R." During exploring days this last fall when I was teaching a letters block for First Grade, we encountered crabs ("C"), a parrot ("P"), squirrels (the "S" shape in the tail), fish ("F"), and several others. The walk in nature gave me my picture for the next day's main lesson.

In the Second Grade the curriculum, again ingeniously, presents children with the contrast between two possibilities for human beings. The curriculum encompasses two opposite kinds of stories: animal fables and the legends of the saints. These stories are one step more earthly than the fairy tales because they tell of human foibles or of the lives of particular people who lived in a certain time and place. The fables communicate a moral (although this is not explicitly formulated for the children), but these morals have more to do with the human social world than with spiritual laws, as do the fairy tales. The significance of the opposing qualities of the animal fables and the saints' legends lies in what they show children as possible paths. In the next year, Third Grade, they will be even more conscious of themselves and this change will continue, so the fables and saints legends plant the seeds to help with choices they will have to make later. The animal fables are not about animals,

(top) Oriole-like hanging pouch bird nest.

(bottom) Woven bags, handwork Grades 1–3.



although they draw on some qualities that animals sometimes show. Therefore, experience with animals, and with nature stories, are important in the Second Grade.

In the Second Grade near Easter time one of our exploring days consisted of taking a harbor cruise on a whale-watching boat. We saw some grey whales, surfacing, blowing, and diving with tails upwards, but more visible and impressive, were a group of dolphins that followed and cavorted beside and around the boat. We looked directly down on the dolphins keeping pace with the boat and watched them leap over and over swimming beside the boat. Later in school I told a story about how dolphins help people in the water (based on stories in and on descriptions of the close kinship of humans and dolphins in Konig, *Penguins and Seals*, p. 69–90). I also spoke the following verse I had written:

RACING AND SWIMMING AND TWO WORLDS

*Down into the depths the dolphin dives breaking in*

*To schools of fishes, and fighting the shark.*

*The dolphin – at home in the dark – Listening, listening, whistling, and listening.*

*But the dolphin comes surging up to the light!*

*She breathes out and, quick, in with all her might.*

*She looks about – she sees a boat – hurray!*

*She jumps for joy, right over the boat.*

*The sailors exclaim and laugh and wave.*

*And if they need help, the dolphin rushes To carry them on her back , sure and safe.*

Finally, we did a watercolor painting of dolphins, one leaping above the water and the other swimming below as they live in both the light and the dark, the air and the water.

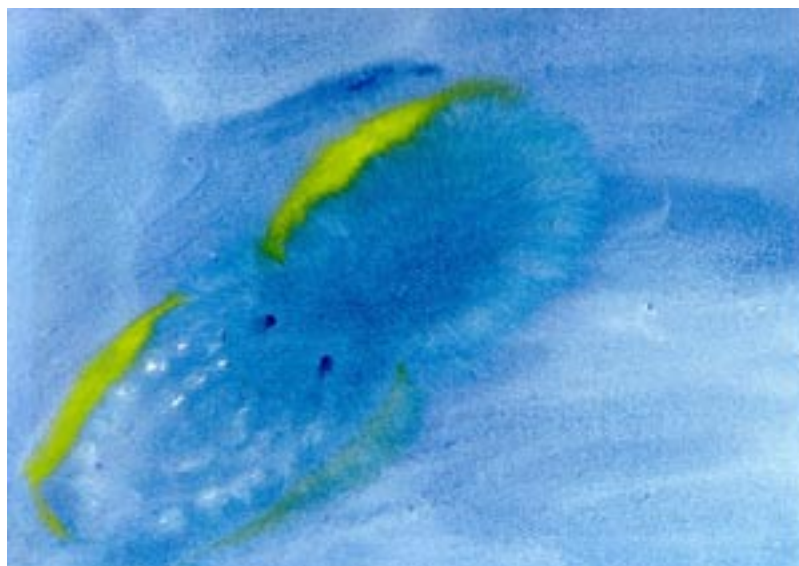
The Third Grade curriculum is comprised of stories from the Old Testament and material on pre-industrial farming and other occupations. Here the emphasis is on the work we must do to live, as told in the story of the expulsion from paradise, and on the responsibility we have to tend the earth, to maintain and ennoble it. On our seasonal visits to biodynamic farms we learned about preparing compost, caring for animals and pasture, and growing, harvesting, winnowing, and grinding grain. My older daughter saw that some preparations have to be sprayed at dusk and if it gets dark before you finish, you have to work in the dark. Biodynamic farming brings one into close contact with the rhythms of nature and the commitment required of human beings.

On our exploring days in Third Grade, even before I taught a house-building block in school, I noticed my daughter beginning to use the materials at hand to build shelters. In a dry stream bed that formerly she ran in looking for insects or

pretty stones, she now sat and cleared an area and used the stones to build up walls for an enclosure. Over the course of the year she built other shelters in a bamboo thicket by a stream and out of palm leaves at the beach. I wonder how much of the whole curriculum we would see if we watched children’s activities in nature with educated eyes.

Our exploring days in Fourth Grade have taken on a new dimension as my daughter becomes more aware of earthly life and more able to notice and observe the world outside of herself. Now I have started giving her some instruction in observing. Before we go on our walk I give us, the older child and I, the task of stopping to quietly observe any animals we encounter. I then bring these encounters back into the schoolwork in stories or artwork. The first time we tried this observing, we saw a lively little wren hopping quickly, actively, in a bush and seeming to be quite interested in

*Continued on next page*



*(above) Cuttlefish, watercolor painting, Grade Four, Claire Read.*

*(left) Dolphins swimming, watercolor painting, Grade Two, Claire Read.*

## Connecting with nature

*continued from previous page*

observing us. We also saw a red-tailed hawk soaring high above near the top of the low mountain. Looking for stories for school, I found “The Wren, King of the Birds,” about an eagle and a wren (in the Oxford Book of Animal Stories, p. 24)! Just before I started the first human and animal block in school it happened that we went out on a boat built to allow the passengers to view the fish and underwater life through a “glass bottom.” We saw kelp forests, the dancing play of light beams that stretched visibly all the way from the surface of the water to the sandy bottom, and many kinds of fish including a darting flattish creature with tentacles. When we came to the first animal in the school work, lo and behold, it was the cuttlefish.

### Authority in parenting and teaching

As I deepen my work with perceiving the natural world, following Steiner’s directions, I begin to connect with the forces and beings who form that world. I therefore, begin to realize that I can be more conscious of the beings who are authorities to me. And I realize we parents and teachers can be authorities to our children/students only insofar as we accept that we also have authorities.

Young children, before the age of seven or so, are not only immersed in the life forces of nature, they are immersed in everything around them, including the parent and/or teacher. That is why everything we are and do is significant for them. The clothes we wear, the gestures we make, our tones of voice, our mood and our thoughts are their world. But as the child’s consciousness begins to change around age nine or ten, they become more aware of us as separate individuals; this is when they need us to be authorities. They need to know that we know more than

they do and that we are more experienced. They need to experience that it is important to listen to us. When we can, as consciously as possible, experience our own authorities in just this way, we can give the children what they need. And, most importantly, those below give to those above. Just as the children’s bright eyes and fresh questions and comments nourish and delight us, we nourish those above us with our good will.

So we have come full circle—from concentrating on the blue sky to beginning to live more consciously in our own inner world, and in the world of human relationships. The directions Steiner gave for concentration exercises in nature lead to a truly participatory observing: we know ourselves through the world and the world through ourselves. That is nature—one never knows where one’s explorations will lead. 🌿

*Catherine Read holds a Ph.D. in Developmental Psychology and is a Research Scholar at UCLA (for example, see Dent-Read, C. and Zukow-Goldring, P. (eds.), *Evolving Explanations of Development*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association Press). She has homeschooled her two daughters from Kindergarten into Fourth Grade using the Waldorf curriculum. She has also conducted workshops on a variety of topics including music in the mood of the fifth, festivals, dyeing with plant dyes, and nature meditations.*

### Resources

- Cook, T. (1979) *The Curves of Life*. New York: Dover Publications.
- Charbonneau-Lassay, L. (1992) *The Bestiary of Christ*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Edelglass, S., Maier, G., Gebert, H., and Davy, J. (1997) *The Marriage of Sense and Thought*. Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Books.
- Goethe, J. (1993) *The Metamorphosis of plants*. Kimberton, PA: *Biodynamic Farming and Gardening Association*.
- Harrer, D. *Nature Ways in Story and Verse*. Contact Rudolf Steiner College Bookstore, Fair Oaks, CA.
- Holbrook, F. (1902) *Nature Myths for Children*. Bedford, MA: Applewood Press.
- Klocek, D. (1998) *Seeking Spirit Vision*. Fair Oaks, CA: Rudolf Steiner College Press.
- Konig, Karl. (1984) *Penguins and Seals*. Edinburgh: Floris Books.
- Konig, Karl. (1987) *Swans and Storks*. Edinburgh: Floris Books.
- Konig, Karl. (1988) *Elephants and Bears*. Edinburgh: Floris Books.
- Pepper, D. (1994) *The Oxford Book of Animal Stories*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press.
- Seamon, D. and Zajonc, A. (1998). *Goethe’s Way of Science*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Steiner, R. (1982) *The Alphabet*. Spring Valley, NY: Mercury Press.
- Steiner, R. (1996) *The Festivals and Their Meaning*. London: Rudolf Steiner Press.
- Steiner, R. (1995) *The Kingdom of Childhood*. Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press.
- Steiner, R. (1992) *Spiritual Beings in the Heavenly Bodies and in the Kingdoms of Nature*. Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press.
- Terres, J. (1958) *The Audubon Book of True Nature Stories*. NY: Thomas Y. Crowell.
- Thompson, D.W. (1992) *On Growth and Form*. New York: Dover Publications.