

On the Seashore of Worlds

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The seashore of endless worlds. . .

Shell
 Dinky car
 Saturday sixpence
 Bull's eye (sweet)/lolly – 3d superior to 1d
 Catapult
 Water pistol
 Dead butterfly
 Snakeskin
 Interesting stone – obviously
 Penknife – succession of (you'd lose them)
 Rubber band – you fiddled with it mostly but it was a great projectile
 Matchbox with something in it – an ant or spider
 Magnifying glass
 Collecting cards
 Conker – in season
 Metal and glass marbles – I liked the feel and the look of them

The boy, one-time owner of the above and now a man, paused thoughtfully as he metaphorically turned out the contents of his boyhood pockets. The hand of his memory reached back into long-forgotten spaces to draw out the treasures lying hidden there still. Held lightly now, in the palm of his imagination, he described the familiar objects with an immediacy and sense of intimacy connected only to the known and loved. A dead butterfly; an interesting stone – “obviously,” he had said, it being unthinkable that a child wouldn't have had one of these; a conker – in season; glass and metal marbles – he liked the feel and look of them. It was clear that many of the individual items, while significant in themselves, also held a totemic value for him; each was a signifier for a set of other important feelings and associations. His rubber band; the papery snakeskin, which hadn't lasted long in those crowded cloth pouches, but what a

find; the magnifying glass; the fluff-covered sweets; the penknives, which kept getting lost – everything spoke of his personal odyssey through childhood, of his journey to find himself. Each object symbolized at least one play adventure in the world: one self-sought, unique learning experience. Taken together, the contents were a tribute to the “raging originality of childhood” and to the diversity and eclectic nature of the growing human mind.

The child would know all the properties of things, their innermost nature. For this reason he examines the object on all sides; for this reason he puts it in his mouth and bites it. We reprove the child for his naughtiness and foolishness; and yet he is wiser than we who reprove him. (Friedrich Froebel)

The boy's pockets were filled with what he chose to gather together to meet his own idiosyncratic needs. Some items helped him explore the world – the magnifying glass, the penknife; some were accidental but wonderful discoveries – the discarded snakeskin, the butterfly – which, even then, he knew connected him to beauty and death although he was unable to verbalize that thought at the time. All of them – his play tools, his treasures – the random accumulations of his childhood, were an affirmation of his individual self.

The child's toys and the old man's reasons are the fruits of the two seasons. (William Blake)

Inside our adult heads, the collector's items that are our thoughts, feelings, and memories, jostle together like the contents of that small boy's pocket. In *The Renewal of Education* Rudolf Steiner suggests that the way we gather things together to create our playworlds as children is a necessary process that pre-empts and indeed informs the way we later collect the necessary concepts from our repository of experience to make good individual judgments in real situations as adults. To make good personal decisions we need to dig deep into the pockets of our experience.

The linear, perfunctory journey through the early

years by the fastest route possible, in which we arrive at our adult station out of breath and with a suitcase full of ticked test papers, is not necessarily the best way to achieve this. What makes us rounded, satisfied, and personally creative human beings who are able to make sound decisions is rather the long trawl, the lingering look, the collection of oddities, the storing of experiences, good and sometimes bad, which originate in childhood and populate our inner worlds from then forward. Children need places to play in safety in their own society – to meander, to look away from the business of learning for a while, and in so doing find themselves.

They also need to find each other! When questioned, children say that what they like doing most is playing with their friends, yet certain games appear to be in decline. A survey carried out in 2004 of 3,500 parents and head-teachers in the UK reported that parents were worried that traditional playground games were disappearing from primary schools. Only one in five children played chase or tag games, one in ten enjoyed skipping, one in twenty played conkers and less than one in a hundred played marbles. Cat's cradle had vanished altogether. Some games have been superseded by contemporary versions. Skipping rhymes are filled with modern cultural references: "Poor Jenny" now gets married, divorced and re-married within a few hectic minutes. This is a dynamic and inevitable evolution, but seasonal games, those which cost very little and have always given children great pleasure because everyone has the same access to them, have been elbowed out of the way by the sophisticated toys and gadgets that have muscled their way in to the playground. Delight in simple things, it seems, is increasingly short-lived.

Children are also losing their play spaces. There is less physical space, fewer places for adventure and healthy risk in relative safety, and also, in some quarters, less tolerance and understanding of why children need their "space to play," why they need time out from the busy schedules in their lives, and why play is such an important part of their learning process.

The natural world, alive in both urban and rural settings, has much to teach us whatever our age, and there is a clear need to encourage and plan for children's playful engagement with nature. Early childhood colleagues are working hard to

provide opportunities for children to experience the great outdoors, for example by introducing garden areas into early years settings, and in the Forest Kindergarten Movement. Many years ago, the educator Margaret McMillan made the discerning observation that "The best classroom and richest cupboard is roofed only by the sky."

Simon Barnes, the author and naturalist, would agree with her. Writing about the discovery of a couple of newts lying "like drowned dinosaurs" at the bottom of a pond by his son, who breathed: "Wow!" in delight, Barnes argues:

It all depends on what you mean by education. Do we want to educate people to become a viable part of the economy? Or should the priority be to make them a viable part of the human race? It's a question of what we value. Your money or your life, if you like.

And how can anyone value what he has never seen? Getting children's boots muddy is not about recruiting tomorrow's conservation workers. Perhaps the test of being human is the extent to which we value things beyond our own immediate circle of concern: to value life beyond family, beyond nation, beyond race, beyond religion, beyond species.

But you can't make the first step to understanding the non-human world if you can't say 'wow' to a newt. It has become a political issue: every child has a right to say 'wow' to a newt[!]

He's right, and I believe we should lobby for children to have these kinds of life-affirming experiences. Children watching hours of TV instead of being outside in streets and fields suffer from the twin ills of experience deficiency and information overload.

Ignoring the life curriculum, in favour of the work project has also been shown to place children under undue stress. In a survey commissioned by Phil Willis (Liberal Democrat party education spokesman) in 2002, 147 representative schools, teachers, and parents reported that 55% of children aged 7 were showing stress. Their stress manifested in various ways including the following:

- excessive anxiety
- loss of appetite
- insomnia
- bed-wetting
- forgetfulness and depression

Teachers were reported to be concerned that children were no longer allowed to be children and the case of girl who unexpectedly started bed-wetting again was used as an example. This girl had been taken to the doctor to get to the root of her problem, where it transpired she was preparing for tests and had been told that her teacher's job depended on the results. How sad for her; the burden of responsibility was simply too much to bear. We are putting weighty sacks on our children's backs again; in the industrial past they deformed the body, now they weigh down the soul.

A piece of older – but I believe still valid – research directs our gaze to a very different paradigm for childhood.

After finding that about one child in 30 is brilliant and happy. . . a great deal of research [was done] to determine what demographic or psychological characteristics distinguished those children. But the children came from a wide variety of backgrounds – rich and poor, small families and large, broken and stable homes, poorly and well-educated parents – and from all parts of the U.S. Finally, through extensive questioning, [Burton White of Harvard Univ.] determined that the bright and happy children had only one thing in common: All of them spent noticeable amounts of time staring peacefully and wordlessly into space. (from Creativity in Business by Ray and Myers)

Staking a claim for the Imagination

I recently visited a kindergarten where children do have time to stand and stare. On this occasion, however, they had chosen not to stare peacefully, but rather to engage energetically in their free play (child-initiated play, without specific, external learning objectives). As they developed their themes – unravelling individual ideas and tying them together in new combinations with others – I was conscious that play is very often about *place*: about “determining the ground.” Two boys were guarding an area of “land,” hallowed ground, with a pair of entwined sweeping brushes. Children wanting to enter the protected area were required to say a password, whereupon the brushes slowly rose, like the drawbridge to a mediaeval fortress, or more prosaically, the barrier to a modern car park

(a beautifully observed detail perhaps). The point about the barrier and what lay behind it was that the children were transforming the designated space into what they wanted it to be. On this occasion, the determined land ranged from being a house, where hidden inside, a cook was flipping pancakes and setting the table for her friend the chicken-cat (a self-determined role negotiated because the “cat” didn't just want to be a cat); a palace for a princess, who slept “over there,” a horse's stable with a hobby horse who had stew cooked for him; and a yard for a kennel with a dog.

This idea of determining land in childhood may be more significant in later life than we realise. Melvyn Bragg interviewed the playwright Michael Frayn to discover what lay behind this man's remarkably inventive mind. Frayn spoke about his childhood, where he had played freely with friends on bomb-sites and other unclaimed areas: “undetermined land” he called it. “It became whatever you wanted it to be.” This quality – of being able to overlay a place or a situation with an imagination (often accompanied by a physical construction) and thus determine it – proved central in Frayn's later literary work. In the interview, the seventy-one year old was shown reacting with obvious delight to the rediscovery of some rusty nails still anchored to a tree that had once supported the prow of an imagined ship he and his boyhood friends had built and sailed in so many years before. He spoke of the imagination as a vast tract of undetermined land waiting for us to claim and determine it for ourselves.

*Know you what it is to be a child? . . .
It is to believe in love,
To believe in loveliness,
To believe in belief. . .
it is to turn pumpkins into coaches,
And mice into horses,
Lowliness into loftiness, and nothing into everything.
(Francis Thompson)*

Despite the importance of make-believe in childhood, research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) suggests that young children may be missing out on “pretend” games like pirates and spacemen due to the demands of the school curriculum.

The project, led by Dr. Sue Rogers at the University of Plymouth, found that reception classes were not always designed to meet the needs of four-to-five-year-olds. “Children of this age learn to make friends as well as to use their imagination through role play,” says Dr. Rogers. “We know that they are capable of sustained and complex imaginative play and that capturing and engaging their interest is essential. Unfortunately, pressures on time and space, as well as the need to teach literacy, means that playing at shops, pirates, and hospitals is difficult to fit into the timetable.”

The researchers made a total of 71 visits to groups of four-year-olds in schools from three contrasting areas in the southwest of England. A total of 144 children and six teachers and six classroom assistants took part in the project. As well as observing how indoor and outdoor play was organized in the three schools, the researchers asked the children about their favourite games and used drawings, stories, role-play scenarios, and photographs to build a picture of their perspective on role play. “Listening to children’s views on use of space and layout could raise the value of play in the curriculum and reduce potential tensions between children and adults,” explains Dr. Rogers.

Making Assumptions

The potential tensions between adults and children mentioned above often come about because of misunderstandings, or mistaken assumptions, and sometimes because of a lack of imagination on our part, as the following anecdote illustrates.

Did you hear about the teacher who was helping one of her kindergarten students put his boots on?

He asked for help and she could see why. With her pulling and him pushing, the boots still didn’t want to go on. When the second boot was on, she had worked up a sweat. She almost whimpered when the little boy said, “Teacher, they’re on the wrong feet.”

She looked, and sure enough, they were. It wasn’t any easier pulling the boots off than it was putting them on. She managed to keep her cool as together they worked to get the boots back on – this time on the right feet.

He then announced, “These aren’t my boots.” She bit her tongue rather than get right in his face and scream, “Why didn’t you say so?” as she wanted

to. Once again she struggled to help him pull the ill-fitting boots off.

He then said, “They’re my brother’s boots. My Mum made me wear them.”

She didn’t know if she should laugh or cry. She mustered up the grace to wrestle the boots on his feet again. She said, “Now, where are your mittens?” He said, “I stuffed them in the toes of my boots. . .”

The point about this joke, perhaps, is that we don’t always know what’s going on with children. They don’t always tell us because they can’t. We make assumptions about them, which are sometimes wrong, or our knowledge about them is inadequate. Sometimes the shoes, or the experiences we try to push them into, don’t fit, and that feels very uncomfortable, and sometimes there are hidden things, things we have no knowledge of, which also exert their influence.

I once watched a girl playing alone. First, she wrapped herself in a cloak, then numerous cloths of different sizes and colours. A skirt from the dressing-up box came next, then a hat, followed by a veil and crown and finally, a pair of gloves. I knew she wasn’t wrapping up against the cold because this was Hong Kong, so her play was serving other, hidden purposes. Cocooned in layer upon layer of cloth and cloak, and speaking softly to herself she fluttered about the room absorbed in her own-world play. Thinking and being are not separated in young children, and I could see the flood of inner imaginings flowing directly into her outer movements. Although creating an imaginary other “being,” paradoxically, she was also exploring the possibilities of an expanded self. I had no idea who or what she was in this metamorphosis, and would not presume to guess, but I felt that the time and space away from the noise and clamour of the world, the few moments she had been given for her imagination to blossom, had not been wasted. Play gives intimations about the future. When we play, we dream our way into the future selves we will one day become.

Susan Linn, EdD, associate director of the Media Center at Harvard University, and active and outspoken critic of the media assault on childhood, writes about the value of a quiet space for the imagination to grow:

Harry Potter did not evolve from a lifetime of exposure

to television, movies and the products they sell. His roots are in the silence J.K. Rowling found in the Forest of Dean. He grew in the space she was allowed to fill with her own vision. He grew in the glorious experience – endangered now more than ever – of listening to voices no one else had heard.

Many children also have imaginary companions. Far from being a cause for concern, these companions have been shown to have positive benefits. Anna Roby, a psychologist at Manchester University, has spent the past year studying 20 children between the ages of four and eight who had created extra mummies, imaginary dogs, and even a dragon to play with. Roby found that “children who have imaginary companions have more advanced communication skills.” Dr. Evan Kidd, her colleague, says that the findings will help to reverse common misconceptions about children with imaginary friends: “They will come to be seen as having an advantage rather than a problem that needs to be worried about.” Invisible companions can help children explore aspects of life that are puzzling or worrying, as well as being fun.

We cannot assume we know what a child may choose to bring into play for the needs of the inner world. For one child, it may be such a friend. “In the tale of myself, ‘I’ may need another me to be braver, stronger, more disruptive than the me I am; an ally, someone I can have a dialogue with. Someone who is me - and not me; in the real world and yet not.” In this quotation from his book *Playing and Reality*, the eminent psychologist D. W. Winnicott claims that play lives between the real and the not real, between the inner and the outer worlds we inhabit. It is taking place and so is real, but it is also imaginary. He quotes from a translation of Tagore’s *Gitanjali*: “On the seashore of endless worlds, children play.” We can only imagine those worlds.

Play fulfills many functions for a child. Like life, its themes can be serious, scary, and violent as well as delightful, and tact and understanding in the face of difficult play when it occurs are always needed. In far more eloquent words than mine, Walt Whitman observed that the child becomes what he sees each day. We know this to be true: the forces of imitation are at their strongest in the early years, and while imitation is in the ascendant, discrimination has yet to appear. Experiences flood in unchecked, and

for the most part what children see is what they then do. Life is their subject matter. Children play explosions after an earthquake; they played out the dreadful events witnessed in the concentration camps of the Second World War; they play suicide bombers on the streets of Palestine – in fact one of the most popular games the children play there is “Being a Martyr,” which involves digging yourself a shallow grave in the sand in the street. In Sri Lanka they slowly began to play games of loss following the recent tsunami.

Though disturbing to witness, these tableaux need to be sanctioned and met with our compassion and understanding. It is vital that we don’t assume children are necessarily being “naughty” when their play becomes challenging or makes us feel uneasy. “Playing out” can be as essential to the child as is thinking to an adult; indeed, in one sense play is the child’s thinking. It is a reflection on life enacted with the whole body and not just the head. When play becomes too scary or dangerous, we may need to intervene with some gentle redirecting: perhaps into ways where people might help each other with rescue vehicles, or bring medical equipment and so on. Being conscious that it is quite normal for children to bring what worries, confuses, or frightens them into their play, however, will help us to respond with sensitivity. This kind of play is needed to help restore inner equilibrium. Play is the medium in which children mix the really big issues with the more quotidian ones. The big players, life, and death, love and loss, rub shoulders with the fools, the acrobats and dancers, and all that lies between, as they share the stage together in the wonderful theatre of play.

Play has a role as a healer: it is also universal. It crosses generations and gender and reaches across cultural divides to arise spontaneously and unexpectedly between those willing to enter its magical world. It takes intelligence and sometimes quick thinking to partner someone in *the game* – to meet another with the right response, as Eduardo Galeano writes in a celebration of fantasy from *The Book of Embraces*. He describes a visit he made to the town of Ollantaytambo near Cuzo, Uruguay. A small boy, skinny and ragged, approached him and asked whether he would give him his pen. Galeano wasn’t able to do this because he was using his pen to “write all sorts of boring notes,” but he offered

to draw a little pig on the boy's hand. Soon after, a throng of little boys surrounded him, all demanding the same thing for themselves. He drew a snake for one, a little dragon for another, a parrot for someone else.

Galeano continues:

Then, in the middle of this racket, a little waif, who barely cleared a yard off the ground showed me a watch [already] drawn in black ink on his wrist.

"An uncle of mine who lives in Lima sent it to me," he said.

"And does it keep good time?" I asked him.

"It's a bit slow," he admitted.

This boy had no pocket for his watch, nor did it ever need winding; it was keeping rather excellent time (if a touch slow), by the power of his imagination alone. In this shared enchantment between adult and child – and in so many other ways – given space and time, play's unfailing genius will extend and enrich our lives. Our task is to determine and secure its place in childhood.

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