

## Expansion and Contraction: From the Big Sky to the Forest

Rose Maynard

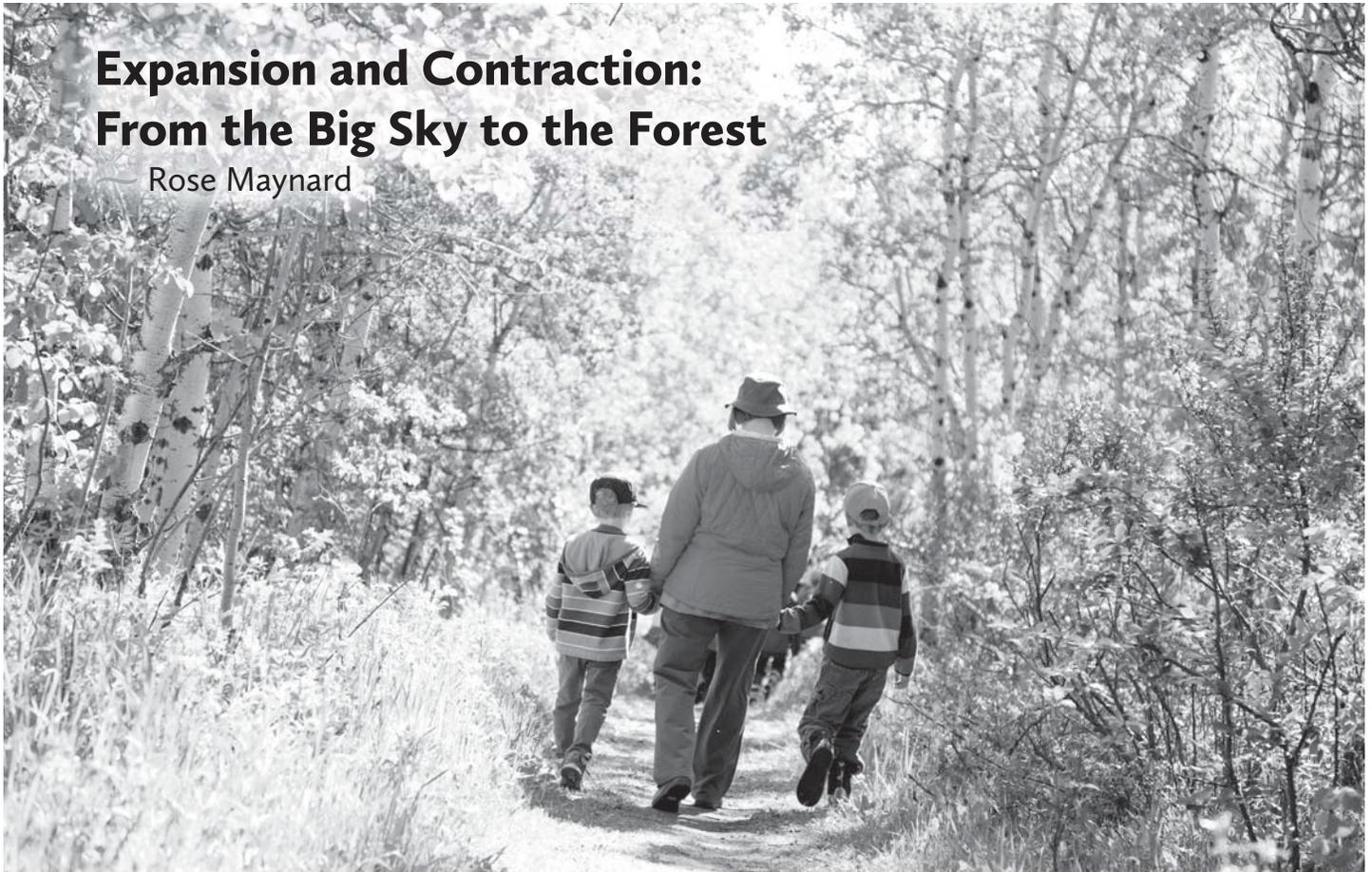


Photo courtesy of Rose Maynard

A few years ago, I began a daily ritual of gathering my kindergarten children for a walk right at the beginning of our day. The school I teach at, the Calgary Waldorf School, is situated at the edge of the city in a fairly new suburban neighbourhood. Ten minutes west of the edge of the city one encounters the rolling foothills of Alberta. Forty minutes west of the edge of the city one encounters the Rocky Mountains. My kindergarten class and I walk under expansive, constantly changing skies. Some mornings blue and soft pink colours greet us. Some mornings the sky is lined with bands of clouds. Other days one sees miles of grey. Many days in the winter, one cannot see much of the sky as snow falls and falls and falls. When it is clear, however, the sky hovers wide above us.

Over the years, many mentors from other lands joined my class on our walks. Although I find comfort in Alberta's big skies, my visitors often noted this never-ending sky above and wondered about the effect on my students. Their remarks inspired some reflection on my choice for our daily route.

I became very conscious to balance out our walk by searching out groves of trees for balance and protection. The children, my assistants and I now start the day with meandering across the field behind the school, greeting the morning sky. But after meeting the morning colors, we quickly dip into a quaint neighbourhood path lined with trees, bushes, and gardens. Each day as we make the transition from the field with the big sky above us to the path lined with trees, the children seem to ease into the walk. The trees, the bushes, the gardens, and wee chickadees and house wrens in this moment of forest embrace us, soothe us, and massage us. The link between this addition of a wooded area and the children and their sense of wellbeing is observable.

I, of course, have not been the only one to notice the therapeutic effects of nature and especially of wooded areas on young children. In fact, shortly after committing to our daily walks, a Waldorf colleague from New York visited our school to speak on her forest kindergarten. Sigrid D'Aleo brought



slides and stories of her days almost completely outdoors in the woods of Saratoga, New York. After hearing her, I could not help but wonder if I could take my children just a little deeper into nature. I already felt the children settle and calm as we wandered through our neighbourhood groves of trees. What would they be like if we were completely surrounded with trees and foliage? Instilled in our routine was our daily walk and not far from the school there were, indeed, miles of trees. To take the class to the woods would mean that most of our day would be outside. I started to plan for a longer walk, an extended play and the addition of food and water. Could I actually incorporate forest days into our suburban city Waldorf kindergarten? How interesting that my search for protection from our big sky was now leading us to the woods.

One Spring morning, five years ago, my assistant Vivian and I committed to a longer walk, to carrying backpacks and to a morning outdoors. I found a spot twenty minutes away that was completely wooded.

This spot was at the top of a hill, at the edge of our suburban forest called the Paskapoo Slopes. At this spot, a teepee shaped structure made of deadwood had been built, and it was big enough for adults and children to go inside. (I am not sure who built it, but I am ever so grateful). The walk to the woods was surprisingly easy as the children did not balk at the extension of our walk or at the slightly different route. When we dipped into the trees I recall Vivian and me breaking out into satisfied smiles. When we released the children into free play into our chosen area, I recall a wave of joy washing through the group. I will always remember one little fellow finding an especially thickly wooded spot and lying under the branches and the leaves. The woods seemed to provide another layer for him, and it was as if he needed a little “cocooning” so to speak.

Forest days are now part of my kindergarten practice. We make our way to the woods when the children have gained stamina through walking daily and when the weather permits. Walking to the woods is usually effortless as it is only an extension of our regular walk, and we go first thing in the morning. (The return trip is harder after an hour of play and this is when we stop for water and food breaks.) Alberta’s big, beautiful, expansive skies inspired a search for the opposite, which proved to be the therapy the children craved. Nature’s embrace instills calm and a sense of wellbeing in the children. There is something quite special when playing under a canopy of leaves. It is truly difficult to find the right words to describe the mood shift in the children as they slip into the world of the trees. Ruth Ker writes that a healthy sense of life “tells us that we are okay in our body, that it’s a safe place to be. This sense helps us to feel at home on earth” (*Gateways*, Spring 2015). I believe that my forest days support the children’s sense of wellbeing, their sense of life. The trees as an extension of the earth provide the experience of protection and feeling safe which allows the children to feel that much more comfortable in their bodies. ◆

**Rose Maynard** *has been affiliated with the Calgary Waldorf School for almost 24 years. Rose trained with Janet Kellman and Rena Osmer at Rudolf Steiner College, and in 2011 completed her Master’s of Education in Early Childhood Education from the University of Alaska South East. For the last five years Rose has been planning and implementing Forest days with her class.*