On Behalf of Children

Special Features

November 10, 2008

Dear President-Elect Obama,

On November 4, 2008, you became a hero of children and dogs when you told your daughters, Sasha and Malia, they had earned their puppy. This final celebratory message of your speech suggests how the current economic crisis can obscure our most vital resources—children and the natural world. Rather than material objects—new TV, larger house, virtual pets—you pointed to a delight that hides in plain sight. Children are intrigued by a puppy’s reaction to a butterfly or the first snow. They enjoy enticing a hermit crab out of its shell. These spontaneous activities for children provide the kind of “extraordinary inspiration” you find in the writings of Abraham Lincoln.

New research from the Alliance for Childhood suggests that many kindergarteners are spending two to three hours per day on literacy, math instruction and standardized tests, with 30 minutes or less immersed in play. In recent decades the distance the average 12-year-old travels independently by bike or on foot has shrunk from one mile to 500 yards. Recess threatens to become extinct. Eight to 18-year-olds spend on average 6.5 hours per day gazing at a screen, and children today engage far less in spontaneous play. Estranged from this vital activity, they lose touch with places that teach them how to become creative, flexible, and alive.

Children’s imprint on the land is light. Adults tread more heavily, etching their ambitions on the environment. As a sense of place marks itself on those growing up, the physical world is written upon by each new generation. Children require outdoor play for integrity, both physical and mental.
Indeed, their right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness could be regarded as crucial to our constitution. Yet children are powerless to make choices about land use and the natural world.

Our relationship with the earth and its young is changing rapidly. We need to engage in a conversation about the connection that children and the natural world must have so both can thrive. Philosopher Simone Weil wrote, “To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul.” Yet our ruptured root system has been dragged to the brink. Technology may have outrun us—not just in financial systems driven by supercomputers but also in the demise of outdoor play and direct experience.

Behavioral neural scientists are beginning to provide proof of the importance of play to learning and wellbeing. Supporting the intuitive knowledge of astute preschool and primary grade teachers, researchers are now understanding better the impact of play on the chemistry of the brain. As psychiatrist Stuart Brown, founder of the National Institute for Play, puts it, play fulfills a need as fundamental as vitamins or sleep. This core affect of mammals is shared by humans, first in games of peek-a-boo, then in hide and seek, spontaneous rough and tumble, embodied fantasy and fort building.

Play has probably been the most important factor in the evolution of social behavior among vertebrates…

Ashley Montagu

Focusing on the earth and its young, we must ask, what mutual exchange creates the best possibilities? How can those of us in the process of growing enhance multi-species living? How does caring for animals protect the lives of all species, particularly our own? Edward Hoagland explains what is missing when we employ authority and compulsion in dealing with children and other
creatures: “In order to really enjoy a dog, one doesn’t merely try to train him to be semi-human. The point of it is to open oneself to the possibility of becoming partly a dog.”

Text messaging your 18- to 26-year-old supporters at your moment of victory marked a unique opportunity. The same forces your campaign unleashed can now enlist the technological skills of the young to use social networking for entrepreneurial greening. Civics curricula can engage middle and high school students suffering from what Kurt Hahn, the founder of Outward Bound, called “the misery of unimportance.” Crying for adults to make use of them, these young people can be major players in rebuilding schoolyards, conducting energy audits, identifying obstacles to free play, and mentoring younger children.
We underestimate our teenagers and undervalue their creative power. Young adults in the developing world with less education and technical skills are making significant contributions to solving social and environmental problems in their own communities. Our students could identify local obstacles to universal access to recreation—whether these involve safety or transportation issues, a dearth of time and space, or the disinclination to play outside. Yet instead of lobbying for environmental justice and using their intelligence to preserve and recreate sanctuaries for free play, they are asked little more than to participate in giving money or cleaning up roadsides. Teens could be micro-financing their own projects for children with the support of agencies like Michigan’s CommunityLink Foundation.

In “endless rows of individual houses, each opening out onto the same ribbon of sterile concrete,” the writer Bill McKibben finds “a sort of invasive individualism, a hyperindividualism that makes us a new species.” Yet at botanical gardens and parks we discover possibilities at the heart of every encounter of children with their landscape. They show how an early-years agenda chimes with an outdoor learning and play manifesto—one relevant to citizenship, geography and spiritual soundness.

Soothing identification with the cycles of season and mortality cannot be realized in the virtual. Stephen Talbott writes that “special effects wonder” does not lead to the same reverent curiosity that accompanies prolonged contact with nature. “The latter…grows from an awareness of one’s immediate connection to the phenomenon—from a sense that the inner essence of what one is looking at is somehow connected to the inner essence of oneself.” Friendships with animals matter; they can and should be bound up with the broader inquiry into childhood, play, and education.
To extend well-being throughout a lifetime, societies have to articulate why they care about outside play. A recent study from the University of Illinois found that children with attention hyperactivity disorder were better able to focus after “green” walks compared to walks in other settings. Policy makers, city planners and landscape architects can learn from such research how to challenge some rock-hard assumptions. Too often, as former children ourselves, we believe we’ve been there—merely regarding the young as less complete versions of ourselves. “When adults seek to learn about and from children,” the sociologist Barrie Thorne tells us, “the challenge is to take the closely familiar and to render it strange.” Creative magic arises when children are allowed and even encouraged to explore freely. So many paths can be taken to personal identity!

For these reasons, play as a mode of experiencing emotion must be nurtured to persist into adult life. “The opposite of play,” states National Institute of Play founder Stuart Brown, “is not work. It is depression.” In Homo Ludens (1938), Johan Huizinga says play takes place in a dimension distinct from “‘ordinary’ life.” It creates “a second, poetic world alongside the world of nature.” With high stakes testing, we may be losing not just recess but also those psychic spaces where imagination and confidence grow.

Operating within schools and universities we need collaborative programs that look at the places where children and adults learn best. The only way educators are going to create a good environment for children is through partnerships that enable our global village to understand the poet Gary Snyder’s words: “Nature is not a place to visit. It is home.”

President-elect Obama, you have our hopes up. In February you said, “We are the ones we’ve been waiting for.” This winter we hope you’ll be the one the puppy’s waiting for on the grounds of the White House when snow falls.
Sincerely,

[Signature]

Elizabeth Goodenough
Lecturer in Literature, Residential College,
University of Michigan

Parts of this letter appear in a special issue of Encounter Magazine featuring Where Do the Children Play? project, a film, website (www.michigantelevision.org/childrenplay), two companion volumes and outreach programs at the Ginsberg Center. WDCP? originated in 1998 with Secret Spaces of Childhood at the University of Michigan’s Residential College and Nichols Arboretum.

Elizabeth Goodenough co-edited with Mark Heberle and Naomi Sokoloff Infant Tongues: The Voice of the Child in Literature and with Mitzi Myers a special issue of The Lion & the Unicorn on “Children’s Literature and Violence.” Her other books include Secret Spaces of Childhood, A Place for Play: A Companion Volume to the Michigan Television Film, and Under Fire: Childhood in the Shadow of War.