

Learning through Nature



A Real-Life Testimonial

By Geoffrey Bishop

Growing up in the Australian outback, the world of Montessori and modern education was a distant idea. But today, after I have had many years of experience and have developed a strong philosophical and practical education ethic, I believe I grew up closer to Montessori than I knew. In thinking about my meager educational beginnings, it was not what I learned in that classroom but what I learned in the wide-open world that educated me for life. Spending many hours by myself in the wilderness, working with my father and brothers

on the farm, and watching as my mother baked cakes, desserts, and cookies. . . . these are the things that deeply influenced me. All these have spoken to me in the same way that Montessori speaks to all of us. We, as Montessori educators, believe there are a number of important factors that are necessary for a child to successfully attain adulthood. They include family, a stable home, good adult mentors, and a strong system of education that includes fostering of independence, autonomy of the individual, and joyful learning opportunities with a system

of choice and a strong prepared environment. I would like to mention one additional element that I believe to be of equal importance in a child's life, and that is unstructured and unrestricted outdoor and nature play. Richard Louv, in his book *Last Child in the Woods* (2008), speaks of the "Nature Deficit Disorder" he sees in many of today's children. I see this as well, and in my role as the head of a Montessori school set on 400 acres, and as the head of an Outdoor Environmental Education program, I aim to correct this deficit.

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I would like to tell the story of my own childhood, how it mirrored a Montessori education in its most authentic form, and how the elements of the natural world contributed to my education and helped me in later life to truly understand Montessori. My education was unconventional, to say the least.

System of Education

The setting is St. Joseph's Catholic School, a small cluster of stone buildings at the bottom of Gillagala Hill on the outskirts of Merriwa, a rural town of 500 people in northwest New South Wales, Australia. It was in this one-room schoolhouse that I received my "formal education." We pupils sat in rows, inkwells full, and listened to repetitive instructions of which I have no memory. But it was not in this classroom that I truly received my education. Each day, I would wake up on our sheep station with my four brothers and two sisters. We would do our chores and then walk a mile to the bus stop for the rough and ragged journey to school. On this journey, I would start my schooling.

As the notorious "naughty boy," my designated seat was up front, on an old apple box next to the driver. My engineering education came from being up close and personal with the bus engine and the gearing system. As I was not permitted to talk for the 1½-hour journey, and the scenery got boring, I found other ways to engage my energies. As there was no lid to the engine housing in this bus, the driver constantly had to refill the radiator so the bus would not overheat. I would watch the engine rattle and groan, and the driver rev and change gears, until I knew every working part of the bus. On one occasion, to try to understand the tension applied to the brake pedal for the bus to stop, I reached my foot across and slammed down on the brake pedal while the bus was in full motion. We stopped, all right, and I

learned that it took a lot of my weight to push the brake pedal to the floor; I also learned, through a sore bottom, that placing one's foot on the brake randomly was not a good idea.

Once at school, the school yard was my science and engineering laboratory, with inconvenient interruptions of classroom work. My days would include building ant traps, constructing forts out of sticks and discarded rope, and climbing trees to prevent detection from those who were chasing me in games. I would undo the water faucet on the children's bubbler system, releasing water to run along the dirt so I could construct dams and experiment with flooding and altering water courses. I would plant random seeds in the nuns' petunia gardens to see if they would grow, and as they did I would weed out the petunias so my wheat and oat seeds would get more light. I would ring the church bell to see how high off the ground the weight of the bell could lift me and drop the chalk on the floor to see if it consistently broke into three pieces. All of these experiences, though not popular with my teacher or my parents, are lessons I learned and can remember. They combined to become my system of education. These small and somewhat innocent experiments in life would lead to much greater experiments in my later years. I bred 2,500 mice in the caretaker's closet to better understand dominant and recessive genes. I wrote, directed, and performed my own play because my school did not have a drama department. At home, I would sit and watch as the sheep gave birth to the lambs and wait in eager anticipation for those first steps and first feedings. I would hunt for bird nests and capture tadpoles to watch them turn to frogs. From a young age, I needed to reinvent my system of education. It sounds a lot like what Montessori did.

Independence: Autonomy of the Individual

On the farm, my mother had some rules that we all understood, and they guided our life. Rule number one: You have to be on time for meals, and we all sit and eat together. Rule number two: You eat everything on your plate. Rule number three: Children were not to be seen between meals. Rainy days were the only days we could stay inside. Otherwise, I was out on our 3,000-acre property getting my education. From my earliest memory, the outside environment felt natural to me; I spent hours along the creek, catching frogs and watching snakes and looking for eels. I spent days combing the mountains, looking in caves and discovering new plants and lying in meadows of ferns looking up at the sky, trying to see pictures in the clouds.

My father gave me a horse at the age of 5. I had no bridle or saddle, but I already knew how to ride. It was also my responsibility to feed, water, and brush my horse, as well as ride him as much as possible. At the time, I did not realize the important life lessons being instilled in me. My independence was being fostered and strengthened. I was learning my limits and my ability to get whatever I needed to succeed. If something was beyond my reach, I would seek out one of my brothers and enlist his aid. Of course this enlistment had to be paid for, so I would have to come up with the plan of payment before the request was made. I learned to respect the needs and abilities of those around me by understanding that we live in a world that is give-and-take. I never once stole something that I needed to make a project because I knew my market, I knew what I had to trade, and I knew the value of people's time and energy. It was in these mountains and streams, along with time with my family, neighbors, and friends, that I developed my individuality. I drew insight and ideas from my father's work ethic, my mother's

laughter and warmth, my brothers' athleticism, and my sisters' worldliness.

Joy of Learning

Our sheep station was part of the lower valleys of the Liverpool Range. We were considered coastal, even though we were at least 100 miles from the sea as the crow flies. It is a beautiful part of the world, with gently rolling hills nestled up against steep, rocky mountains. The mountains are olive gray, sometimes black, and the hills a smoky green on white. Rich green is not a color that describes my country well. Blues, grays, browns, and white, with a splash of red, would be more accurate. The lower hills were covered with beautiful stands of white box, kurrajongs, and ironbark. The flats had tall majestic ghost gums, flowering white apple gum, and grass. In the wind, white tufts of rye and kangaroo grass swayed like the great ocean. Here and there, ghostly white stumps and dead trees would stand out against the blue sky. Galahs and cockatoos screeched from hollow trunks, in search of food for their young. Crystal-clear water flowed out of the mountains into the valleys, becoming the lifeblood of the land. I seemed so small upon this land and yet so much a part of it.

Old Mr. Clark, one of the adults in my life who played an important role in fostering my love of learning, told me stories about our hills and mountains as I sat on his knee in front of a warm fire on a winter's eve. From my view, he was as old as the mountains themselves. His face was lined and wrinkled, and his eyes deep but bright. He was a thin man, but as his arms held me, I could feel the power of years working in the mountains and on the land. His eyes reflected the joy and sorrow of his life and his grieving for his recently deceased wife. His hands were big and rough and yet gentle and kind, full of love and a life-

time's dedication to the land.

Old Mr. Clark's stories would all start the same way. I would snuggle in close for protection, and he would take a long sip of his scotch. "Back before the war," he would start, "the big war, this land was wild and untamed. . . ." And the stories would flow out of him like winds from the past. The stories of my land.

Another adult who inspired me was Father Delaine, our parish priest. Every week, he would come to our classroom and tell us stories from the Bible. He would tell of people riding camels through the desert and of slaves and kings and pyramids and pharaohs. The religious meaning completely escaped me—I was mesmerized by the people and the places.

When either Old Mr. Clark or Father Delaine told stories, I would feel joy bubbling out of me. Oral history, the history of a people preserved through storytelling, is very powerful. And in my case, these stories, with their connection to the world and the outdoors, were a strong influence on my developing a love of learning.

Choice

Growing up in a small rural community, there did not seem to be many choices in life. Most kids would do a number of years at the local school, then move on to working on the farm, find a spouse at the bachelors' and spinsters' ball, and settle into a quiet, simple life. From an early age, I knew this was not the life I wanted. My parents believed strongly in not influencing their children on the direction our lives would take. But I have vivid memories, from age 10 or 11, of deciding that my life's plan was to embark on a discovery of this planet. What were the influences that planted the seed in my mind that Merriwa was not my destiny? To answer this, I have to go back to when I was 5 or 6 years old. One of my sisters had moved to the

United States after finishing school and would send us gifts via airmail. One of my gifts was a series of books by Ivy Wallace about a rabbit called Pookie.

It was the first of these books that forged the path to my future.

Pookie was not an ordinary rabbit. He was born with two little flimsy wings which his mother would tie up in tight bows. He wanted to sleep all day, even at meal times. When his mother Rabbit tucked them [brothers and sisters] all into the big leaf bed at night Pookie was full of bunny hops and bouncing. This kept everyone awake. (Wallace, 1946)

The story goes on to describe how Pookie did not fit in anywhere, least of all at school. This story resonated with me so strongly that a phrase in the middle of the book became the drum that beat in my head for my entire life. Pookie's teacher, cross with him for falling asleep in class, told him he should leave school and go out and seek his fortune. But Pookie did not know what a fortune was and for the rest of the book goes on adventures to try to find it. His fortune ended up being the thing that made Pookie happy. My mother would read this book over and over again, and when I learned to read I would read it myself. Torn and tattered now, that book still sits in the children's closet of our farm in Australia.

I was able to seek my own fortune by spending a number of years traveling around the world, looking for a place to set my sack and to find direction for my life. I discovered it first in environmental education, and now in Montessori. The choice to find my own fortune allowed me to discover my own education, dreams, and interests, and, in doing so, I was fulfilled.



Exploring in the woods

Nature's Classroom Institute and Montessori School

Multiage Learners

Multiage learning environments seem to me to be as natural as falling off a log. In my community, children from many age groups learned and played together. Much of what I learned growing up on the farm was from my older brothers. On long hot summer days, we would spend hours in the creek, swimming and skipping rocks. I learned how to replace the spark plug on the lawn mower from my brother, I learned how to shoe a horse from my father, and I learned how to dig for yams in the mountains from a neighbor boy. I also learned to be streetwise and to question when asked to do something. For example: My three older brothers had been

spending weeks building a go-cart with an engine removed from our old lawn mower. The frame of the cart was made of wood and iron, strapped together in many ingenious but perhaps less-than-stable ways. The big day arrived when the prototype go-cart would go for its debut run. I, of course, was there to witness its maiden voyage. There was a lot of back and forth between my brothers as to who would be the first to ride in this cart. The back and forth was not because everyone wanted to ride, it was more because no one wanted to be the first in case the thing fell apart. Being the youngest of the four, it was decided that I should be the first to ride. I was strapped in with my father's old army

belt, and the engine was fired up. I was given strict instructions that I was only to release the brake when I was told. In releasing the brake, the go-cart would plummet forward. However, I was given no instructions on steering the go-cart. With the engine revving at full RPMs, my brothers set me in motion, and I flew directly toward the nearest tree. Lesson learned: Beware of some honors that are bestowed upon you.

When I went to boarding school, I learned from my prefect how to conduct oneself in a large school environment; he taught me how to make hospital corners on my bed and how to polish my shoes so they shined. And before that, in the one-room schoolhouse, I learned that there were a lot of chil-



Observing a water environment

Nature's Classroom Institute and Montessori School

dren just like me, and there were a lot who were very different. I learned whom to ask questions of and who could be relied upon to give the right answers. I learned whom to trust and whom to avoid. As I got older, I learned to mentor those younger than I, who to show how to make ant traps, and who was trustworthy and respectful and who was not. I learned that it is advantageous at times to get the advice of an older peer rather than trust the advice of someone your own age. I found many things in common with those who were my age, I gathered wisdom from those who were

older, and I gave advice and solace to those who were younger.

Intimate Relationship between Adults and Children

In our adult world of getting to and from work, going through our daily routines, and making sure that our bills are paid, the birthday cards get out on time, our car oil is changed, and that we book four seats on the family vacation instead of three by mistake, we often forget the importance of the mentor role we have with our children. What may seem an insignificant event in our lives may

end up being one of the most important moments for a child. We do things in our classrooms and in our interactions with children that seem routine and mundane to us, but they have powerful and far-reaching consequences for the little ones who watch us. There have been a couple of very powerful compasses that have directed my life, and, in thinking back, they came from interactions with adults who never really understood the impact that they would have on me.

Some of my earliest memories of my mother are of her standing in the garden, admiring the beauty and life



she had brought into our harsh landscape. My mother was a traditional English gardener, taking direction from traditional landscape designers such as Capability Brown and Edna Walling. I would spend hours with her, weeding and digging in the garden, and to this day my connection to the earth is one of the strongest forces of my life. When I have my hands in the soil, and I smell the flowers—that is when I am content. That was a gift my mother gave me.

The second thing that impacted me is a little more abstract, yet it had an equally powerful and long-lasting influence on me. One of the chores that I had as a child was to bring the sheep shearers their *smoko* in the morning and afternoon. “Smoko” was the name for tea and cake in the morning and tea and *pikelets* (a kind of crumpet) in the afternoon. This job meant loading the tray with my mother in the farmhouse kitchen and walking it up to the shearing shed to the shearers, a distance of about 200 yards. We all had jobs on the farm, and this was mine. Once the tray had been delivered and set out on a bale of wool, I would ready the washbasin for the shearers to wash up. Walking into the shed with the sound of the shears going full tilt and the smell of wool and lanolin mixed with the strong smell of fresh tobacco is a smell unlike any other. I could curl up in a pile of wool and fall asleep with the sound in the background. But going to sleep in a shearing shed was not an option as the roustabout and wool hands moved wool from the shearing floor onto the skirting tables, then into the sorting bins and into the press. All this was rapid fire; movement was quick and all hands were busy. When the horn sounded for the shearers to stop for smoko, then the engines would stop, the sound of shoes was deadened by the lanolin-waxed floor, and a quiet would come over the shed. Even the sheep seemed to know it was smoko;

they too stopped their bleating and dozed a little.

Once the sweet pikelets were eaten, the shearers would settle in with their tea mugs full, and tobacco smoke would filter through the air. Then, one day—I remember it as if it were yesterday—one of the shearers asked me to clean his shears. I was in heaven. With this one gesture, an adult job was given to me. I remember, he showed me how it was done and then I practiced. I practiced all afternoon and ended the day with the shears clean, oiled, and shining. That the shearer had allowed me to do a task that was usually reserved for an adult gave me the confidence that I could do anything.

Prepared Environment

My prepared environment was my outdoor world. It was perfectly prepared each and every day; it was prepared with me in mind; and it was prepared to challenge me, to inspire me to immerse myself in what I was doing. This prepared environment was Nature. It was not adapted with fences to keep me in or to keep others out; it was not prepared with special pathways for me to explore or manicured grass for me to lay on; it was not prepared with swings for me to swing on or slides for me to slide down on or little pools for me to play in. It was Nature, in its raw form, with its broken stumps I could climb on as king of the world, its dandelion and thistle flowers I could pick for my mother, its creek banks I could catch frogs in, its overgrown hedges I could climb into to make my fort. Nature need not design for children, nor engineer to create play-scapes or boundaries; it has everything a child could possibly want, and it will inspire imagination.

I have had a fortunate life, and I talk a lot about my childhood and my adulthood. People often ask me, “But I live in the city—there are dangerous people there. What about my child’s safety?” The safety and well-being of

his or her child is, of course, every parent’s concern. To this, I answer: We can let our fears and our prejudices control and rule us or we can trust in our own judgment and thus build trust in our children. How is a child to learn independence if we never allow her to do anything for herself? How is a child to learn whom to trust and whom to be aware of if we do not allow him to explore humanity? A fall for a 1-year-old is a normal part of daily life, while a fall for a 35-year-old could mean serious injuries, and a fall for a 90-year-old can be fatal. Our children need to fall, they need to climb, and they need to get dirty. They need to experiment and to stretch their limits. If we as adults force them to wait until they are 18 to fall or to get dirty, the consequences will be devastating.

Let us not allow our gated communities and our restrictive subdivision associations to limit our children’s ability to experience life for themselves. Allow them the freedom to explore, allow them to discover the world that will one day be theirs. My parents gave me a gift—it was the gift of Nature as a prepared environment, a place to play freely. Let us give every child the same gift.

References

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