

Church of the Covenant
Children, Outdoors, and Spirituality
Alys Hickcox, for the Children Outdoors Mission Group
June 5, 2016

Quote for silent meditation:

"The creation is quite like a spacious and splendid house, provided and filled with the most exquisite and at the same time the most abundant furnishings. Everything in it tells us of God."

- John Calvin (1509-1564)

Good Morning-

My name is Alys Hickcox. I have been coming to this church since Mike and I moved to Lynchburg from Nashville in 2010. I have been an early childhood educator for many years. I started teaching in 1972. I have the privilege of working with our music team here at church. And I am part of the mission group working to connect young children with the outdoors, specifically here on our beautiful 40 acres.

My purpose this morning is to talk about children, outdoors, and spiritual awareness.

But I need to start by sharing a miracle. This miracle has its beginnings in a grassy field near a little old brick schoolhouse in the middle of a mill town in rural New Hampshire. For about 15 years, I taught kindergarten in the little old schoolhouse near that field. Fall was the time of year that we would hike out to that field; a field brimming with milkweed plants. Along with walking, singing, talking, and laughing, there was lots of searching. We were looking under the milkweed leaves for tiny monarch caterpillars - caterpillars with beautiful yellow and black stripes. The caterpillars would be about as long as the width of your fingernail, and as thick as a pencil lead. Our living treasures would be carefully put in a jar, along with a good supply of milkweed leaves, and brought back to the classroom. Those tiny caterpillars are programmed to eat. They would eat so many leaves that I needed to stop at the field every morning before school for a fresh supply. The children watched, waited, wondered, and asked questions. When a caterpillar grew to the size of my thumb, it would attach itself to a stalk or leaf, and form its body into a "J" shape. It would shed its skin and form a luscious, green chrysalis with beautiful golden dots lining the edge. For the children: more watching, more waiting, more wondering, more questions. One morning, a child would notice that the luscious, green chrysalis had turned black. Was it dead? Had something gone wrong? On further inspection, they could see that the shell of the chrysalis was actually clear, and the black was really black and yellow, and orange wings wrapped securely inside. Soon after, we would watch the amazing emergence of that newly-formed

monarch butterfly - bursting out of the clear shell. The children and I would keep the butterfly for a few days so that the children could let it sit on their finger and drink a drop of sugar water off of their skin with butterfly's long, curled-up mouth part called a proboscis. Finally we would release our butterflies, wishing them well. They were leaving New England and beginning a journey of thousands of miles to a place they have never been before ... to Mexico where they would spend the winter. These monarchs can travel over 200 miles a day, and a total of up to 3,000 miles to reach their destination.

What a wonder, what a miracle! Actually, there are so many miracles: the transformation of caterpillar to butterfly, the children in the field, experiencing the outside world, me in the field watching it all happen. And I haven't even mentioned that when that chrysalis was formed, the caterpillar dissolved itself into a literal soup of plasma. Within that plasmic soup is a memory of what had been AND the knowledge of what was to happen next: the formation of organs, wings, the beauty and strength of a butterfly. I repeated this experience year after year; a repetition of true miracles that never ceased to amaze. How could it be possible for me to be part of all of that and not understand that there is a plan, a hope, something greater, a knowledge that my well-being - our well-being - is linked to the well-being of all creation?

I believe we are obliged as Christians to provide opportunities for our children to experience this connection with God's creation. In Matthew 19, Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."

So what prompted me, way back then, to take those children outside, into a field, in search of caterpillars? At the time, it was what I knew instinctively as a teacher to be true: when young children are outside, they are in their natural learning environment. This is where they are inspired to ask questions. This is where they are open to sights, smells, and the possibility of surprises. This is where a sense of awe and wonder is created. I knew this from my own experiences as a child.

A few years ago, I wondered if this was also true for others in my mission group. I asked my fellow mission group members, Rachel Wilson and Evi Kaiser, about their childhood connections to the outdoors. We were a 20-something, a 60-something and an 80-something. We grew up in different parts of the country with different traditions. But we discovered that we three were bound together by our early experiences of freely exploring our natural environments, encouraged by those who loved us.

Rachel shared these remembrances from her childhood: *"I spent most of my childhood days in the outdoors beginning with the times when we visited my grandparents who lived "in the country" and I would get to feed the chickens. In my*

own yard, there was a grape arbor that allowed me to imagine I was in a castle or on a boat or whatever place my vivid imagination would call forth. There was a cherry tree to climb and I spent much time viewing what I was sure was all of Lynchburg from its top branches. On the way down I always stopped to pick some of the wonderful fruits it produced.

When I visited my friend Frances, she and I would head to the small stream near her house where we would catch 'crawfish' and crawl through the huge culvert under Thomas Road to get to the place where the stream widened. We waded in its cool waters on many a summer afternoon.

The campus of Lynchburg College was mostly forest, bordered by Blackwater Creek. Here I would go with friends and spend the day swinging on grapevines and walking on logs that were across the creek, filling my pockets with the treasures found everywhere. It was a child's Paradise."

When children are outside, they relax, they move freely, they run, yell, and use their imaginations. Children create their own games and learn to problem-solve. Being in nature is good for a child's body and brain. And being in nature is good for a child's spiritual awareness and growth.

Thanks to encouragement from David Edwards, some of us here have read Richard Louv's book, *Last Child in the Woods*. Louv is a journalist, an advocate for children, and an advocate of the natural world. He traveled the country for ten years talking with children, parents, educators, religious leaders, environmentalists, and child advocates. He created the term *Nature Deficit Disorder* to describe the separation of today's children from nature. He described the impact on children when they have little or no direct contact with nature: more attention problems, more emotional problems, less physical health, and less agility and stamina. Time outdoors, time with no adult agenda other than *being*, reduces stress, invites imagination, promotes problem solving, and bathes the senses in colors, smells, patterns, and textures.

Why are children spending less time outside? You know the answer to this. We have computers, TV, iPhones, video games, wireless connections. Children have so many enticing electronic distractions. Plus, children observe the adults around them focused on technology. I'm sure you've noticed families in restaurants where each member is looking down at a screen rather than engaging in conversation. A Kaiser Foundation study in 2010 found that kids 8-18 years old spent on average of 7 hours, 38 minutes on entertainment media every day.

We're also aware of society's growing concern for safety. Louv notes that, as a culture, we are not comfortable allowing our children to freely roam the neighborhoods and woods as I was able to do when I was a child. Do you remember being outside as a child? Where did you play? How did it feel?

I had a special tree in the woods that surrounded our house. That big old tree had a branch that hung out over our brook. I spent hours sitting in that tree, listening to the brook's water trickle over rocks and through leaves in the fall. It bubbled and gurgled under the ice in the winter, and roared over its banks in the spring. It was my place to breathe, to dream, to feel a connection with God's world.

Summers meant camping: a huge heavy canvas tent, pumping water at the well house, cooking over the campfire, and swimming in the swimming hole. And camping also meant that my sister and I were allowed endless days of free exploration in the woods.

There is a quote of John Calvin in the bulletin today:

"The creation is quite like a spacious and splendid house, provided and filled with the most exquisite and at the same time the most abundant furnishings. Everything in it tells us of God."

Calvin felt that, through our wonder and exploration of the natural world, God makes herself known to us. He believed that what we discover in nature are hints that God exists.

Today, much of outside time is reserved for organized sports, and the radius children are allowed to roam has decreased to one-ninth of what it was 20 years ago. Studies say that American kids spend half as much time outside now as they did in the 1990's.

I have had the opportunity to talk to early childhood educators about this topic. I have shared the values of time spent freely playing outdoors. This is a topic that has inspired outdoor movements - in this country, as well as around the world. Educators and parents are working to develop schools where the outdoors is the classroom, in all kinds of weather, throughout the seasons. Nature is good for children physically, socially, and academically.

Here with you today, I also share my belief that time freely spent in nature is good for a child's soul. Novelist Dan Wakefield says in his autobiography, "In the fields and woods not far from my house, I felt close to the source and mystery of things." Our children need time to feel this mystery, this connection with the natural world. Young children are open-minded. They do not need a prepared lesson to explore rocks, puddles, and mud but they do need to be given the opportunity to explore.

Researchers from Michigan State University and Yale University observed children aged 7 and 8. According to their study, those who spent 5 -10 hours a week playing outside experienced feelings of peace, awe, and a connection to the natural world. These children expressed appreciation for beauty, and a sense of wonder.

Mark Coleman, a Buddhist, writes, "In nature we can feel a living connection with life all around us. Being outdoors we can taste how we are held and nourished exquisitely by the intricate web of life that is supporting us in every moment, every breath." Isn't this something we all need?

Remember that miraculous plasmic soup inside the monarch chrysalis? I think this is a good way to describe our mission group. Rachel, Evi Kaiser (now Colinger) and I began meeting more than 5 years ago. Members have come and gone, taken breaks and returned. We recently have been blessed with 2 new members: Sandy Slack and Ann Mayer. Like the chrysalis, we are a cosmic soup. We are a mixture of past experiences, reading, sharing, praying, singing, accountability, wondering, questioning, and like my kindergarteners, waiting. Waiting with hope for what will emerge.

Something is emerging, And we are so excited. This September, our group, in conjunction with Pat Haley and Leigh Huyett from Camp Kum Ba Yah, will host Rusty Keeler here on our church grounds. Rusty has written this book: *Natural Playscapes: creating outdoor play environments for the soul*. A playscape is a large play space for young children, where the interest areas are composed of natural materials. There might be a tunnel made of living willow branches, a children's garden, a water source near some really good dirt to create a "mud kitchen."

Rusty will stay with us, walk our grounds, and help us envision a playscape right here for children ages 4-7. This will be an area open to our community where young children can experience all that I have shared with you this morning. The reality is still churning inside the chrysalis - but something is happening. Ideas and plans are taking form. I share this vision with you all because this one of the many miracles of our community. You are invited to ask questions, check books out from our mission library, keep us in your prayers, and come to a meeting. Our meeting times are listed in the bulletin. We are open to a different time and place if necessary so an interested person can come.

It is our responsibility as Christians to provide our children with the gift of time outside: time to be, time to experience our glorious, ever-changing natural world, time to be amazed and then to wonder how this all came into being. Our children need an opportunity to learn to care for our earth, and to grow spiritually. This is

the passion behind the Children Outdoors Mission Group. We are waiting, we are wondering, we are hopeful. Amen.