

Living Under the Sky

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When a pine needle falls in the forest, the eagle sees it, the deer hears it, and the bear smells it.

Native American saying

Many of our familiar indoor activities are just as relevant in the outdoors environment. In this article, I will give many living examples of the outdoor activities we have pursued over the years in our kindergarten at Michael Hall. Tidying up outside, for example, should be just as consequent as it is inside. Fetching someone else's bowl for a second helping is just as natural outside on a log as inside. It is a rhythm, a natural habit, brought about by imitation; no thought is involved, only joy in helping, doing and seeing the good. The six-year-olds, already living in good unconscious habits, begin to repeat actions out of a recognition that they have to be done. These are acts of devotion, a real impulse of will, setting the scene for their class teachers to build upon. Hanging everything up properly after being outside, independently even if it is a struggle, becomes a necessary habit. "I can hear some boots playing around outside the door," say I when ready to start the story. The children jump to it and sort it out. "Oh, I forgot!" "I put mine away!" "Mine were just lying down, they got a bit lazy because they were tired." Dressing properly to go outside should equally be a habit, not thought about and done with time and care.

The elemental beings are the intermediaries between the earth and the spirit-cosmos.

Rudolf Steiner, *Man as Symphony of the Creative Word*

Steiner describes the particular relationship of each elemental to our world in the most fascinating way—for instance, the butterfly, whose wings on death shed their dust into the warm ether of the earth, glimmering and shimmering, into which the fire beings then pour themselves. And this is the world around our children, particularly outside. He describes the relationship between the gnomes and our movement system, the undines and our

metabolic system, the sylphs and the rhythmic system, the firebugs and the nerve-sense system. He tells us how a spiritual music sounds forth from the movement of birds in the air to the sylphs.

How important it is, then, to be in this bird world, in the butterfly world, around and about in nature! Children love nature stories; they find a connection to the world of nature and the elementals. Singing bird songs and singing to the sun, moon and stars find an instant place in their hearts. In speaking of singing with children, Steiner says in his *Education of the Child*:

The more living the impression made on eye and ear, the better. Dancing movements in musical rhythm have a powerful influence in building up the physical organs, and this too should not be undervalued.

Nature abounds with impressions for eye and ear, and movements in musical rhythm for our children to imitate: leaves in the wind, dewdrops sparkling on the cobweb, clouds playing in the sky, raindrops falling in a puddle, flames in the fire, crackling wood, seeds rattling in their pods, frogs croaking, and all the delicacies and differentiations of colour and form. All this is absorbed by the child's etheric body.

Sight is the most used of all the senses, but movement underlies all the lower senses. They are penetrated by will activity, by unconscious will forces. Think of the life sense: inner movements of well-being and of jumping for joy! In touch, we reach out to our own periphery, move to our own boundaries to find outdoor space supports skills practice and helps to create harmony amongst the children. When creating or changing part of the garden, the children should be involved; otherwise, it is an opportunity lost. They can help dig, pass bricks, set stones, fetch wood-chips in a barrow, or watch. We are all familiar with how such meaningful work is then imitated at the time and later re-created in play. Every day we adults should be working outside as an example: sweeping, raking, scrubbing, weeding, compost making. A garden is never

finished because parts of it are in a constant state of growth and change. If parents are kept informed and consulted, a lot of involvement can ensue. Workdays are fun and great social occasions. We need their help anyway on the whole issue of clothing.

Clothing

What are we ourselves wearing outside? Imitation! We know children must have warmth for their life forces, and that they neither recognise nor can as yet regulate their own temperature. They should be dressed properly before they go out of the door, tucked in, buttoned up, hats, scarves and gloves on, extra pair of socks in winter and waterproof jacket and trousers when it's wet. The latter are expensive but save on washing and mending. I explained to the parents from time to time that it's not necessary for the children to have lots of clean clothes and often to be washed themselves, because they don't really get dirty; where it was appropriate I also said that the life forces are washed away too from clothes and body; soap should be used only where necessary. After the winter hats come off, the children should wear sun-hats. I made a whole lot of bonnets with neck protection of old pillowcases with pretty edgings, but the children could also wear their own. No one was allowed to have bare shoulders. With regard to the child's lack of defence mechanism, Dr Victor Bott writes in *Anthroposophical Medicine*:

Exposure to noise, cold, heat, or too intense light can give rise to disturbances. Temperature regulation is dependent on the ego, and therefore must be supported by care of the adults around the child until the ego has taken hold of the body much later on.

Planting and Animals

Seeds and berries for children and birds, herbs for soup, tea and drying, vegetables, fruits, flowers (particularly which are scented for bees, other insects and butterflies) or of interest, like snapdragon, winter-flowering shrubs, trees, as and where appropriate. Have a compost heap and leaf mould, and wood and sticks to rot for wildlife.

Caring for animals helps to build up sociability and respect. We couldn't have animals at Michael Hall because it was too exposed and vulnerable, with no one anywhere near, but we had the gift of cows or

sheep next door for most of the year, plus squirrels (grey, not red, sadly), birds, the odd fox and deer, rabbits and mice! Moles were secretive, but their tunnels were an endless source of exploration and excitement.

Small or Difficult Spaces

Some teachers only have a very small space for a lot of children, and asphalt on the ground that they may not dig up. Here, I would find old half-barrels, tubs, sinks, and plant them up. Recycled logs do well for a bed, too, attached to corner posts. Put near a wall or fence, climbers can grow up from them, and small trees can flourish too. Water when necessary. Perhaps a part of the asphalt could be covered with wood chips which can be swept up or a carpet. If there is a lot of mud, see how you could cover some of it with, for example, stones, gravel, old carpet or wood chips. Have logs, planks, bricks and branches for creative play. Make a circle of logs for play, picnics and story. Tie ropes to fences and hang clothes over them like tents.

Beyond the Garden Gate

We are woodmen carrying trees, carrying, carrying, carrying trees.

We don't care about the wind or weather, we just keep carrying, all together.

We are woodmen carrying trees, carrying trees, carrying trees.

Sawing, Chopping, Hauling.

Rhythmical "sea shanties" help the work along; we all use them to accompany activities, and outside should be no exception. I used to make up rhymes as we went along, to soothe a situation, but usually just on the spur of the moment anyway:

Woosh, woosh, puddles, woosh. Slosh, slosh, mu-ud, slosh. Mind your boots, mind your nose, Hold your hat, hold your toes Woosh, woosh, clouds, woosh. Plosh, plosh, rain, slosh.

I made this one up now as I wrote it. It often encouraged the older children to add verses of their own. They loved it!

Ringtime Outdoors

What about ringtimes in and beyond the garden? Why not, as long as it holds its rightful place in the morning's rhythm? Magical things happen, too, like birds singing with us, and finding the daisies we're singing about. We can use the natural landscape to enhance our ringtime (e.g. the molehills become the seven hills in Snow White). Stories are lovely outside, under the tree, under the bush, on the hillock, under the sky. The same rhythm, rituals and reverence accompany them.

Creative playtime in woods and field is so rich: nothing gets in the way, and Mother Earth's playthings are rayed out for us. It is also quieter than in the kindergarten. I worry a lot about the noise our children have to suffer today.

All learning associated with speech in these years should be especially by imitation. Children will best learn to speak through hearing.

Rudolf Steiner, *The Education of the Child*

The child's whole body is also an ear. Where better to hear than outside? Our songs, games, stories told outside, birds, wind, rustling leaves, creaking branches. These experiences will later become concepts, and these will be the basis on which the child later responds to the world.

The joy of children in and with their environment must therefore be counted among the forces that build the physical organs. They need teachers who look and act with happiness, and, most of all, with honest, unaffected love.

Rudolf Steiner, *The Education of the Child*

Wonder

The environment outside is a rich treasure, however modest, to fill us adults with happiness, especially if we see how fulfilling it is for the children. My children felt deprived if they hadn't had enough time outside. Wonder (of a daddy long legs: "What do they eat?") and reverence (of a squashed worm at the road, "We'll make him a grave.") help to build up, through imagination, the powers of original thought and feeling for one's fellow human beings. Wonder

helps to rekindle the flame of curiosity, the ability to discover and invent. Time is of the essence: "Hurry up, or we'll miss the shops." Not having time for the child may be depriving her of vital experiences; those who saunter and dawdle may be seeing something we have missed. We have the power to give our children time.

Water and Healing Forces

Playing with water is very important for children; inside they can wash up, paint, wash dolls clothes and paint pots. I recently saw a boy stand under the drips from the ceiling (leaky roof) "I'm having a shower." Water is especially helpful for precocious, hardened children. Although what comes out of the tap no longer has all the healing properties it should, and rain is polluted ("Mummy says you mustn't eat ice. It's got pollution in it.") none-the-less, water is a healing force. Dew, a stream, the pond, puddles, dripping gutters, mud, rain, mist: all are gifts for our children, and we can seek ways to bring it to them. Joan Marcus once told me she had water in the room in some form, and if it wasn't possible, one could have a blue veil.

The healing forces of music, ritual, warmth, colour and beauty are all found outside. Music gives us bird song, our own song, sounds of nature; "The leaves are clapping their hands!" Rituals are the movements of sun and moon, the seasons, growth and dying, our grace before the picnic and thanks afterwards, lighting the candle (reverent gesture to the sun.) Warmth comes from the fire, the sun, our clothing, the ruddy glow in the cheeks, happiness and our love for each other and the world. Color in nature is like a breath of fresh air for many children who suffer from today's harsh untrue colours. There is beauty in a bird's eye flowers, the big oak tree, and the clouds, in everything in nature.

How Long Outside?

How long should one be outside? A growing number of kindergartens and playgroups on the continent, and now also here in Britain, spend whole days out, and even have no building, just a shelter somewhere. Margaret McMillan had "shelters" in the city, not "classrooms." One April, in the snow, I visited a state forest kindergarten in Switzerland and asked the teacher about the things one could hardly do outside. He replied that you

had to let some things go: it depended on what you thought was important. In fact, there is almost nothing you can't do outside, especially if you have a shelter. Experience of permanent forest kindergartens is that the children are less ill and generally stronger, healthier and more harmonious. I've thought a lot about it all, and, when I retired, I was still at the stage of being outside for a total of about three days a week, because I still needed to have the balance of the indoors for the children: not for the activities, but for the being.

Trips and Expeditions

When we were out, we went to the same places for repetition, and also to new ones for wonder and surprise. This is not possible for some, but with a bit of imagination one can do it within a small area, too. Sometimes I invited the parents to come with us to see what we do; that was very popular, and people even took days off for it. One can arrange bus trips or car trips if there's not much possibility at kindergarten; then you need to have new risk assessments, comprehensive insurance policies and clean driving licences along with parents' permission.

We had many happy expeditions. Three miles is not too far for the children to walk once they are used to it; it is strengthening for the will forces. Once, our reward for walking the long way to a farm was seeing two lambs being born. Watching builders on a roof with a bucket on a pulley for tiles was exciting. "I'd like to do that when I'm older. I'd like to be a real workman when I grow up. Do you have to pay to do that?" To be around the campfire is to be as if in nature's kitchen, a cup of warm herb tea (herbs collected and dried ourselves) in one hand and a hot potato or chestnut in the other (rain didn't bother us): bliss! Cheeks glowed, social life blossomed: squeezing up on the log for others, sharing our food, sharing the odd story, talking together: idyllic! Food for the senses and power to the will, underlined through activity. I was blessed with assistants who supported me in all this, who didn't mind getting a bit grubby and fire-smelly. The parents were wonderful, too; I explained to them why I was doing this, and how they could help me.

The Elements

Suggestions for Games Outdoors

Water: Blowing walnut boats across a disguised paddling pool. Fishing little fish parcels of dried fruit in blues and greens off a blue cloth. The parcels have wire loops, rods have wire hooks.

Air: Throwing little sand bags with streamers into a basket. Throwing a ball through a decorated hoop to hit the bell hanging from it. Blowing tissue or fleece balls about.

Fire: Playing with a tissue paper butterfly on a stick. Making a candle in the sand (wick tied to a stick placed across the top of a small hole, wax poured in).

Earth: The sand pit has been brushed and combed the day before, and on the morning is decorated by many eager fingers drawing special pictures in it, prior to the streamers they made (of sticks and strips of red, yellow, orange crepe paper tied to the top) being placed in it for hoopla. Boxes of different materials for an obstacle course in bare feet: grass cuttings, pebbles, sand, shingle, wet mud, etc.

General Outdoors Activities

Water: Flow form, pond, leaf, paper or bark boats, waterfall, waterwheel, (two small paddles of rectangular board crossed in the middle on a piece of dowelling, supported either side of the stream by forked sticks), washing steps, watering plants, sand pit after rain, watching clouds, an old boat to play in.

Earth: Frost painting (put painted papers still on boards out on frosty ground; wait; bring in dry as normal). Mud pit, clay, gardening, collecting crystals from the ground (in gravel paths, even), sand pit, play with real bricks.

Fire: Play with beeswax, birthday cake candles if outside day (protect from the wind with an umbrella), bread oven, sand candles, watching butterflies and bees, visiting beehives (not too close!), bonfire, spoons and saucepans for "cooking."

Air: Skipping, throwing balls, running after hoops, making windmills and whipper whoppers, leaning on wind, watching clouds, climbing hedge or tree to the top.

Winging through the Year:

Festivals Outside

A teacher once reported on a nursery that had not been outside for five months because of the mud. Amazing! But we can really only appreciate the joys of spring and summer if we take part in the dying and secrets of autumn and winter.

*The earth's soul sleeps
In summer's heat;
Then the sun's mirror blazes
In the outer world.*

*The earth's soul wakes
In winter's cold;
Then the true sun shines
Spiritually within.*

*In summer's joyful day
Earth sleeps deep;
In winter's holy night
Earth rouses, wakes.*

Rudolf Steiner, translated by Matthew Barton

If rhythm and habits live in the children well, festivals can be celebrated outside. Maypole dancing is the most obvious. Sometimes we had to do it in raincoats or hang on to the blowing ribbons tightly, ending up in a glorious colored knot! But this is all a will-developing experience that the parents enjoy and laugh through because of our own enthusiasm.

Whitsun, the late spring festival, is of blossoming pictured by the compositae (daisy, dandelion, etc.) family. How beautiful, then, to bring the picture of the impulse of Christianity into the wide world when surrounded by blossom and insects. This is the alternative to having lots of candles inside: one can have them on a wind-still day, or a white one in a glass lantern. Music can be made outside just as well as inside.

At St John's tide, we can celebrate with songs and a story and music outside, followed by the fire. Midsummer with food galore for the senses is celebrated by some after the St John's festival, and by some separately. Dancing, song, honey, games and a picnic can belong to this: food for the senses, entertaining all the elements. Parents love to help and look after different games, and to provide for a bring-and-share picnic: a delight of colors, smells and tastes. It must be well organised

with the normal grace, beginning together, passing round and sharing, followed by thanks at the end. Parents may need help in supporting us with this, but are only too pleased to fit in and do "the right thing" for their children. The picnic can be on rugs under the tree, on the grass, on logs. I don't remember its ever raining for this festival, threatening, yes; actually raining, no.

Michaelmas: Some people celebrate this together with the Harvest festival, some separately. Whichever way, both can be outside. Michael stands there, the pedagogical companion of humankind, as a picture for the children of everything we have gathered and harvested to put in our basket for winter's dark and cold. An element for Michaelmas can be a lot of hard work in the garden or amongst the older children if attached to a school, or a walk in a "difficult" place with brambles, squeezey places in bushes, up steep hills and so on.

Courage and activity are certainly the main aspects at this time. I used to do both together: Michaelmas and harvest. We had a lot of work to do inside and outside on the morning prior to celebrating in a circle in a mood of quiet reflection, with music and a story at the end. Work included sweeping outside, apple polishing, apple-juice making, harvest loaf baking, raking, herb cutting, lavender picking, weeding and soup making. Parents were invited for as much of the morning as they liked, and were shown how they could help. Everyone shared in the well-earned little meal.

Martinmas: We celebrated out of doors with a walk in the darkening night visiting old people, or those who still worked for the school, bringing a lantern and biscuits to each. We would have earthly food, as a balance to the spiritual food, in some prepared place, in the yard, at friends', under the trees, somewhere, whatever the weather: hot tea (cinnamon plus ginger infusion with apple juice added) and biscuits. Parents were well prepared with songs and details beforehand, such as extra socks. At some point, where the children could sit down, e.g. a low wall, I would produce a little puppet play out of my pocket. In the dark, in the lantern light, the mood was beautiful.

Advent: My main thought was to kindle the wonder which escapes many of our children today, and to keep it alive in those where it still lives in order to make a space for the advent of the Christ

child. Sometimes I made a spiral garden, sometimes not, but at least a part, if not all, was always outside. It would take too long to describe it here, but it was always a surprise, and wonderful things happened in the children. Sometimes we went for a walk on a normal morning and found candles in apples under the bushes, with parents helping, well hidden, and making music to lure us there. When we returned, we found a beautiful spiral garden of twigs and crystals, and stars that definitely weren't there before! (I had it down to a fine art, with or without help, to create a festival centrepiece in five or ten minutes while the children were getting ready for outside or so, having everything ready behind the curtains.) One of the nicest things I did was to tear up little pieces of sheepskin on the third week of Advent and put them on the grass in the field some distance away before kindergarten started. When we went out for our walk (lured again by magical music glockenspiel or so), we found so many little sheep in the meadow, and could "hear" that they wanted to come back with us to the children's own Advent gardens at home. Again, the parents were well informed and sworn to secrecy! Sometimes I did similar things for other festivals, e.g. hanging so many little shell cradles with babies in them in the bushes in early morning a mile away, which we found later before the story of Briar Rose in the forest with the parents. One could say this sort of thing is a trick, but what about St. Nicholas and Father Christmas? Children should have magic.

Candlemas: In the flowerbeds, we planted candles we'd decorated or made and sang to Mother Earth.

Easter or Spring Festival: New planting would be a part of it by making Easter gardens outside to take home in flower pot saucers or on bark: cress, alfalfa or wheat sown a few days before. Egg decorating is more of an inside task.

What Lies Ahead? A New Beginning

*The plant-seeds spring in the womb of Earth,
And waters rain from Heaven's heights;
So does Love spring in human hearts,
And wisdom water the thoughts of men.*

Rudolf Steiner

As the turn of the century passes, humankind is engaging in some soul-destroying education, and we are destroying the very ground upon which we walk. Rudolf Steiner told us that these are times of hard tests for human beings and that they would become even harder. Yet there is hope! I become very distressed and worried about so much I see and experience, but hold before me the healing possibilities offered to us by four Archangels: Gabriel, Raphael, Uriel and, of course, Michael, the leader of our age, to guide us in morality to stand up as individuals and not be afraid to do so, and to be as worthy guides to our children as we can possibly be.

Michaelmas is the Festival of Strong Will. Times of sacrifice, but therefore also healing, can be ahead for us all. Describing how to make an attractive garden for our young children, and doing something about making sure there will be a world garden for them and their children to walk in, are not one and the same. Our inner, awakened selves, with eyes, ears and hearts everywhere, must be active to perform outer deeds. There are many organizations working to save and heal the planet for the children whom we are educating. There are other groups that can give advice and practical help on living with nature and the creation of a harmonious landscape for the young.

All that we bring about through meditation and action changes the world; every deed has repercussions, whether greatly moving or a drop in the ocean. Teachers create ripples in the pools of their work with children, resonating out into the wide world. I am convinced that there is nowhere richer for this sparkling water than under the sky. And all our groups' back gardens may bear a heavenful of playthings, of fruit for the future, of magic.

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