

A SENSE OF WONDER

by David W. Orr

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A revolution in education is underway and it is starting in the most unlikely places. The revolutionaries are not professional educators from famous universities, rather they are elementary school students, a growing number of intrepid teachers, and a handful of facilitators from widely diverse backgrounds. The goal of the revolution is the re-connection of young people with their own habitats and communities. The classroom is the ecology of the surrounding community, not the confining four walls of the traditional school. The pedagogy of the revolution is simply a process of organized engagement with living systems and the lives of people who live by the grace of those systems.

Perhaps the word “revolution” is not quite the right word, for what is captured in the images that follow is more akin to a homecoming. We all have an affinity for the natural world, what Harvard biologist Edward O. Wilson calls, “biophilia.” This tug toward life is strongest at an early age when we are most alert and impressionable. Before their minds have been marinated in the culture of television, consumerism, shopping malls, computers, and freeways, children can find the magic in trees, water, animals, landscapes, and their own places. Properly cultivated and validated by caring and knowledgeable adults, fascination with nature can mature into ecological literacy and eventually into more and purposeful lives.

A curriculum that enables young people to discover their own homes as described here is not an add-on to the conventional curriculum. It is rather the core of a transformed education that enables young minds to perceive the extraordinary in what we mostly mistake for the ordinary. There has never been a time when we needed the kind of transformation described here more than at the end of a century of unprecedented violence and at the dawn of the new millennium. We need it, first, to help open young minds to the awareness of the forgotten connections between people, places, and nature. But we need a transformed curriculum and schools as the start of a larger process of change that might eventually transform our communities and the culture beyond. If this occurs, and I believe that it will, it will begin with small everyday things: freshwater shrimp, the trees along the banks of streams, the lives of ordinary people, the stories we tell, and the excitement of children.

D.H. Lawrence once said that “Water is H₂O, hydrogen two parts, oxygen one, but there is also a third thing that makes it water and nobody knows what it is.” It is magic, the kind that can only be found in nature, life, and human possibilities once we are open to them. What is captured in the images that follow is the kind of education that takes young people out of the classroom to encounter the mystery of the third thing. In that encounter they discover what Rachel Carson once called the “sense of wonder.” And that is the start of a real education.