Wild Rumpus Revisited: The Benefits of Outdoor Play in the Vocation of the Child

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It came a bit earlier this year, February to be exact. My mailbox and inbox began filling with flyers and parenting magazines strewn with summer sporting opportunities for my daughter, who is incidentally not yet four years old. Some of the solicitations were predictably competitive in nature, as if to echo the tenor of sport itself. “Make sure she’s ready for the A-league when the time comes” and “Building little superstars one skill at a time.” Other ads cast youth sports in a more holistic light, selling programs as a vehicle for increased self-confidence and the opportunity to develop lifelong character.

Curious about the experiences of friends with older children, I began soliciting stories on the parental tension between encouraging organized sports on the one hand and emphasizing undirected, freestyle outdoor play on the other. What I discovered over the course of months was a narrative of inundation not unlike my own. While the primary source differed some—parents of teenagers readily identified their children’s peer groups as a key factor for increased involvement in sports rather than concerns regarding long-term development typical among parents of young children—the same questions emerged. How can I best help my kids succeed? What combination of activities, organized or not, will foster growth?

Like adults, children undergo legitimate experiences of calling. Chief among a child’s vocational responsibilities are learning and play, which research on the bio-behavior and spiritual lives of children suggests are greatly enhanced by consistent access to undirected outdoor play.

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Christian parents, presumably interested in their children’s spiritual well-being in addition to their physical, cognitive, and emotional welfare, contextualize these questions in a unique way. Here the concern is not just one of success, but also discipleship. How can the activities my child participates in teach and train them in the way they should go? What are the spiritual benefits of sport and outdoor play respectively? And what will ultimately help my child flourish as a whole person?

Many articles in this issue of Word & World address the positive (or sometimes negative) relationship between sports and Christian faith. Small in measure, my task here deviates from this theme and takes up an arguably more countercultural pursuit. While not discounting the myriad benefits of organized childhood sports, my aim is to examine what decidedly sports-free childhood experiences of nature offer children, and to connect such insights to a larger picture of childhood vocation. Might there be good reason for the conscientious parent to say no to a summer soccer league and yes to a family camping trip? Looking at the bio-behavioral gains of consistent communion with nature and the spiritual currency of exposure to the natural world, I will argue that unstructured outdoor play is critical to the realization and embodiment of childhood vocation. To make these connections clear I will first explore the concept of children’s calling to clarify the purpose of this beautifully fragile stage of life and speak to the high stakes of parental priorities. Second, I will engage recent research related to the phenomenon of Nature Deficit Disorder to uncover biological, behavioral, and psychological advantages of outdoor free play. And finally, I will conclude with reflections on the role of nature in the spiritual nurturance of children.

THE VOCATION OF THE CHILD

To address adequately the question of how best to teach and train one’s child, a goal or purpose is needed, not just an ideal of responsible adulthood measured decades down the road. Surely good parenting cannot be measured merely by long-term outcomes, if it can ever be externally measured at all. Rather, the success of parenting ought to be more modestly measured by the degree to which parents help children live into their present calling. But do children really have such vocations? Can they be called to one way of life over another and thereby held responsible?

Parenthood has been conceived as vocation since the dawn of the Protestant Reformation. Luther, for example, saw it as both a temporal and a spiritual calling wherein father and mother served as priests to their children, acquainting them with the gospel, nurturing them in faith, and developing within them gifts to serve others. Parenting, Luther wrote, “is adorned with divine approval as with the cost-

liest gold and jewels.”

Yet this vocational language, which speaks to the process of heeding and responding to God’s call, has largely been reserved for adulthood, or at the earliest what we might today call adolescence. Three factors have contributed to this partitioning of calling. First, most theologies of vocation emphasize the cognitive aspects of discernment over the experiential. The assumption is that with growth in reasoning ability comes a heightened aptitude to discern God’s still small voice. This acumen then helps a person translate experiences of calling, which are typically characterized as individual rather than corporate in scope. Naturally, children lag behind in the rationality department. In fact, most pediatric studies suggest that critical thinking skills don’t emerge until the age of five and are not fully developed until the mid-twenties. What’s more, children—particularly young children—often perceive reality in community. From learning about consequences to marking off one’s identity, children discern in an intermutual context. A second reason for defining vocation in adult terms relates to agency. After one uses such thinking skills to discern a calling she must then decide whether or not to pursue it. Vocation isn’t inevitable, nor is it coercive. Even in the Lutheran context where vocation is thought to be passive, a matter of freely receiving what God has given rather than pursuing a particular aim, choice is yet involved. And children do not possess the freedom to choose in the same way adults do. Thus, as unable willingly to act upon a calling, children cannot be thought to bear a vocation in the proper sense of the word. And finally, theologies of vocation have overlooked children because of the limited and fairly determinate influence their lives can have on others. Vocation, after all, isn’t just about an individual’s relationship to God’s divine command or beckoning, but it also speaks to alliance and kinship with the neighbor. Time and again the biblical texts illustrate how God calls people for a purpose to a person or people. Children, critics argue, cannot be seen as equal bearers of such responsibility nor can they be considered as capable as adults. What influence our children have upon the world and us is more inadvertent than intentional, casual than designed.

Or not. In recent years several excellent works on the vocation of the child have shed new light on children’s gifts, aptitudes, duties, and responsibilities. These works have sought to place children in the middle of theological reflection rather than as peripheral subjects related to issues such as marriage and the family.
abortion, gender relations, contraception, and the like. The goal of child theologies has been to provide theological understandings of children and our obligations to them while also reconsidering theology and church practice in light of children. One of the leading figures in this work, Marcia Bunge, outlines eight biblical dimensions of childhood vocation, which collectively counter the three above objections. Children are to: (1) honor and respect parents; (2) obey parents; (3) disobey parents and authorities if led by them to sin; (4) fear and love God; (5) learn about and practice faith; (6) teach adults and be models of faith; (7) go to school and study diligently, and (8) play and be in the present.3

Surely if the biblical texts require children to honor, respect, and obey their parents (Exod 20:12; Deut 5:16; Lev 19:3; Eph 6:2–3; Col 3:20; Heb 12:9; 1 Pet 5:5–6), they must obtain the ability to reason between respect and disrespect and be able to freely choose between the two. Similarly, resisting adults who might lead one astray (Ezek 20:18–19; Luke 21:16–17) and fostering a fearful love of God (Deut 4:10; Prov 1:7, 14:26) require equal degrees of discernment and freedom. So while it may be true that children wouldn’t know what to do on the Damascus Road, if at all aware of what was occurring in the first place, it is also the case that children hear the voice of God in myriad ways and are more than capable of responding with their presence as Isaiah did, “Here am I, send me” (Isa 6:8).

Of particular note and especially relevant to our larger conversation about outdoor play are the ways that children model faith formation and character and in so doing serve as our teachers. This point is especially emphasized in the Gospels, which turn upside down the first-century and contemporary assumption that children are to be seen rather than heard and that their primary role is to learn from and obey adults. In Matt 18:2–5 children are depicted as the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, the epitome of faith, and hence a living spiritual standard for adults. Praised as vessels of revelation due to their teachability and humility, children have a communal calling to explore, wonder, and learn.

Learning in this sense far surpasses the confines of formal education while yet including it. Schooling of the young has long been a trademark of the Christian tradition, as evidenced in the establishment of numerous Christian schools and colleges throughout the centuries. However, the vocational aspects of education are not limited by space, time, and expense. In the very fabric of their being, children are learners. Biblically speaking, learning intimates natural and experiential knowledge, or what would in Scholasticism be classified as scientia and sapientia. Children are called to increase their knowledge of the world (scientia) by learning the difference between hot and cold, patterns of numbers, the consequences of gravity, and the like. But they must also grow in wisdom (sapientia) by encountering the

thrills and disappointments of embodied experience; that is, how life changes after being burned or how the sky seems different after setting aloft a helium balloon. Parents then ought to champion educational opportunities that encourage the learning of content as well as appreciating the process of learning. Kids need information, skills, and techniques, but to continually grow in knowledge they also need motivation, intrigue, and perseverance. As we shall see below, research indicates that regular unstructured outdoor play helps children acquire both forms of knowledge while kindling an appetite for lifelong learning.

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Childhood development specialists argue that play is integral to learning; many of us likely recall the time when preschool was called playschool for this very reason. Children are called to play and must be permitted to do so because their vocation is fundamentally that of learner. This explains why at many points in history Christians have spoken out against child labor, for example. Yet, play is depicted positively in the biblical texts for reasons beyond the cultivation of childhood itself. Although children are called to utilize their cognitive and moral abilities, their gifts and talents, to serve others in the future, through play and a contagious zeal for life they have a critical role in enhancing and vitalizing our communities now. Children have tremendous power to influence with their laughter, curiosity, and joy for simple things. Replete with passages underscoring the cheer children bring, the Bible consistently ties images of children at play to visions of restoration and peace. Zechariah, for example, writes of a restored Jerusalem where “the corridors of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in the streets” (Zech 8:5). In Proverbs, divine Wisdom is depicted as a child freely playing and delighting in an inhabited world (Prov 8:27–31). Play is fiber in the fabric of childhood, and a beautiful contribution to the woven tapestry of our communities.

As we can see from this brief glimpse into the vocation of the child, children are not simply called to compliance with God’s laws and obedience to responsible persons in authority. Their vocation is also to model faith, create joy, and remind us all of the gifts of God. Central to this high calling are learning and play. We turn now to consider how undirected outdoor exploration facilitates these two central features of vocation in bio-behavioral and spiritual realms.

**OUTDOOR PLAY AS PRACTICAL ANTIDOTE TO NATURE DEFICIT DISORDER**

While not an official mental disorder according to the American Psychiatric Association, the modern-day phenomenon of Nature Deficit Disorder (hereafter NDD) has been a source of lively conversation among parents, educators, and childhood specialists. Coined by Richard Louv in the 2005 groundbreaking book,
Last Child in the Woods, the theory behind NDD suggests that all human beings, especially children, require sustained access to and immersion in the natural world. Just as a child’s welfare depends in part upon material and emotional environs, proponents of NDD view sensitivity to and connectedness with the natural world as equally important to human development. When a child is deprived of this well-spring or deficient in exposure due to a combination of factors including increased use of technology, the over-scheduling of childhood recreation, and limited safety for free-range play, there are negative biological, behavioral, and psychological consequences, all of which impact a child’s spiritual being and her budding sense of vocation.

One of the reasons members of the psychology guild continue to debate the validity of NDD is that contemporary research on the disorder does not conclusively point to these negative impacts. What it does demonstrate, however, are the overwhelming benefits of unstructured outdoor play. Recent literature suggests that children who create their own games and imaginative play outside have a stronger sense of memory than those who participate in organized sports or play primarily inside. For example, a 2008 study at Columbia University linked memory increases up to 20% for every hour that a person spends outside. Edith Cobb, in her early and famous study The Ecology of Imagination, linked enhanced memory to higher intelligence quotients. The more one marvels at and within the complexities of nature, she uncovered, the more wonder one has, and with increased wonder a greater likelihood of high intelligence.

In addition to these cognitive advantages there are many positive physiological impacts of outdoor play. Immunologists now associate increased immunity to various bacteria with extended periods of time spent in nature and suggest that increased immunity may improve children’s ability to learn new tasks. Additionally, as is the case for children who participate in organized sports, it’s been shown that children who live in proximity to green space have lower body mass indexes, an important discovery in light of increasing childhood obesity in North America and beyond. And related to this, several medical studies suggest that prolonged physical health and recovery from physical injury are more likely to result in positive outcomes with consistent and prolonged access to nature.

The dimensions of NDD extend beyond the biological to the behavioral and psychological. Psychologist Michael Gurian has examined the impact of human migration from agrarian to urban communities, discovering that nearly 30% of

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children living in urban contexts are not able to cope adequately with the sense stimulation within their immediate contexts. Over the course of a nine-year study, psychologists Stephen and Rachel Kaplan found people more likely to think clearly and feel more restored when they are out of the urban environment. This is particularly so for children because attention is more freely structured and less directed in the rural context. Too much directed attention, they argue, leads to fatigue marked by impulsive behavior, agitation, irritation, and inability to concentrate. And this is not merely a behavioral response, but also a proven biochemical one, wherein neural inhibitory mechanisms become fatigued by blocking competing stimuli. In laymen’s terms, our urban children are at risk of perpetually living in response mode, overwhelmed rather than rested. Yet, given that urban dwelling is the norm for so many, the Kaplan study didn’t stop with the uncovering of sensory inundation. It went on to study those who do cope well in urban contexts and discovered that consistent unstructured time in urban green space coupled with some deliberate time in the wilderness was critical for healthy psychological development. On the whole such kids suffer less from depression and anxiety and are less likely to need medication. Such findings have been reinforced by recent research on ADHD among children and youth, which on the one hand directly connect childhood concentration problems to increased levels of screen time and on the other hand demonstrate an alleviation of children’s attention deficit symptoms with prolonged periods of outdoor play.

Here the corollary between the earth’s well-being and the long-term health of the child is evident. Free outdoor play in an environmentally safe and sustainable space not only benefits children, but also has the potential to strengthen ecosystems by fostering wonder, appreciation, and a sense of environmental responsibility within children. So while debates on the pros and cons of sports versus outdoor

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11For example, see Dimitri Christakis, Frederick Zimmerman, David Di Giuseppe, and Carolyn A. McCarty, “Early Television Exposure and Subsequent Attentional Problems in Children,” *Pediatrics* 113/4 (April 2004) 708–713. This study shows that for every hour a preschooler watches TV, she/he is 10% more likely to develop concentration problems. Indicators suggest that the highest risk is for children under the age of seven.
play may initially seem irrelevant to nonparents, the discussion extends to larger questions of global environmental ethics. As agrarian Wendell Berry has long reminded us, the solution to our contemporary environmental challenges lies not in any one cosmology or practice, but rather in our love and affection for the land we inhabit. If given the opportunity to forge such a relationship with the natural world, how might our children live out their vocation by becoming environmental leaders in years to come?

**The Role of Nature in the Spiritual Nurturance of Children**

Having charted territory on the vocation of the child, noting the importance of experiential learning and curious, undirected play, and having outlined the bio-behavioral benefits of children’s consistent access to nature, I will conclude with a brief reflection on how unstructured outdoor play nurtures children’s emergent spiritual identities. Prior to his premature and sudden death in 1970, American psychologist and researcher Abraham Maslow began exploring children’s understanding of the spiritual. As his biographer and intellectual disciple Edward Hoffman has noted, Maslow was convinced that some of life’s most profound mystical and ecstatic experiences occur early in life. Decades later, research undertaken in related fields of child psychology has confirmed Maslow’s hunch. “It now appears undeniable,” Hoffman writes,

that some of us (perhaps far more than we suspect) have undergone tremendous peak—even mystical—experiences during our early years…. As a growing number of influential therapists and educators are far more accurately depicting, we all have an inborn capacity for deeply spiritual encounters with the world around us.”

Such discovery has led contemporary psychologists to explore further the factors contributing to such spiritual encounters. Interestingly, beyond the typical contributors of familial exposure to spirituality and early access to organized religious structures lies regular and sustained access to the natural world. In fact, recent research has showed such a strong connection between nature and the spiritual life of children that exposure to nature is now being referred to by child development specialists as a first principle in the nurturance of children’s spiritual selves.

But why? Why are children more prone to have spiritual experiences if consistently granted time outside? One strain of research has answered this question by attending to children’s paradigmatic thought and vocabulary. The magical thinking children utilize when describing spiritual allusions, child psychiatrist Robert Coles suggests, often employs images and classifications relating to the natural world. In fact, in this sense exposure to nature not only promotes spiritual encoun-


ters among children, but also provides a platform by which children can understand their experiences. A little one’s authentic encounter with nature’s wild rumpus becomes an interpretive lens for the intangible and unknown. In theological jargon it serves as a sort of accessible natural law.

Another answer to this question addresses juvenile concepts of relationship. “Nature,” Richard Louv argues, “introduces children to the idea—to the knowing—that they are not alone in this world, and that realities and dimensions exist alongside their own.”14 These realities, children discover by way of puddle-jumping, bird-watching, and tree-climbing, are more coherent than they are chaotic, connected than random, logical than absurd. The wild things, which we adults are more inculturated to fear, lead our children to consider the purpose of life as well as its fragility. This is especially true for children who have been introduced to some form of religious story. For them, presented concepts of things unseen—God, spirits, resurrection, celestial promise, etc.—are often described in natural world narratives. So when a young person consistently accesses nature’s landscapes, such stories can more readily come to life.

Social ecologists provide yet another answer to the question of why a child is more likely to have significant spiritual experiences while playing freely outside, arguing that consistent exposure to the interconnectedness of biological life affirms our identities, individual and collective. Children see in their relationship to the natural world a clearer understanding of who they are, including a sense of their power and vulnerabilities, and where they fit in the larger scheme of things. Nature shows children the value of adaptation and perseverance while fostering a deep sense of kinship and belonging, or what E. O. Wilson called biophilia. “This feeling of connection to nature,” Stephen Kellert writes,

enlarges our understanding of community, as we intuit ties that extend beyond the parochialism of an isolated humanity. Through a spiritual affinity with the natural world, we enlarge our sense of membership in a broader community and with it our moral obligations to sustain it.15

For this reason, in addition to those mentioned above, many Christians like Paul Gorman, the founder and director of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, argue for the spiritual necessity of accessible nature. It isn’t just

that outdoor experiences adorn spirituality, but more so that they are an essential contributing factor of spiritual development and identity. Gorman reminds the church that “the extent to which we separate our children from creation is the extent to which we separate them from the Creator, from God.”

To conclude, I return to where I first began, with the parent entertaining a long list of youth sporting opportunities and the question of how best to help a child flourish. I have explored the biblical notion of childhood vocation, establishing that, like adults, children undergo legitimate experiences of calling. Chief among a child’s vocational responsibilities are learning and play, which research on the bio-behavior and spiritual lives of children suggests are greatly enhanced by consistent access to undirected outdoor play. Though I have not delved into the ways learning and play take place in organized sports, I have established good reason to believe that such childhood “duties” occur in more creative and generative ways in an unstructured natural environment and work to fulfill within children a God-given need to connect with nature.

Of course, the need for nature among children applies to adults by extrapolation due to the influence our children’s vocations have on our consciousness and the obvious fact that children will eventually stand in our stead. Surely the biological and spiritual benefits of sustained interaction with nature apply to us too! Yet sadly, many religious adults—Christians nonexempt—pit religious belief against the world, particularly the world we’ve come to know through the natural and earth sciences. Even those who seek to integrate faith and science frequently cast nature as a mere mechanism for spiritual enlightenment rather than a crucial element of human ipseity (or self-identity). But as children’s experiences in nature remind us, the relationship between the spiritual and the natural is one of awakening. Here Jesus’ words in the voices of the synoptic writers can be heard in a refreshing new light, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs” (Mark 10:14). The young among us are humbled by the magnificence of nature and, if given the opportunity, call us to follow suit.

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16For statements on the relationship between human and global wellness by Gorman and other religious leaders and institutions, see the NRPE’s website at: www.nrpe.org (accessed July 10, 2015).