

# To Seek the Spirit of a Child

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## **Reading: From The Prophet, by Kahlil Gibran.**

Your children are not your children.  
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.  
They come through you but not from you,  
And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.

You may give them your love but not your thoughts,  
For they have their own thoughts.  
You may house their bodies but not their souls,  
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,  
which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.  
You may strive to be like them,  
but seek not to make them like you.  
For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.

You are the bows from which your children  
as living arrows are sent forth.  
The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite,  
and He bends you with His might  
that His arrows may go swift and far.  
Let your bending in the archer's hand be for gladness;  
For even as He loves the arrow that flies,  
so He loves also the bow that is stable.

## Sermon

One winter morning when I was about 11, I got suited up and went outside with 2 or 3 friends. We took a bit of an unusual route, wandering down the road at the edge of our small town and then at some point crossing the ditch and cutting through a grove of trees. On the other side we emerged into a wide open flat area, covered with windblown snow and dotted with bare trees. There was a frozen stream running through the middle of it, and we went out and tested the ice – frozen solid. We spent the rest of the day – I can't really remember how long – sliding on our stomachs along the smooth ice, sweeping the snow out of the way as we moved like giant earthworms along the frozen water. I remember it as blissful delight. I remember having the sense of stumbling on something magical. I had lived in that town for 4 years, spent a lot of time outside, and never discovered this place before. I let my mind run with it, and settled on the conclusion that we must be the first people to stumble upon this place in a hundred years or more. I was a little too worldly and practical to believe that nobody had ever set foot there, but it had a sense of being untouched, and I imagined that we were the only living people in town – maybe in the whole world, who knew about this fabulous, hidden outdoor space. Maybe it was the absence of footprints in the snow, maybe it was my sense of self-importance, but that was how it felt. When we went back a few weeks later, excited to continue our adventures, we discovered it covered with snowmobile tracks and footprints, looking clearly very well-used and nowhere near as magical. It all made sense – of course it hadn't gone untouched for generations. Upon closer inspection, it was really just a big field, it was only a few metres off a road. And maybe we weren't the most adventurous people in the world after all, or even in our town. Instead of repeated excursions to a magical landscape, I would have to settle for the memory of that one amazing day. And I'll take it.

I thought of this story again when I recently stumbled upon the work of David Sobel, described as “the world's leading expert on why kids build forts.” He wrote a book called “Children's Special Places: The role of forts, dens and bush houses in middle childhood.” He's studied the phenomenon extensively, and says that the building of forts and special hideout places is a behaviour that typically begins around “around the time they stop believing in Santa Claus,” and stops around “around the time they stop looking in the mirror.” He's observed that this form of play – whether it's structures made out of blankets and pillows in a high-rise apartment, a suburban backyard or basement, or sticks and moss deep in the woods – is a cross-cultural phenomenon, that seems near-universal among the world's children. He emphasizes that it's not merely a random kind of play, but a universal drive rooted in children's healthy development. He says, “Regardless of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, or ecosystem, children play in similar ways when they have safe free time in nature.”

Decades ago in a classic song, Cat Stevens asked the question “Where do the children play?”:

*Well you roll on roads  
Over fresh green grass  
For your lorry loads  
pumping petrol gas  
you make them long  
and you make them tough  
but they just go on and on  
and it seems that you can't get off.*

*I know we've come a long way  
we're changing day to day  
but tell me, Where do the children play?*

I don't think he was just being rhetorical. There is increasingly a literal absence of places not covered in cement or asphalt for children to play. And although I don't have a map, thinking back to that magical winter play space of my childhood, I'd place a good bet that it's a housing development by now, a few token trees left and the creek dried up or filled in.

For a whole range of reasons in a variety of contexts – from poverty, to poor urban planning, TV, video games and computers, to the growing pressures of school and homework, the “safe free time in nature” that David Sobel talks about has been on its way to becoming an endangered species for some time now. It's what led David Louv to coin the term “Nature Deficit Disorder,” to draw attention to the social, political and environmental context of what is seen far too narrowly as a problem of mental health in children, (and increasingly, adults). There is a huge difference between the linear, thinking-based form of consciousness usually demanded by school and most adult jobs, and the kind of open, fluid, receptive, intuitive and body-based consciousness that awakens in natural settings. This latter type of awareness and intelligence is such a rarity in an urbanized, industrialized, and digitized context that we almost forget it's a real thing. But children dwell there more naturally, and we should be asking hard questions about how quick we are to see it as a problem when it conflicts with the other expectations placed on children, particularly in the context of school.

But it's not as simple as children needing more time outdoors and less time in textbooks and screens. Sobel points out that programs such as guides or scouts, summer camps, and environmental education programs, are only part of the answer. When we emphasize “time in nature” as a structured learning project with specific goals in mind – however worthy those goals are – we are still missing out on the innocence, spontaneity and creativity that emerges when children are left more-or-less to their own devices in a natural setting, even a setting as mundane as a city park. I remember a moment in a park in Montreal, watching a few children running around, tearing sticks off of trees and chasing each other with them, laughing. The “good citizen” in me had to bite his tongue to stop from saying “hey, don't do that – those branches belong on the trees!” I caught myself, remembering that these kids weren't starting forest fires, they were just helping themselves to a few low-hanging bits of healthy trees, and - while the trees probably didn't appreciate it - how much better for them to be outdoors having fun, actually interacting with the trees and each other, rather than treating trees as museum objects, thereby fulfilling Joni Mitchell's prophecy of taking all the trees and putting them in a tree museum, charging all the people a dollar and a half just to see them. (Sorry, clearly some kind of musical nostalgia has gotten into me, talking about Cat Stevens and Joni Mitchell in the same sermon. But at least be grateful I haven't burst into song).

It's that element of free play that is just as important to the spirit of childhood as the element of nature. I would encourage all of you to check out a very short 15 minute film called “The Land,” about a playground – also called “The Land” in the UK. Claire Griffiths, mother to a young girl, spearheaded the effort to open what is called an “adventure playground” in her area – a low-income industrial neighbourhood in North Wales. The definition of an adventure playground is that it's an area set aside for children, where they can play freely in their own way and their own time, and build and shape the environment according to their own creative vision. It's the antithesis of typical playgrounds, designed by adults and with limited,

predictable, linear play options such as climbing or swinging in straight lines. Common elements of adventure playgrounds include old shipping pallets, which can be arranged into makeshift structures using a hammer and nails, sawed into little bits, or broken up and used to start a fire (the requirements for starting a fire at The Land are essentially that you need an adult and a bucket of water). A place like the Land would be considered a nightmare to an insurance company, but it's not nearly as dangerous as it sounds. One of the adults in the film (The Land is always staffed by 3 adult volunteers called "play workers") distinguishes thoughtfully between risks and hazards. A hazard is something unsafe that a child doesn't know is there – for example an old nail sticking out of a piece of wood, and it's the job of the play workers to prevent and remove these. Risks, on the other hand, are about decisions children make for themselves based on their assessment of their surroundings and their own capacity. A big part of an adventure playground is the idea that it's actually safer overall – and especially in the long run – for children to learn to choose and manage their own risks. And in several years of operation, The Land has never had injuries worse than the odd twisted ankle, of the sort you might get running for the bus anyway. The adults who give their time and energy as a labour of love to help kids play are not naive in thinking that real injuries are impossible, but they are adamant that kids are much better at judging risk for themselves and managing their own limits than we might think, especially when they have the space to do so from an early age. Furthermore, a 2010 article in the Guardian points out that there are now more children in the UK hospitalized for injuries sustained from falling out of bed than from falling out of trees. And I can't imagine anyone taking that factoid and concluding that children should never go to bed. At least I hope not ...

Now of course, I find all this fascinating, and reigniting the spirit of play is something that I think could be healing for our whole society in many ways. I love that Claire Griffiths, founder of The Land, hosts workshops for reluctant adults called "Parents learning to Play." One father who took part says : "She had us playing tag and God knows what. She organized an egg fight and no-one wanted to do it. By the end, we were all gutted when there were no eggs left!" But there's more to it than a simple lesson about the value of being outdoors or how children spend their time. In describing the adventure playground she helped build, Griffiths says "To the adult eye, it may look chaotic and ugly. But to a child, it's just possibilities." And that gets to the heart of it, I think. Bill Plotkin identifies childhood innocence with what Zen Buddhists call "beginner's mind," - that capacity to see the world through the immediacy of experience, and not through conceptual lenses that often limit and distort as much as they clarify. It's the beginner's mind that allows us to see new possibilities where the trained mind sees intractable problems. Think about the problems of political polarization in our city and province, violence in the middle east, refugee crisis, climate change. The familiar narratives point to easily identifiable good guys and bad guys, sort things into familiar problems and solutions, which somehow rarely work out as well in practice as in theory. The ability to see not just chaos and ugliness, but also possibilities, is something we sorely need, and it's a gift children naturally bring if we make space for it – in our communities, our congregations and our schools, and within ourselves.

I hesitated when choosing the Kahlil Gibran reading for this morning. I know most people have heard it multiple times, and it's read at nearly every Unitarian child dedication. But I figured it's a classic for a reason. I choked up as I read it aloud the other night for the first time after Darragh was born, looking across the room at Carly holding him in her lap.

**Your children are not *your* children.  
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.  
They come through you but not from you,  
And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.**

**You may give them your love but not your thoughts,  
For they have their own thoughts.  
You may house their bodies but not their souls,  
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,  
which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.  
You may strive to be like them,  
but seek not to make them like you.**

We are all the children of *life's longing for itself*, and may we strive to open our hearts and souls to feel that longing. May that longing burn brightly and fiercely in all children, and may it never be extinguished. May it shine in you, in your children, in the children in this congregation, in our city, and children everywhere. And may we behold and give it the honour it is due. Amen.