

by Jim Greenman

Places for Childhoods

When I was a child, my brothers and sisters and I loved to visit my great aunt Meg — a tall, angular, elderly woman who is fixed in my memory as Babar's woman with the yellow hat. She would greet us at the door of her tiny Victorian house with the same words: "Come, children, we must find the fairies in the garden." Off we went to the small overgrown garden to find the fairies amidst the mushrooms and worms, lilies and lilacs. Each sparkle of dew was certainly a fairy, twinkling in and out of our lives with the power of van Goth's "Starry Night." Then we would wash off most of the mud and troop in for hot chocolate and stories on her velvet couch. We would be snuggled against the crook of her powdery arm, enveloped by the lemony smells of furniture polish, cats, and Aunt Meg (a scent of violet, cream, and an exotic smell we loved, later to discover it was the Ben-Gay ointment she used for her arthritis).

Is there a more secure place to be than drinking hot chocolate in the arms of a loved one? This security was essential as Aunt Meg read to us old Russian fairy tales — scary stories of witches and evil parents and the poor children, regularly subject to terrible predicaments. Our favorite was "Prince Ivan and the Witch Baby." At the climax of this tale, young Prince Ivan is chased through the countryside by his mountain-sized baby sister, who is grinning horribly with her huge iron teeth and chanting: "I've eaten my father, I've eaten my mother, and now I will eat my baby brother." (Looking at my younger sister, I identified completely.) We listened, delighted in our horror, waiting to be startled by the clock chimes on the hour or the raucous tea kettle.

Years later, we went to see Aunt Meg in the hospital just before she died. She slipped in and out of our reality, then suddenly appeared alert: "Do you still find the fairies?" she asked. We must have looked embarrassed because she quickly said in an impatient voice, "Oh, don't look like that, I'm dying, not demented — I know

the house is gone (to make way for an apartment parking lot) — but the fairies are still there, only they've gone and buried most of them."

Childhood is about magic and wonder, of coming to terms with an inexplicable world of fairies and monstrous fears, of loved and feared adults, and a sensual world of sounds and smells and sensations. In an increasingly institutionalized world, are we bound to discover that we have buried all the fairies?

12,000 Hours: An Early Start on a Lifetime of Long Days

When children enter the world of child care, they may well spend up to 12,000 hours in child care before they reach the age parents decide it is no longer necessary — 12,000 hours, more time than they will log in elementary and secondary education. Almost from birth, eight to ten hour days, five days a week, 50 weeks a year. In contrast, children in nursery school, Head Start, or preschool usually spend no more than 15 hours a week, five days a week, 30 or so weeks a year, for two years of their lives — a total of less than 1,000 hours. Similar educational situations, vastly different experiences for children.

These profoundly different realities should have ramifications for nearly every aspect of child care program and facility design. Children in a part-day educational program go from home to a school (a *not-home*, an institution) and back to home where

*Living
in the
Real
World*

they spend most of their lives. What happens at the school may be an important and enriching experience, but it has relatively little overall influence on the quality of the child's day or childhood. If the program is too regimented and children spend too much time waiting, lining up, or following instructions, it is, after all, only for a few hours. The same is true if there is too little to do or the place is dreary, lacking natural light, or absent of charm. These programs provide only a small fraction of the child's experience.

However, in an all-day program, the quality of the child's day is determined by the program; indeed the quality of the child's childhood will be hugely influenced by his experience of child care people and places. 12,000 hours spent in a dark church basement, or sandwiched between gleaming vinyl floors and institutional uniform florescent lighting in small rooms based on 35 square feet per child, or being marched around with children the same age is not the childhood of which dreams are made, no matter how wonderful the teachers.

Whose Place Is It, Anyway?

Why has this huge difference between the child experience in a part-day and full-day setting been so little remarked upon in the literature and training? Why haven't we taken it into account in the design of facilities, and in licensing and accreditation guidelines about necessary space and experiences? The answer is egocentrism — ours. Because for us, the adults who inhabit the child care world, the difference between our days spent in child care, nursery school, and school are not so different. Our daily lives are not profoundly transformed as we move between the streams of early education.

Places for Childhoods

Given the time children spend in them, it is not an exaggeration to view child care programs as places for childhoods. Childhood is terribly perishable. It is a territory always under siege. Sometimes it is threatened by the forces of poverty or adult indifference. Other times it is threatened by an equally deadly onslaught of adult attention. Whether based on a view that childhood is primarily a no-nonsense time to prepare for future adulthood or a time to prolong innocence, well-intentioned adult attention can fence children off from the world and impoverish them with a benign, but sterile, existence.

When we institutionalize childhood, as we have certainly done, we risk doing what institutions nearly always do — diminish the poetry of everyday life. We eliminate the

highs and lows and wash out individual differences, trading predictability and security for the messy idiosyncrasies of individual lives. Is that what we want for the one childhood allocated to our children?

What Kind of Place?

"God is in the details," said the architect Mies Van de Rohe. The soul of the building was not in the impressiveness of the facade, nor in the ornamentation, but in how it all came together: the rightness of the door knobs and the vapor barrier, the color of the brick and the form against the sky, the flow of water and air, and the feeling of being together inside on a cold day — how it worked, how it felt, how it was lived. Similarly, when Mozart composed, he understood that God was in the notes and the rests — the sound and the silence.

In education, childhood, life, it is the richness of the **background** that creates value — focusing on the foreground distorts our perspective. Forever, educators (and parents) tend to forget that, for, indeed, we are the foreground. In our programs, perhaps it would be far better if we conceived ourselves as creators or, more modestly, orchestrators of the background, a greater role than simply being the teachers out in front.

Quality in early education and care is an accumulation of small transactions, between child and adult, child and child, child and objects and physical environment. The richness of place and the overall experience outweighs the value of teaching to a group, yet that is often where the bulk of planning is directed. Even in programs less group and school oriented, our focus is inevitably drawn and weighted toward our teaching and caregiving, and we lose sight of the learning and being cared for that may not take place.

It is in the laps and conversations, the side-by-side work and play, and the shared bouts of silliness and sadness that a child learns that he or she is somebody important. It is the bursts of energetic noise and the interludes of silence that punctuate reflection. The sunlight and breezes and frost on the window and the shadows descending on a corner of the room give daily life its fullness and sensuality.

The three Rs can be present as well in the exuberant exploration of the world, if the awareness of the value of language and number infuse every experience. The sifting, kneading, and mixing on the table, and the digging and splashing are necessary precursors to laboratories of beakers and archaeological expeditions. The rhythm of the rain and the swing of the pendulum are both

mathematical and musical experiences. Gazing at the crack on the ceiling that has the habit of looking like a rabbit, the row of dandelions at attention like an army of golden soldiers, and the flashing color from the angel fish or the canary enrich our sensibilities and inform our artistic vision.

It Ain't What You Do, It's How You Do It (Charlie Parker)

Childhood, like sex, is dirty if you do it right (to paraphrase Woody Allen). It is also noisy, exuberant, and poignant. It requires liberal doses of freedom and mess to thrive. If we are to create places for childhoods, we have to deinstitutionalize our newly important institutions of childhood. We have to recognize and resist the ever-present tilt towards formality, uniformity, and blandness that legitimacy brings.

E. B. White once wrote to a reader of **Charlotte's Web** that "all that I hoped to say in books, all that I ever hope to say, is that I love the world. I guess that you can find it in there, if you dig around." That is what we need to find when we dig around our child care programs.

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