

## SPEAKING OF SCIENCE

*'Human beings have an affinity for the beautiful'*

By LEN BARRON  
Special to the Sentinel

For all the negative consequences of global warming, the good news is that environmental education is the most fertile practice that we can offer young people.

Thankfully, we already have exquisite models that show what can be done. There are schools involved in stream restoration, habitat preservation and environmental justice projects and programs like the Edible Schoolyard, in which youngsters dig up the earth, plant the seeds, tend the garden and then pick the fruits of their labor, cook it and serve it to their classmates. That practice alone can make a life.

There is River of Words, a program that invites students from around the world to write poetry about what they see and imagine. The folks who created River of Words share a simple thought: "Children are experts at creating visions of places seen only in their imagination, made real by the act of imagination. What happens when you invite them to 'imagine' real places, to find the poetry in water and earth and stone ... not just to explore the beauty of a place but to feel their connection to it."

Environmental education engages all the senses igniting imagination and wonder among students while honing their thought and observation skills. Running through the literature is a fruitful consequence: In schools that have fine environmental programs, students do better in other subjects as well because they are engaged. When children of any age are genuinely engaged, learning is as natural as breathing. Environmental education is good for our youngsters and

it is healthy for the Earth.

Fostering an environmental sensibility is not any one thing; it is a convergence of a range of practices and ideas including the practice of walking and the idea of beauty.

Every newborn before long is crawling and exploring her available space and soon she gets up, falls down, gets up, falls down, gets up and delights in her newfound spatial possibilities.

In concert with that instinctual drive to walk is the sensual pleasure in moving and with it the first step for a feeling of independence. And then there is the explosion of diverse natural forms that nurture a child's sense of wonder and connectedness to the earth.

Kids love to be outdoors; take a walk with any 2-year-old for a charming adventure. Children love to move and are also prone to stop at any moment to look and listen, perhaps to touch, smell and taste anything that catches their attention. Every child is an expression of imagination and inventiveness and it springs from within; it is an evolutionary gift.

Walking keeps us in touch with our own rhythm, in touch with our animal nature, in touch with the ground. Walking is a freedom school — free to wander and wonder, daydream, look about or think, or just to get someplace. We all draw sustenance from that school.

It is interesting to note that most all the giants in science had a passion for walking. For Einstein and Niels Bohr walking was not only a dear pleasure, it was an indispensable part of their thought process.

When the 23-year-old Werner Heisenberg first came to Copenhagen to work with Niels Bohr in 1924, Bohr greeted his young friend with: "Let's go for

a walk." They walked for three days talking physics and making up games along the way. A reporter once asked Einstein how come walking was so important for him. Einstein replied, "Well, if I didn't walk, there never would have been an Einstein."

As it was for Einstein and Bohr, so it is for any one of us — legs and minds are lovely companions. In recent times, however, the surges of urbanization and technology have driven youngsters indoors. The writer Richard Louv asked a fourth-grader where he preferred to play, indoors or outdoors. The boy replied, "I like to play indoors 'cause that's where all the electrical outlets are."

We need to alter that drift. The environmental literature advises us that we will not fight to save what we do not love. A deep-rooted joy in the simple act of walking is the first step in the making of an environmentalist.

As for beauty, we can again draw from the experiences of Einstein. In his search for the unifying force in the universe, Einstein said, "Beauty is the first test." His passion and imagination were fueled by his instinctual faith in the inherited intelligence that moves one toward the true nature of things: The beauty in the harmonious order of the parts to the whole.

Nearly 2,500 years ago the declaration of that intelligence was expressed by Plato who wrote, "The soul is awestricken and shudders at the sight of the beautiful for it feels that something is evoked in it that was not imparted to it from the senses, but has always been already laid down there in the deeply unconscious region."

The beauty in the structure

of the stars in also true of human experience, for that which sustains life is beautiful: kindness, empathy, curiosity, courage, and a profound respect for the natural world. Naturalist Terry Tempest Williams wrote, "Beauty is not optional, but essential to our survival as a species."

The sages of all times have been sharing that lesson. In our own time, our finest minds affirm that hopeful truth now with even more convincing evidence. Sociobiologist Edward O. Wilson wrote, "What we call aesthetics may just be the pleasurable sensation we get from the particular stimuli to which our brains are inherently adapted."

That same thought is expressed with utter simplicity by Joseph Campbell, who studied the ways of people in many parts of the world. Campbell reminds us that the "Ah" factor is built into every known culture.

Human beings have an affinity for the beautiful ... it is another evolutionary gift.

Encouraging an environmental sensibility is, in large measure, an arts program for the 21st century: How to use ourselves and our resources beautifully; the two go hand in hand.

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*Len Barron began college when he was 30 years old after years of hauling scrap iron, selling magazines and driving a taxi. For 10 years he was an interviewer on KGNU, community radio in Boulder. The last four years of that time he produced "On Parenting and Other Things," a forum on parenting and education.*

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*Have a question about the natural world? E-mail [masc@bresnan.net](mailto:masc@bresnan.net).*



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**CHILDREN WANDER ALONG** a scenic nature trail in Dunwoody, Ga., during the Dunwoody Butterfly Festival this year. "Environmental education engages all the senses igniting imagination and wonder among students while honing their thought and observation skills," Len Barron writes.