

4-16-10 Earth Day Is Every Day

I didn't mention upcoming Earth Day (4-22) to my grandchildren when I played with them last Saturday but the lessons were there. They see that we recycle at my house and after lunch we made a trip out to the compost pile. That was far more interesting to the five and under crowd than recycling! Four year old Colin was very interested in the possibility of meeting my resident mouse. He hoped to lure it out of hiding as he tossed pizza crusts to the pile. It was a no show for the mouse but just talking about and feeding it made it real. Isn't that how it goes for all of us, of all ages? First we think about it. Then we talk about it. And then we start to do something about it. And before we know it, it is a part of our life. It is real.

The changes resulting from our actions are real, too. There are some great worms growing under that compost pile, along with one well fed rodent!

After feeding the mouse and the worms, we took a walk. We saw that a frequent topic of conversation and trail friend, a certain rotted pine tree, long dead in one way but so full of life for the bugs and the woodpeckers, had finally succumbed to the recent rain storms. It now lies where it stood for so long and it will feed different bugs and it will crumble into the earth. There was also the additional gift of beautiful patterns in the wood left by boring insects. The toppling over opened up the center, providing a new view, with not only lacey holes and tunnels but, also, a variety of colors. There was silver, black, tan and the original orangey pink center, all surrounded now by bright green moss. Two year old Taryn learned about moss. She pointed out all the pin cushion moss for the rest of the walk. We would pat it and I'd say, "So soft. So beautiful!" She would nod her head in agreement, as though she had said the words.

At this point in the adventure, we were still only about forty feet from the house. I was reminded of when my children were little and I could not afford such things as after school programs or summer camps or museum memberships but life frequently confirmed my conviction that the earth is the best museum and the local chapter is right in our back yard. And it is free. And it is always open.

After examining the dead fallen tree that gives life, we continued on the trail. Colin knew what to do when we came to the young beech tree. Taryn was just learning. The young tree is like a toddler; pliable and yet stubborn and growing very quickly. A couple years ago it was just big enough that its branches were beginning to reach out over the trail. I didn't want the little ones, Colin, Haley and Joey to get hit with a branch snapping back. I thought of the countless walks with my father and how he taught us to call out to those behind us, "Swinging branches here!" But we were older then than these little ones were. They needed more help than a call out. So, every time we arrived at this little beech tree, I'd ask the tree if we could pass. I'd answer for the tree by saying, "Yes, you can pass. Here, I'll lift back my branch for you." I'd stand there holding back the branch and the children would giggle as they passed, at the idea of

talking to the tree. The next time they visited, though, they remembered and enjoyed talking to the tree themselves. Haley would say, “Oh, Mr. Beech Tree, can we pass?”

Now the little tree has grown so much that the one branch over the trail has been joined by another and it took a little more effort to hold it back. And another child, Taryn, learned about asking the tree permission. She did not question this at all. She accepted this idea even though she is two and is very good at shaking her head to say “No” emphatically, in other circumstances.

The lessons continued as we walked to the horse farm. The farm provided so many opportunities for life lessons. The horses are big and unknown, deserving of respect and knowledge. We need to ask if it is OK. These little children learned that while it might not be safe to feed some horses, it was OK to feed these particular ones, if they were willing to learn the correct way to feed them. Colin would say as he held his handful of grass out, “Open, flat hand.” And it worked! That big horse nibbled gently and oh so deftly with its big soft lips, the grass from that little open hand.

If Colin moved his hand too quickly, though, the horse would be startled and jump back. I had to explain that even though they are big, they were frightened by us if we moved too quickly. Imagine being only a few feet high yourself and learning in a few minutes that you can feed a huge animal and that this same large animal can be afraid of little you. It is humbling and empowering at the same time. Even my fifteen year old granddaughter, Kayla and her friend Victoria were full of authentic smiles and true wonder at the sight and touch of the horses. It was reassuring to see two teenagers happy while away from technology. It gave me hope.

The farm visited continued with talking to the goat, feeding corn to the chickens, touching the little eggs from the Bantams and asking many questions, including could they take a horse shoe home.

Talking, touching, doing, thinking and interacting, with respect and with joy. That’s how we learn about the earth.

EPA <http://www.epa.gov/earthday/podcasts/index.html>

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