

*Anna Golden uses a narrative format to tell the story of her preschoolers' explorations of and relationships to the natural world. Using the narrative lenses of written stories, photographs, and selected literature, she brings us along an artistic walk through elements of a story arc in the children's experiences with nature. Anna's piece stands out by integrating memoir and her own artwork as sources of data to help her understand the children's special connections to the forest. We see the power of teacher research to go back in time as she revisits her own childhood memories of experiencing a sense of place in nature.*

*The voices of the children and her own passionate voice as a daughter, an artist, and a teacher all come together to help us understand the critical role of play in untamed natural spaces for young children.*

—Barbara Henderson and Daniel Meier

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Photos courtesy of the author unless otherwise noted.



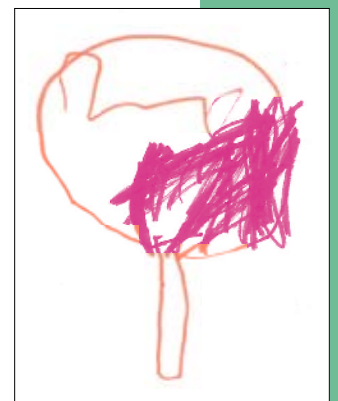
## Exploring the Forest Wild Places in Childhood

**THE PRESCHOOLERS LEAVE THE SCHOOL BUILDING AND WAIT, pressing up against the playground gate. When I open the gate, they take off like horses let out of a stable where they have been shut in too long. I follow behind them, trying to keep up in the bumpy and overgrown forest.**

**I have my usual tools, a clipboard and pen, and the children each have the same. At times I bend down to pick up a clipboard that has been tossed aside in an effort to cover ground more quickly. They yell back over their shoulders so that I can record what they discover as they fan out over the land.**

**Alec brakes at the creek bank. "There's a beach! There's a beach! There's a cute little beach!" Scrambling down, Evan shouts back to alert his friends: "A toadstool! A toadstool! If you see poison, scream!" Then, before inhabiting his rocky beach, Evan turns and warns again: "Guys, if you see poison, scream more!" Alec and Ryan, walking alongside a fallen pine, spy the creek. "A river!" They both sprint. "Ryan, I'm right on your tail," Alec yells.**

**Henry, kneeling over his clipboard, shouts, "Hey, I found a berry. I drew it!" Jack comes over and picks up an orange shell encasing a round pink berry. "Oh. Those are cute," he says. "It's like a pumpkin disguise." But Henry is already off. "Leafs! Leafs!" he hollers back. "I need to draw leafs!"**



Anna Golden

This is the story of a teacher/researcher/artist/daughter who, with her group of 4- and 5-year-old children, explores the untamed woods outside a school. This teacher research article encompasses the experiences I had with the children, my reading on the importance of wild places for children, and my personal reflections on sense of place in my childhood.



What draws children to build forts, seek and create hideouts, and make out-of-the-way places to play? These common behaviors create a *sense of place* for children that extends beyond the simple act of building. Inside all of us are memories associated with place. They touch the core of who we are and inspire us beyond childhood, into adulthood. That childhood sense of place often has a huge influence on adult ideas. For children, the physical and sensory experiences of place imprint themselves on memory. I saw the children in my preschool class make magical connections to place in their excursions beyond the playground fence.

I am a teacher and the *atelierista*, or studio teacher, at Sabot School, a progressive preschool in Richmond, Virginia, that is influenced by the philosophy of the schools in Reggio Emilia, Italy. An *atelierista* is an art specialist who helps young children express their ideas through drawing, building, and other media, and helps teachers with ideas about art media, ways to extend and deepen children's inquiry, and documentation. I am inspired by the work of the teachers in Reggio Emilia. Learning and teaching in this way is a process that doesn't end. There is always more to learn and new areas of inquiry to explore with children.

### The piazza question

This teacher research project began with a staff discussion about the Italian tradition of the piazza. In Italy, towns are built around a central square, a piazza. This is where people socialize, conduct business in open-air markets, hold festivals and celebrations, and gather for quiet talks in the evening. The noise of a hundred conversations fills the piazza. It is the heart of the community. The preschools of Reggio Emilia are built around a central piazza for similar reasons. In this common area, children of different ages play and learn, families interact, and daily school meetings take place (Malaguzzi 1993).

For American teachers interested in adapting Reggio Emilia ideas, there is no piazza tradition to build on. In Richmond, the closest thing to a piazza is the beloved James River and the municipal park that runs along its banks. It seems that every Richmond resident has experienced this natural place, our own urban wilderness. But the park is too far away to serve as a meeting place for our school community. At Sabot, we wondered, What is *our* piazza? We craved a place that we could share with the children and families, a place that would bring us together.

Because Sabot's families are from the city, suburbs, and outlying rural areas, the school grounds seemed to be the only place that we all had in common. When we realized this, we thought of the woods beyond the school grounds.

What draws children to build forts, seek and create hideouts, and make out-of-the-way places to play?



Sabot School, which shares its building with a church, sits next to a large undeveloped lot, a wooded area just outside the playground fence. There are tall pines and many trees downed by Hurricane Isabel, the strongest, most damaging hurricane in the 2003 season. We thought the children could use the fallen trees as bridges and the large roots as mountains to climb. The lot has a long, thin, shallow, drainage ditch with steep banks and a rocky bottom for exploring. The children called it “the creek” and referred to the wooded area as “the forest.”

As we thought more about the woods, many questions came to mind. How could we use the forest as a space for young children? What could the school community gain from moving out into this space? Would families use the space? Could expanding into the woods bring our school community together? Could the forest become the Sabot School’s piazza?

We staff decided that we would explore the forest with the children. We weren’t sure what that would entail, but we were committed to taking the children outside the playground fence to see what would happen. We began reading *The Geography of Childhood* (Nabhan & Trimble 1994), a book about the benefits of a relationship with nature. We read one chapter at a time and discussed it in staff meetings.

The staff talked about potential dangers and possible accidents in the woods. Adults sometimes let fear stop them—and children—from interacting with nature (Nabhan & Trim-

ble 1994). If we teachers let worry rule us, we would never take children beyond the playground. As a group, we decided to focus on the endless benefits of the experience rather than worry about what might go wrong.

What would the children learn from being out there? Would they investigate the area and make it their own? Could children of different ages and grade levels work together to inquire about and solve problems? Would the shared experience build community, leading to greater collaboration between children, families, and teachers? We teachers decided that we would document introducing the children to the woods and bring the documentation to Monday staff meetings for discussion and planning.

**What would the children learn from being out there? Would they investigate the area and make it their own?**



Meanwhile, I was inspired to read more about children and their relationship to nature. The more I read, the more I recognized how my personal connection to the outdoors had evolved through my childhood experiences.



### Nature in my own childhood

During the time we were debating about our American-style piazza, my father became ill and moved in with my family and me. My father and I had always been close, and when he moved in, I was happy for his company. My dad had worked as an accountant, but he was also an artist and photographer who loved wilderness. Curious and studious, he read the journals of American pioneers and ancient explorers. After my brother and I had left home, he moved to a rural Virginia county to fulfill his dream of living close to the land. When I was thinking about taking the children at Sabot School into the woods, I thought about my dad when he was healthy and exploring the things he loved.

When my dad died, I missed him. His books and belongings filled every room in my house. Opening his boxes of photographs, negatives, and slides flooded me with memories. There were street photographs from Washington marches, portraits of family and friends, and nature photography that he had sold at the Audubon Society store in Alexandria. My father's photographs represented spaces and places burned into my subconscious. They have always influenced me artistically as a painter and sculptor.

Thinking about the secret spaces of my childhood yielded quick impressions, rich with feeling and sensory memories—like flash-

backs in a movie, only more real. Our neighborhood in Arlington, Virginia, was close to military bases, and I remember climbing chain-link fences, sliding down the banks of Four-Mile Run, poking around in muddy water for crayfish, and scrambling up fast when somebody yelled, "Snake!"

I remember the communal nature of this play, the feeling that we children were doing something important together. I remember the joy of being away from adults and the exciting feeling of being on the lookout for any intruders in our secret place. I also recall the private nature of the play, because sometimes, even in a group, my imaginary world was mine alone.

My favorite spot in the creek was another world to me. It was a place apart from my life at school and home, a place where I felt all kinds of magical things could happen. When we kids heard taps over the military base's loudspeakers, it was time to go home. The real world flooded



back in, and I would suddenly remember that I had homework and chores and that I was hungry.

In going through my father's things, I looked for one photograph in particular. I found it in an Agfa photo paper box labeled Misc. It was a photo of a dilapidated barn in North Carolina, my brother and me barely visible in two of its large windows. I was about 7, thrilled to be exploring the old barn with my brother and two family friends. The photograph triggered a wave of feelings and memories.

Childhood experience of place fuses with daydream and then changes into memory (Bachelard [1958] 1994). Childhood daydreams are experienced again in adulthood through creative thought.

For me, the old barn photo brought back the nuances of memories of that barn—the sound of laughter, the smell of the lofts, the scary creaks and groans of the old wood in the wind, the itch of hay on sweaty skin, and my strong connection to my dad. I began a new series of paintings, working out my feelings of loss, reliving my childhood experiences, and riding the powerful wave of creativity that rushed through me.



Photo © Allyn Walters

Childhood experience of place fuses with daydream and then changes into memory.



### Exploring the forest

With the staff committed to the investigation of the forest with the children, we began the exploration of the woods. Each day the children would ask, "When are we going into the forest?" We would go into the forest after planning time, usually for 45 minutes or more. I would bring a notebook and pen for myself, a digital camera, and maybe a tape recorder to document the children's experiences.

When the forest exploration project was first proposed, we teachers had hypothesized about what the children would consider important when they got outside the playground fence. We assumed they would be interested in collecting and identifying natural treasures, like rocks, ferns, and flowers. We pictured the children with their clipboards, studiously drawing the things they observed, just as they did inside the classrooms and playground.

During those early investigations, I thought I would point out wild roses or a sleeping salamander; however, once the gate was opened, we found that the children were most interested in physical and sensory exploration. They didn't want to draw yet or even talk; they needed to climb up a tree root or down into the creek. They were in motion: running, crawling, jumping, scrambling. Our early trips were truly exploratory, with the children and me climbing into the densest, most overgrown sections of the forest. The children were determined to physically go over every inch of the place. They dragged around large branches, used sticks to dig holes, found footholds to climb up a bank, and discovered bouncy spots among the fallen leaves and debris on the forest floor. The confident children moved more quickly and took on more challenges while I walked more slowly

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with the less-confident children. This tested my teacher's tolerance. I wanted everyone to stay together, but the children's different skill levels made that impractical. The other teachers and I observed, allowing the children to show us what was important to them about this learning experience.

Moore (2003) says that "children possess their environment by making places; by the way those places offer the twofold gifts of adventure and sensory identity" (p. 61). Young children cannot help but be immersed in the environment because they are physically so close to the ground, their bodies in direct contact with nature—getting wet in streams, climbing trees, or rolling down hills (Chawla 2002). There is a real, elemental, sensory connection to place and sensory and physical contact with a special place is a way we first identify with the world around us. The act of being in a natural or wild place—the sounds, the smells, and the strain of muscle against an obstacle—is what defines this connection. Such relationships with natural spaces may be crucial to human development.

Children come to know themselves through their transactions with both the physical and social worlds. Unlike people, the physical world does not change in response to a child's actions but simply reflects his manipulations, so it offers a particularly valuable domain for developing his (or her) sense of competence. (Hart, Volkert, & Walch 1983, 67)

In other words, children create their understanding of place first by experiencing its physical and sensory characteristics. These sensations help in developing un-

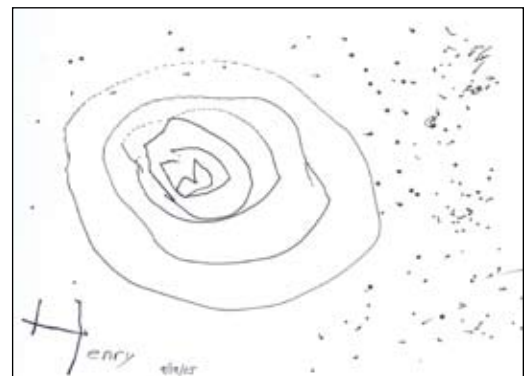
derstandings about personal limitations and potential. So children build their concepts of who they are and what they can do through physical contact with the world around them.



After the children had explored every forest nook and cranny, they slowed down and investigated more closely.



Later, after the children had explored every forest nook and cranny, I observed them slowing down and investigating more closely. They began comparing their findings with each other and forming groups to explore things more thoroughly. The groups that initially went out to explore became more mixed in age as the year went on. The children began forming groups based on common interests. They were creating, drawing pictures of each other and maps of the forest and wondering about the red-tailed hawk and its nest and about the origins of the water in the creek. They collected some treasures to take back the classroom, but mostly the children left things where they were and drew pictures of the objects to bring inside. Drawing became a way of cataloguing the objects the children found in the forest. Their maps and drawings took on two meanings: they were signs of both a very private connection to place and of the communal nature of play in wild places. Remarkably, even children like Henry, who rarely chose seat work in the classroom, felt compelled to draw what he was seeing in the forest. Was he trying to keep what he saw by drawing symbols of these natural objects?





When you listen to children in wild places, you find so much happening. As illustrated in the opening vignette, children made analogies (“It’s like a pumpkin disguise”), references to popular culture (“I’m right on your tail,” from the Star Wars game), and strategies for dealing with danger (“If you see poison, scream”).

Another aspect of the children’s explorations involved dramatic play that empowered them to face imagined fears or dangers.

The children soon began creating imaginative scenarios. One day I watched a group of 4- and 5-year-old girls find a large puddle at the base of an upturned tree. They quickly gathered long sticks and began fishing. One girl exclaimed, “I caught a fish!” and another asked, “Is it real?” A third shouted, “A whale!” and all the girls began swishing their sticks through the water to find whales. The magic of that experience lasted a long time, and for months afterward the girls talked about the day Layla caught a whale in the forest.

Another aspect of the children’s explorations involved dramatic play that empowered them to face imagined fears or dangers. I observed children pretending to be lost baby birds trapped in tall trees, searching for their mothers. Their play revolved often around survival—“We’re lost and no one can find us.” Other times the children would arm themselves with sticks, cardboard-tube telescopes, and masking-tape “power stripes”



to prepare for a long journey across the creek, through the brambles, and up the bank toward an unknown destination or challenge. The trek was usually filled with imagined dangers and enemies, such as wolves or robbers.

Children’s inner voice—imagination—as well as their confidence and self-knowledge, is nurtured by their constructing and playing in wild places and secret spaces (Goodenough 2003). Children need to build places for play because the “imagination needs to feel protected as it expands within safe boundaries” (p. 3). In my class, the boys who engaged in the long process of mixing paint to create camouflage masks and construction-paper weapons were creating their own world—an imaginary world in which they were hunters and heroes, in control of their environment.





## Childhood and a sense of place: Making the space their own

Clearly, the children came to inhabit the forest—for them, the forest became part of school and part of their lives. Time to play in wild space is very important for children. It allows them to discover and test their own boundaries against a physical environment that can accept the changes children bring, while remaining essentially the same. The classroom can replicate some things in nature, but in the natural environment the learning seems so much more authentic. For instance, in a classroom, children may learn about wedges and levers in block play, but in the forest, children *use* such simple machines to build a shelter. Louv discusses how the tacit knowledge that grows from experiences in nature affects children's sense of self: "Natural play strengthens children's self-confidence and arouses their senses—their awareness of the world and all that moves in it, seen and unseen" (Louv 2008, 186). The young children at Sabot thoroughly explored the new space and made it their own. At the same time, the space is so big, and so many things are in it, that the children never exhausted their wonder of it.



In our school forest, where the creek bank is overgrown with tree roots and ivy, the children pulled themselves up to discover a little clearing in a dense thicket. After a few brambles were stomped down and some branches rearranged, this became the children's hideout. Building is a way for children to order and control their world, often in a cooperative way. In building forts and tree houses, digging holes and making dams in moving water, children deconstruct and reconstruct the landscape to suit their need for secret spaces, spaces they can define for themselves, away from adults (Moore 1986). Environments are often too controlled by adults to allow for children's spontaneous building. It is in the fringe, out-of-the-way places that children create their spaces—under tables and in closets, in alleys, fields, or vacant lots.

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## Childhood experiences and adult creativity

Do our childhood experiences with nature become a part of who we are as adults? Chawla (2002) reviewed autobiographies of prominent people to determine if early experiences with special places had any impact on adult creativity. She found that adults who were involved in creative fields described "magic or ecstatic" experiences with places in childhood they remembered (p. 214). Bachelard also wrote about the link between secret spaces and artistic authenticity: "Inhabited space (the space where we think and daydream) transcends geometrical space (the actual physical place where we are)" ([1958] 1994, 47).

In undertaking the forest project at school, I realized that my artwork draws heavily on my memories of wild places. I have been making paintings of houses and imaginary landscapes for years. I never thought about what

real places they represented, but they are strong, symbolic images that have a magical quality for me. Today, I wonder if my childhood explorations of parks, campgrounds, and waste places like vacant lots between houses and shopping centers may have been among my earliest aesthetic experiences and whether that is why they influence me now. Artists, like children, “enjoy harmonizing things in smaller, manageable worlds of their own” (Goodenough 2003, 9). Clearly, my own childhood experiences are embedded in my adult memory in a way that nurtures my creativity; but how important are these kinds of experiences to young children today?

### Reflections and conclusions: Making connections

The most important questions I ask myself over and over again have to do with becoming a better teacher and a better artist. I want to know more about reflection and documentation. I want to read and understand the theories of important educational pioneers like Lev Vygotsky and Jerome Bruner. I wonder about the relationship between reading theory and putting it into practice in my classroom. I think about the connection between drawing and learning. As an artist, I feel that I can bring reflection and painting together in a mysterious way to create art that is very personal



and that I don't know how to explain. But how does all of this thinking come together? I'm not sure I have found any answers, but somehow my work with my colleagues and the children in exploring the forest has brought my questions together in a new way.

Exploring the Sabot School forest with the children and documenting that experience, reading about children and nature, and working through my fathers' things became strongly connected in my mind. Never before had my artwork been so directly influenced by what was happening in my classroom, and never before had what happened in the classroom been so influenced by what

I was reading and what was happening in my personal life. I began thinking about everything in a new way. More than any other time, my personal and work interests came together in the exploration of the forest, and I understood the idea of school as life.

Children need strong and satisfying connections to nature, but unfortunately, for too many, time spent outside and in wild places is a luxury rather than an everyday opportunity (Nabhan & Trimble 1994). Moore estimated in 1986 that “the current generation will spend 5/7 of their time in experientially deprived spaces” (p. 60). Experientially deprived spaces include the indoors, manicured suburban lawns, and school and park playgrounds that offer only very programmed and safe play. Moore advocates for changes in public policy that would make natural spaces more available to children. He believes that children must have access to wild places so they can learn about nature, face physical challenges, and learn how to be themselves. Children cannot learn the importance of adventure and exploration in natural spaces unless adults make that possible, and sadly, many adults do not expose their children to nature play if they themselves have not experienced it in childhood.

Unfortunately, children are often taught that the natural world is perilous. In *Beyond Ecophobia*, Sobel (1996) laments that children hear about environmental disasters, like oil spills and loss of biodiversity and habitat, while they lack firsthand, authentic

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experiences with natural places. Indeed, some environmentalists worry that teaching children about distant environmental disasters can lead to apathy instead of activism (Nixon 1997). Abstract discussions (about tropical deforestation, for example) are completely different from allowing children to interact with nature in their own community.

The forest at Sabot School has become the piazza. It is a rich resource for teachers and families, as well as for children. I studied children's strategies to represent the forest and tried to find better ways to bring the outdoors into the classroom. Other teachers used the forest for an inquiry into light and dark, to study family involvement, and to see what would happen if a class spent the entire school year outdoors. The families of Sabot School have embraced this space, sharing the documentation, helping to maintain the land, and exploring the forest and creek with their children after school. For children, the forest is a place for exciting dramatic play, a place for discoveries, and a place to map through physical exploration. As the children grow up, I hope that they too will remember it as magical and inspiring.

In this experience, I began to better understand the way children learn and how they can thoroughly immerse themselves in a project. Exploring the forest coincided with an intensively reflective period in my life, as I experienced the loss of my father. The process of teacher research took on new meaning as I reflected not only on what was happening at school and the things I was reading, but also on my relationship with my dad and his love of nature and wilderness. I was learning as a teacher, as an artist, and as a person, just sorting things out in my mind, and this is the story of my learning.



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You will find many resources about childhood and nature listed in "Resources for Science in the Early Years," from the November 2009 issue of *Young Children*, focusing on science. Go to [www.naeyc.org/yc/pastissues/2009/november](http://www.naeyc.org/yc/pastissues/2009/november).