Help your child to wonder
by RACHEL CARSON

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RACHEL CARSON
ONE stormy autumn night when my nephew Roger was about 20 months old I wrapped him in a blanket and carried him down to the beach in the rainy darkness. Out there, just at the edge of where-we-couldn't-see, big waves were thundering in, dimly seen white shapes that boomed and shouted and threw great handfuls of froth at us. Together we laughed for pure joy—he a baby meeting for the first time the wild tumult of Oceanus, I with the salt of half a lifetime of sea love in me. But I think we felt the same spine-tingling response to the vast, roaring ocean and the wild night around us.

A night or two later the storm had blown itself out and I took Roger again to the beach, this time to carry him along the water's edge, piercing the darkness with the yellow cone of our flashlight. Although there was no rain the night was again noisy with breaking waves and the insistent wind. It was clearly a time and place where great and elemental things prevailed.

Our adventure on this particular night had to do with life, for we were searching for ghost crabs, those sand-colored, fleet-legged beings whom Roger had sometimes glimpsed briefly on the beaches in daytime. But the crabs are chiefly nocturnal, and when not roaming the night beaches they dig little pits near the surf line where they hide, seemingly watching and waiting for what the sea may bring them. For me the sight of these small living creatures, solitary and fragile against the brute force of the sea, had moving philosophic overtones, and I do not pretend that Roger and I reacted with similar emotions. But it was
good to see his infant acceptance of a world of elemental things, fearing neither the song of the wind nor the darkness nor the roaring surf, entering with baby excitement into the search for a “ghost.”

It was hardly a conventional way to entertain one so young, I suppose, but now, with Roger a little past his fourth birthday, we are continuing that sharing of adventures in the world of nature that we began in his babyhood, and I think the results are good. The sharing includes nature in storm as well as calm, by night as well as day, and is based on having fun together rather than on teaching.

I spend the summer months on the coast of Maine, where I have my own shoreline and my own small tract of woodland. Bayberry and juniper and huckleberry begin at the very edge of the granite rim of shore, and where the land slopes upward from the bay in a wooded knoll the air becomes fragrant with spruce and balsam. Underfoot there is the multi-patterned northern groundcover of blueberry, checkerberry, reindeer moss and bunchberry, and on a hillside of many spruces, with shaded ferny dells and rocky outcroppings—called the Wildwoods—there are ladyslippers and wood lilies and the slender wands of clintonia with its deep blue berries.

When Roger has visited me in Maine and we have walked in these woods I have made no conscious effort to name plants or animals nor to explain to him, but have just expressed my own pleasure in what we see, calling his attention to this or that but only as I would share discoveries with an older person. Later I have been amazed at the way names stick in his mind, for when I show color slides of my woods plants it is Roger who can identify them. “Oh, that’s what Rachel likes—that’s bunchberry!” Or, “That’s juner (juniper) but you can’t eat those green berries—they are for the squirrels.” I am sure no amount of drill would have implanted the names so firmly as just going through the woods in the spirit of two friends on an expedition of exciting discovery.

In the same way Roger learned the shells on my little triangle of sand that passes for a beach in rocky Maine. When he was only a year and a half old, they became known to him as winkies (periwinkles), weks (whelks) and mukkies (mussels) without my knowing quite how this came about, for I had not tried to teach him.

We have let Roger share our enjoyment of things people ordinarily deny children because they are inconvenient, interfering with bedtime or involving wet clothing that has to be changed or mud that has to be cleaned off the rug. We have let him join us in the dark living room before the big picture window to watch the full moon riding lower and lower toward the far shore of the bay, setting all the water ablaze with silver flames and finding a thousand diamonds in the rocks on the shore as the light strikes the flakes of mica embedded in them. I think we have felt that the memory of such a scene, photographed year after year by his child’s

continued on page 46
In the sand dwell secret things like ghost crabs, which live in little pits at the edge of the sea.

Children delight in small things because they are closer to the ground than we.

A boy can sit forever in the silent woods, finding the world mirrored in a still pool.

Up on the sand dunes, stinging hot, it seems like the very edge of the world.

The quiet woods path, carpeted in silvery green, feels deep and springy on a rainy day.
mind, would mean more to him in manhood than the sleep he was losing. He told me it would be his own way, when he had a full moon the night after his arrival last summer. He sat quietly on my lap for some time, watching the moon and the water and all

the night sky. Then he snuggled closer and whispered, "I'm glad we comed." A rainy day is the perfect time for a walk in the woods. I always thought so myself; the Maine woods never seem so fresh and alive as in wet weather. Then all the needles on the evergreens wear a sheath of silver; ferns seem to have grown to almost tropical lushness and every leaf has its edging of crystal drops. Strangely colored fungi—mustard-yellow and apricot and scarlet—are pushing out of the leaf mold and all the lichens and the mosses have come alive with green and silver freshness.

Now I know that for children, too, nature reserves some of her choice rewards for days when her mood may appear to be somber. Roger reminded me of it on a long walk through rain-drenched woods last summer—not in words, of course, but by his responses. There had been rain and fog for days, rain beating on the big picture window, fog almost shutting out sight of the bay. There were no lichens, no gulls on the shore, scarcely even a squirrel to watch. The cottage was fast becoming too small for a restless three-year-old.

"Let's go for a walk in the woods," I said.
"Maybe we'll see a fox or a deer." So we strode down the fairyland—slippery rocks on a stone, odd little forms like booby or horns or the shell of a sea creature—was glad to find Roger noticing and spotting everything. Like an old-fashioned hall runner, it made a nice strip of silvery gray through the green of the woods, here and there spreading out over a larger area. In dry weather lichen carpet seems thin; it is brittle crumbles underfoot. Now, saturated with rain which it absorbs like a sponge, it is deep and springy. Roger delighted in tugging, getting down on chubby knees to look at it, and running from one patch to another jump up and down in the deep, resilient pet with squeals of pleasure.

It was here that we first played our Christmas tree game. There is a fine crop of pine spruces coming along and one can find a tangle of almost any size down to the tip of Roger's finger. I began to point out baby trees.

"This one must be a Christmas tree fork squirrels," I would say, "It's just the tip height. On Christmas Eve the red squirrels come and hang little shells and cones in silver threads of lichen on it for ornament, and the snow falls and covers it all shining stars, and in the morning the squirrels have a beautiful Christmas tree..."

One is even tinier; -it must be for the bugs of some kind—and the big one is for the rabbits or woodchucks.

Once this game was started it took played on all woods walks, which on from were punctuated by shots of, "Dad step on the Christmas tree!"

CHILD'S world is fresh and new as beautiful, full of wonder and excitement. In our misfortune that for many of us that clear-eyed vision, that true instinct for what is beautiful and awe-inspiring, is dimmed and even lost before we reach adulthood. If I had influence with the pious fairy who is supposed to preside over our Christmas tree and who should every child in the gift to each child in the world of wonder so indefinable that is a child one, and children of the world would be..." a child..."

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EXPLORING nature with your child is largely a matter of becoming receptive to what lies all around you. It is learning again to see with your eyes, hear with your ears, nose with your nostrils, and fingers with your fingertips, opening up the disused channels of sensory impression. For most of us, knowledge of our world comes largely through sight, yet we look about with such unseeing eyes that we are partially blind. One way to open your eyes to unnoticed beauty is to ask yourself, “What if I had never seen this before? What if I knew I’d never see it again?”

I remember a summer night when such a thought came to me strongly. It was a clear night without a cloud in the sky. With a friend, I went out on a flat headland that is almost a tiny island, being all but surrounded by the waters of the bay. There the horizons are set off by distant trees on the edge of the sea. You lay and looked up at the sky and the millions of stars that blazed in darkness. The night was still, and we could hear the bay on the ledge out beyond the mouth of the bay. Once or twice a word spoken by someone on the shore was carried across the clear air. A few lights burned in cottages. Otherwise there was no reminder of other human life. Our companion and I were alone with the stars. I have never seen them more beautiful: the misty river of the Milky Way stretching across the sky, the pattern of the constellations standing out tight and clear, a blazing planet low on the horizon. Once or twice a meteor burned its way into the earth’s atmosphere.

It occurred to me that if this were a sight I could be seeing only once in a century or even once in a human generation, this little headland would be thronged with spectators. But it is a sight that we see many times a year, and we need to learn to see it with a clearer eye, and we need to be more grateful because it is our right to see it.

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The East Is Home

from page 32

puppy. One has to get used to a more reti-

cent gesture than one encounters in the
South or the West. You may find the Ve-

eraltherman taking a seat to the point of silence

of it’s chat you’re looking for. But get stuck

in the snow some bitter night and he’ll har-

ness his lantern, put away his roaming boat

and make you a pot of hot coffee without asking

to look at your wallet.

Ours is not a spectacular environment.
Our mountains do not tower very high, our

chams do not cut deep. We swim in a more

moderate ocean, drive smaller cars on less

eless roads. We do not wear slacks to the

village or bikinis on many of the beaches.

If we like hamburgers rare, we do not care

for them raw. Our most persistent symbol

are still our quiet elms, our lilac-covered

churchyards.

There is something very pleasant about

accepting a natural background. I used to

wonder why even the most faithful copy

of an old house was so much less charming

than the original. My eye finally told me

it is because the latter has warped a little

with age. All its lines curve a bit to com-

come with the earth it stands on. Porches sur-

ever so slightly, windows lean just faintly
toward the slope. The house stopped doing battle with its surroundings

and has become a part of it.

This grnce of form explains why many

an easterner would rather spend his money

on remodeling a dilapidated farmhouse into

a residence than on building a new one at

less expense. It accounts for what is most

appealing in the East. This is a grown-up

place. Here is the warmth of home.

For Phyllis McHale’s last word on the East, turn to page 84