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Boys in the Woods

Motherhood, Identity, and Sustainability

Richard Louv has argued that lack of time spent in nature is the root cause of the wild increase in behavioral problems experienced by America's children. I'm happy to report that my sons have been inoculated. In August 2010, I was fortunate to spend a week at the Lama Foundation, a spiritual and sustainable community located in the Carson National Forest about 20 miles north of Taos, New Mexico. Similar to many American communes, the Lama Foundation was established during the heyday of the "back to the land" movement of the 1960s and 1970s, though it was never associated with the pervasive psychedelic culture of that era. Rather, Lama has always been substance-free working community and venue for philosophical and spiritual teachers. I went to join a group of scholars and practitioners attending a workshop on contemplative environmental studies, in reference to the incorporation of mindfulness and other contemplative practices into the environmental studies classroom. My captive sons, nine-year-old Parker and fourteen-year-old Quentin, came along for the experience. This essay offers insights about the relationship between environmental identity and sustainable behavior practiced in the setting of contemporary intentional community, or commune. Bottom line, raising environmentalists is a whole lot easier with a little help from your friends.

I was an environmentalist long before I became a mother. The threat to the natural world that catalyzed my activism was the transformation of orange groves and strawberry fields into subdivisions that marked my childhood in the part of Orange County California you never saw in Fox Television's "The O.C." I am the eldest of nine children, who used to follow our mother annually into the fields at the end of the spring harvest to (eat and) pick strawberries for desserts immediately, and preserves all year long. More than a decade before

The Learning Company launched "The Oregon Trail" computer game, we traveled "cross country" by pulling loaded-down Radio Flyer wagons through the fields turned housing lots with our bikes, the wagon handles tied to sissy bars with jump ropes. Whether we reached the end of the trail or not, we always survived to race home in time for the "New Mickey Mouse Club," leaving our transportation and assorted house wares strewn on the front lawn. By the time I graduated from college, there were no more fields near the neighborhood where I grew up, no more vacant lots, and far fewer children playing outside, except in carefully supervised park playgrounds and on athletic fields. I was palpably saddened, and moved to action.

My upset over this vast reduction in suburban open space of sorts might amount to little more than nostalgia and an anecdote to locate my interest in sustainable communities, if not for current research on the importance of free play outdoors. Unstructured physical activity that takes place predominantly outside—whether in back yards and parks, along woodland streams, or on sun-baked rocks in the desert—arguably contributes to healthy weight maintenance, emotional stability, and intellectual creativity (see Louv; Elkind; Brown and Vaughan). This argument has been roundly criticized as unnecessarily conservative and rooted in a "largely white, privileged value system" (Nichols 1). Certainly, those who live in rural communities or have the time and financial resources to visit national parks and wilderness areas possess a distinct advantage with respect to securing adequate outdoor experiences for their progeny. This privileged access to nature more or less continues to correlate with race and class divisions in the United States. In addition to attacks stemming from substantive social and economic concerns, the overly simple association of outdoor play with the good life has been subject to philosophical discussion and censure. The concept "nature" and the meaning of "natural" remain subject to debate such that writer Martha Nichols, a "feminist and white adoptive mom of an Asian son," (1) and others with atypical families are justified in asking, "Is 'natural' always best for kids?" (see McKibben; Salleh; Laine). Outdoor enthusiast and writer Kristen Laine argues, in response, that the take-away from arguments by Louv and his ilk is that children should be encouraged to connect more often than not with "green, living things; ditches and sandlots; air and water and dirt" (1).

I would have to agree. In that sense, my own children are fortunate. My spouse and I prioritize time spent outside—including the easily manageable sports, gardening, and learning to identify local plants and animals, as well as the more resource-intensive camping, hiking, fishing, and kayaking. Still, as junior members of a prototypical double-income suburban household, my children enjoy much more soccer and character building exercises—read manual labor—in the backyard than they do mountain trekking. I highly doubt that

such mundane lives will cost them their good health, emotional stability, or intellects. I do sometimes wonder if it will suffice to instill in them the commitment to the earth necessary to weather our current environmental crises. No wonder I jumped at the opportunity to take our family's ordinary appreciation of, and enjoyment in, nature up a notch. Because I would be working while at Lama, and the boys would be contributing members of the community, our respite from the everyday was doable. Simply put, it required more free time and labor than it did money. This commentary on our experience in an established sustainable community seeks to situate the argument that intimacy with the natural world is not only good for us, but also essential to sustained environmental protection and human survival. It is in no way intended to be an exhortation. Arguably, we will not save the earth unless we know it; however, every one of us need not go back to the land to learn that lesson.

Back to the Land

The Lama Foundation is the one of the oldest intentional communities in the United States. Established in 1967, the community's commitment to ecumenicalism, ecology, and consensual decision-making is characteristic of the back to the land movement, which featured a devotion to self-reliance and harmony with the land reminiscent of Thoreau. Despite my credentials as a vocal environmentalist and longstanding appreciation for *Mother Earth News*, the closest I had ever come to living off the land, prior to my arrival at Lama, was successfully growing tomatoes, lettuce, carrots, and a handful of other nearly fool-proof vegetables in the raised beds I can see from my home office window. In contrast, Lama residents and visitors benefit from permaculture, a sustainable land use design modeled on the place-specific ecological relationships among plants, animals, and their nutrient cycles, climate and annual weather patterns. Its permaculture design has successfully achieved the community's goal of generating stable and sustainable sources of food, water, and energy since the early 1990s. Most of the food consumed at the Lama Foundation is harvested on the property, or is procured via trading the produce of its gardens, orchards, and woods. All of the energy consumed at Lama is generated from onsite solar panels. The water used for drinking, washing, and showering is drawn from a natural spring located on the property.

Clearly, this was the perfect site for a workshop on how to integrate contemplative practices into post-secondary scholarship and teaching. The workshop, entitled "Contemplative Environmental Studies: Pedagogy for Self & Planet," was supported by the Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education and included daily meditations and contemplative artistic exercises in addition to more conventional academic fare: presenta-

tions, focused conversations, film screenings, and keynote talks. Participants consisted of a multidisciplinary group of environmental studies professors who are also spiritual practitioners with a common interest in preserving the natural environment. Our joint decision to live and work at Lama for a short time provided both an apt retreat and an opportunity to experience what it might be like to live responsibly in the context of our current environmental crisis. We were forewarned that living conditions at Lama would be "rustic." Although there are fixed dwellings on the property, including yurts that serve as men's and women's dormitories, most workshop participants, and residents, slept in tents. We dined together, shared a communal bath, and were encouraged to relieve ourselves in the woods.

The setting was also ideal for a family getaway of sorts. My spouse was unable to take time off work for the week, my older daughter was away at camp, and my younger daughter—not yet six and already something of a princess—was better suited to stay with her aunt, who would also be caring for our puppy. "Quality mother-sons time," I thought. Both of my sons are Boy Scouts with plenty of family hiking and camping experience to boot. Taking them back to the land was unproblematic. In fact, a weeklong camping trip that promised reduced parental oversight and limited shower time amounted to heaven in their minds. Neither boy was fazed by limited Internet access on the property due to constraints on the electricity supply, or by the probability that cell phone use would be discouraged. (Residents at the Lama Foundation prioritize face-to-face interactions over the maintenance of virtual relationships.) Rather, they were primarily concerned about the food. The Lama menu is strictly vegetarian, and my sons are not. Although I had thought that running into town for a burger fix would be easy; in fact, it was a small ordeal. The Lama Foundation is located about eight miles off the highway, including a steep, four-mile long, deeply rutted dirt road. In the end, the boys got out once—for a burger on Quentin's fifteenth birthday. Quentin's birthday was another point of contention. I had underestimated entirely the relative value of "hanging out with friends" over "outdoor adventure with mom" in a teenage boy's mind. My nature-loving Boy Scout and dirt bag rock-climber Quentin simply did not want to spend his birthday on a commune. Unfortunately for him, he was a minor without a driver's license. That made Quentin, at least initially, captive to my experience.

Nature Experiential

As both a scholar whose research agenda includes air quality, energy policy, and sustainable communities and an environmentalist, it should not be surprising that I would welcome the opportunity for a nature experiential with my sons.

Moreover, one of my deepest desires is that my children will develop an appreciation of the natural world akin to my own, and behave consciously and responsibly to preserve and protect nonhuman as well as human life. A repertoire of experiences in the wild is essential to that end. Literatures in the natural and social sciences alike indicate that our experiences in nature influence our relationship with nonhuman life and consequent behavior (see Wilson 1984; McKibben; Merchant; Abram; Kellert; Milton; Brekke).

Without a doubt, my own scholarship and activism are the predictable outcome of hiking and riding every summer at camp in Southern California's San Jacinto Mountains; years of rock-climbing and camping in Joshua Tree National Park, the Rocky Mountain National Park, and other favorite locations in the southwestern United States; and ending many a long, hot day sitting on the sand with my dogs and/or children, watching the sun set over the Pacific Ocean. More generally, anthropologist Kay Milton's study of environmental activists reveals that they likewise tend to share positive experiences in nature, from idolizing a favorite tree to frequent backcountry excursions. Writer and activist Bill McKibben goes further, arguing that we can only experience ourselves as fully human in relationship to the natural world, and literally require the existence of wilderness. In some sense, McKibben echoes biologist Edward O. Wilson's claim that we all subconsciously seek connection to the whole of life, and that this biological drive is essential to our development, both as individuals and as a species. David Abram, a philosopher, cultural ecologist, and magician with a keen awareness of his own sensual relationship to the natural world, argues that modern society's hell bent destruction of the environment is the direct result of our estrangement from the earth that he experiences so directly.

Research in psychology supports this "biophilia hypothesis," or the supposition that there exists a genetic basis for humans' interconnection with their natural environment. The field of environmental psychology, broadly defined,[1] specifically addresses the relationship between people and their natural, built, social, and informational environments. Ideally, our surroundings will provide the impetus for the kind of conscious and responsible behavior necessary to sustain us individually and collectively in the environments within which we find ourselves. Regarding the natural environment, in particular, historian Theodore Rozak (2) explains that the identity of the needs and rights of people with those of the earth is rooted in the ecological unconscious. From his point of view, maturity entails the development of an ethical responsibility to the planet as well as to other people that must be manifest in the social relations and political decisions that together govern human behavior. One's "environmental identity," according to social psychologists Susan Clayton and Susan Opotow, reaches this peak state of development in a social context

that includes interpersonal relationships and group memberships (see Mead; Searles; M. Thomashow; Weigert; Kahn).

The very short upshot of this body of scholarship is that those of us who enjoy our outdoor adventures are more likely than others, all other explanatory factors held constant, to identify with the natural environment and come to value it highly enough to modify our social, economic, and political behavior accordingly (Naess and Rothenberg; Altman and Low; Axelrod; Merchant; Kellert and Wilson; Stern and Dietz; Cantrell and Senecah; Milton; Clayton and Opotow; Holmes). That would be enough to compel me, as a parent, to ensure that my children have ample opportunities to spend time in the wild (Revolutionary Motherhood). For those who remain on the fence, one's environmental identity arguably has deep roots in childhood (Barrows; Kellert and Wilson; Sobel; Kahn and Kellert; Kaplan and Kaplan; C. Thomashow; Kals and Ittner; Orr 2004; White 2011). Childhood is when our "naturalistic intelligence," or innate ability to notice patterns in nature, to collect and classify treasures during our treks outdoors, and to develop a concern for the natural world, emerges (Wilson 2011). Failure on the part of parents and/or societies to facilitate this developmentally appropriate and necessary period leaves children vulnerable to environmental deficit disorder (Louv; Ronald; see also Nabhan and Trimble). Journalist Richard Louv coined the term to capture the languor he associates with young people's attachment to electronics rather than nature. Televisions, computers, iPods, and automobiles deprive all of us, but especially children, from developing the strong, flexible bodies, broad, tolerant minds, and sharp senses born of outdoor (work and) play (see also Elkind; Brown and Vaughan).

Living the Life at Lama

My sons and I are experienced hikers, climbers, back-packers, and campers, but we arrived at Lama as commune novices. I was excited about experiencing life in this hippie throwback community. My sons' enthusiasm noticeably increased as we pulled out of Taos, New Mexico and headed north into the sparsely populated hills. The Lama Foundation is located at 8600 feet on a nearly 110-acre site 40 minutes from Taos by car. It is nearly surrounded by the Carson National Forest. Scrub oak gives way to aspens, and then pine trees at the highest elevations, providing a sense of quiet seclusion everywhere but at the social center of the property, where most of the fixed structures are located. These include the common areas—kitchen, "dome" or meeting area, bathhouse, and prayer room—and offices. Remaining structures—essentially housing, outdoor showers, and out houses—are located a short distance away. It rains frequently in summer—every afternoon/evening

during our stay—and the resulting muddy road and pathways underscore the fact that "lama" means "mud" in the once local Spanish dialect. Crystal clear skies follow the rain, making it possible to see seemingly forever from the clearing where much of the community's activity occurs across the Rio Grande plateau below.

We just beat the rain to Lama the day we arrived. After parking in a small clearing in the brush just off the road, we followed a rain-softened path through tall grass and scrub oak toward the main building on the property, where we expected to find someone who could tell us where to set up camp. As we approached the portal, a wide porch that stretches out and around the kitchen facilities, we saw maybe a dozen people. Most appeared to be like us, newly arrived and eager to make camp before dark. Others appeared to be preparing for the evening meal. The rest were sitting at long wooden picnic tables, sipping tea and talking, or simply passing through. This mix was representative of the Lama community during our stay, which included, in addition to workshop participants and some of their children: residents, who live and work on the property full time for up to six or seven years; stewards, who assist the residents during the peak season; and resident scholars, naturalists, authors, artists, and/or teachers. Some members of this community, such as the aging Richard Falk, who joined our workshop, resided in a one of the small multi-room "houses" or dormitory yurts available; however, almost everyone slept in tents. We pitched ours—an Everest-ready bungalow for Parker and me, and a lightweight backpacking number for Quentin—in the larger of two designated camping areas within easy walking distance of the kitchen, dome, where most of the workshop activities were scheduled, and bathhouse. Others chose to live further away; during the week, we saw people living in tents all the way from the parking area about half a mile below our temporary home to very near the mountain's top.

Our housing mirrored the juxtaposition of solitude and intimacy that characterizes the Lama experience in my mind. There was more than enough space for independence and time alone; it was just as easy and acceptable for Quentin to live on his own as it was for any member of the community to walk away from the group and "into the wild" (Krakauer). Yet the amount and nature of collective activity made it impossible to avoid a level of affinity typically reserved for roommates, if not lovers. To start, the natural quiet combined with the very thin walls of even the hardiest tents reduced privacy practically to zero. I regained Parker as a very active snuggle buddy after a good three years of sleeping in his own bed at home, or with his siblings and/or cousins during family camping trips. In part because I was awake off and on throughout the night, adjusting to Parker's movements or accompanying him when he got up to urinate, I was privy to bits of my neighbors' nighttime rituals, including

reading late into the night, snoring, and tripping through the brush to find somewhere to "go."

Privacy was additionally limited by Lama's bathroom facilities and norms. 50 or so of us shared a single, albeit beautiful, bathhouse. The main feature of the bathhouse is a hot-tub size tile-inlaid tub and shower set inside a greenhouse. This oasis is separated by a curtain from a roughly 100-square-foot room that contains five raised tile and stainless steel sinks, and an abundance of heavy wooden shelves and cabinets for toiletries, and towel hooks. Yes, bathing or showering with just a piece of fabric separating you from multiple near strangers brushing their teeth, washing their faces, and etc. was difficult for some people to get used to. Parker insisted that I sit watch on the dressing bench just outside the curtain while he bathed. I simply preferred the outdoor showers; my son Quentin and I often waited for the sun to heat the water in the completely solar shower cut out of the oak a short walk from our tents. Once or twice, I heard someone hiking within earshot while I was showering, but no one ever stumbled in to join me.

Like the solar shower, the outhouses were mostly set along narrow paths in the woods. Visibly traditional wooden versions of this camping staple, complete with curtained windows, sported two seats each for communing with one another as well as nature during elimination. (To my knowledge, no one in our group took advantage of this perk.) I learned late in the week that Parker's favorite was the one out-house without a screen or curtains because he could look out while he did his business. Indeed, these out houses were reserved for defecation; everyone was strongly encouraged to drink A LOT of water and urinate in the bushes away from living areas. Despite every effort to be discrete about this natural yet highly personal activity, we collectively developed an unusually high level of physical intimacy because we spent so much of each day in and around kitchen, dome, and bathhouse.

It is quite possible that the togetherness generated via basic living conditions facilitated Lama's mission to create and sustain a community of mostly unrelated people committed to human and/or spiritual development and sustainable living. A great deal of additional effort was nonetheless expended in establishing the relationships necessary for everyone to cooperate effectively. A key part of this process that involved everyone in residence was the mealtime ritual. A bell and gong sequence called everyone to the portal. There, we joined hands to hear the cooks describe the meal they had just prepared, share announcements and news, make any necessary work assignments, and participate in a spiritual practice, song, or blessing. It honestly reminded me of Girl Scout camp, and I genuinely felt more at home among my academic peers than I ever had before in the context of a professional meeting. As I slipped my hands into those of the people standing beside me on each side, I watched my sons. Lama's mealtime

ritual is a far cry from saying grace before dinner as we do at home. Quentin did not hesitate. Parker did, peering sheepishly from behind the hair in his eyes, before following suit. I breathed a sigh of relief.

I need not have worried. Both boys had gone native within 24 hours of our arrival. This successful start to the week was a very good thing because I was committed to participate in the workshop as well as teach yoga daily as my seva, or service, while in residence at Lama. Card-carrying progressives all, the other parents and I effectively counted on some form of communal, collective, or extended "mothering," in reference to the practice of caring for and nurturing our children (O'Reilly 2008, 2004; Napikoski). Shared responsibility for children among members of a community has, until recently, been the norm in many traditional, agrarian, and/or nomadic cultures, and has worked effectively in urban neighborhoods as well as on communes and kibbutzim, and in modern cooperatives (see Hrdy; Barlow and Chapin; Belkin; Feather). With the exception of a steward's two young children, the only minors at Lama during our stay were related to workshop participants. These young people ranged in age from nine years old to 17, and were put in the sure hands of Ella, a summer steward whose seva included integrating our children into the life and work of the community. As part of this small pack of tweens and teens, my sons joined the community for "tuning," a morning ritual that included a short meditation, check in, and work assignments. Ella guided the boys' choice of age appropriate seva that ranged from weeding and berry picking, to cooking and clean-up, to out-house beautification detail. They never balked at the work and seemed to enjoy participating. The rest of their time was spent hiking and swimming with Ella in the morning, literally running wild in the afternoons while Ella had time to herself, and joining the adults in the evenings for performances, dancing, films, etc.

Ironically, the unique combination of extreme freedom, relative to what they enjoy in our suburban community at home, and diffuse security afforded by a community of like-minded adults produced a context in which Parker became obviously more independent, while Quentin's typical teen rebelliousness was tempered by his growing identity with the group. Despite Parker's renewed dependence on me after dark, I hardly saw him at all between breakfast and dinner. He spent his down time in the den below the kitchen, which served as a hideout for the younger kids, talking, plotting, playing cards, and—sometimes, when someone left a computer behind—checking his email. Much like Adrienne Rich's sons on summer vacation, Parker routinely fell asleep with his head in my lap while I checked my email and posted pictures to Facebook before hiking out to our tent for bed. In contrast, Quentin, in the company of some of the older teen-agers, became a junior member of the adult community. We shared coffee and conversation on the

portal, practiced yoga together with others in my class, and shared responsibility for photographing the sculptures workshop participants produced in art class one morning. An avid reader, Quentin also found time to tear through a number of now out-of-print books on philosophy and science fiction available in the library, and discussed many of them with Lama staff as well as workshop participants.

Getting by with a Little Help from Our Friends

In a word, our stay at the Lama Foundation was fantastic. This outcome was due in no small part to the workshop's design as a retreat such that each day's activities were organized around communal meal times and individual and collective spiritual practices. Allocation of the space and time for workshop sessions and participant's individual scholarly agendas was secondary to feeding our bodies and souls. Likewise, the boys' seva followed a good night's rest and a generous breakfast, and left most of the day free for exploring our mountain-top home, playing, and hanging out with newfound friends. As a result, we were all better rested, overall relaxed, and simply happier than we had been in a very long time. Of course, it is much easier to take time for delicious meals when you are not expected to plan and prepare them, plus supervise the washing up afterward. Likewise, it is easy to get up, go for a run, followed by meditation practice and a shower before breakfast, when you can forego the drama of seeing that the dogs are fed, and your children are clean, dressed, and out the door on time. This assessment is generally true for my sons as well. They actually performed less manual labor than they usually do at home and had far more discretion over how they used their free time than is the norm, even in summer time. In effect, we were fortunate to live the life of leisure characterized by the likes of Aristotle and Karl Marx (cited in Eker).

The transition back to "real life" was excruciating. By the time we reached my sister's home in Colorado Springs, where we visited and picked up Olivia and our pup before heading home, I was already exhausted just thinking about the work involved in getting all of us ready for fall—school, soccer season, climbing competitions, and conference travel. Thankfully, all of the activity and stress inherent in the day-to-day work of this true-life super mom has not obliterated Lama's place in the back of my mind and the bottom of my heart. More importantly, I am certain my sons will never forget this outdoor adventure. Leaving Lama, I fully expected to see the spark of environmental activism and cooperative living ignited in the mountains of Northern New Mexico eventually begin to burn somewhere inside of my sons. Still, I was surprised when Quentin soon thereafter became an advocate for the Leave No Trace program, which educates visitors to parks and wilderness areas about

how to reduce their impact on the natural environment. I was even more taken aback when Parker shifted the focus of his desired career as an automobile designer from "shiny and fast" to "clean and energy efficient." In addition, in a nod to Louv, Parker now increasingly opts to spend time outside mountain biking and hiking with the dog on his own, as opposed to only under duress of a family expedition.

[1]Subtle, yet nonetheless significant in some instances, distinctions among environmental psychology, eco-psychology, conservation psychology and related subdisciplines are beyond the scope of this article.

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