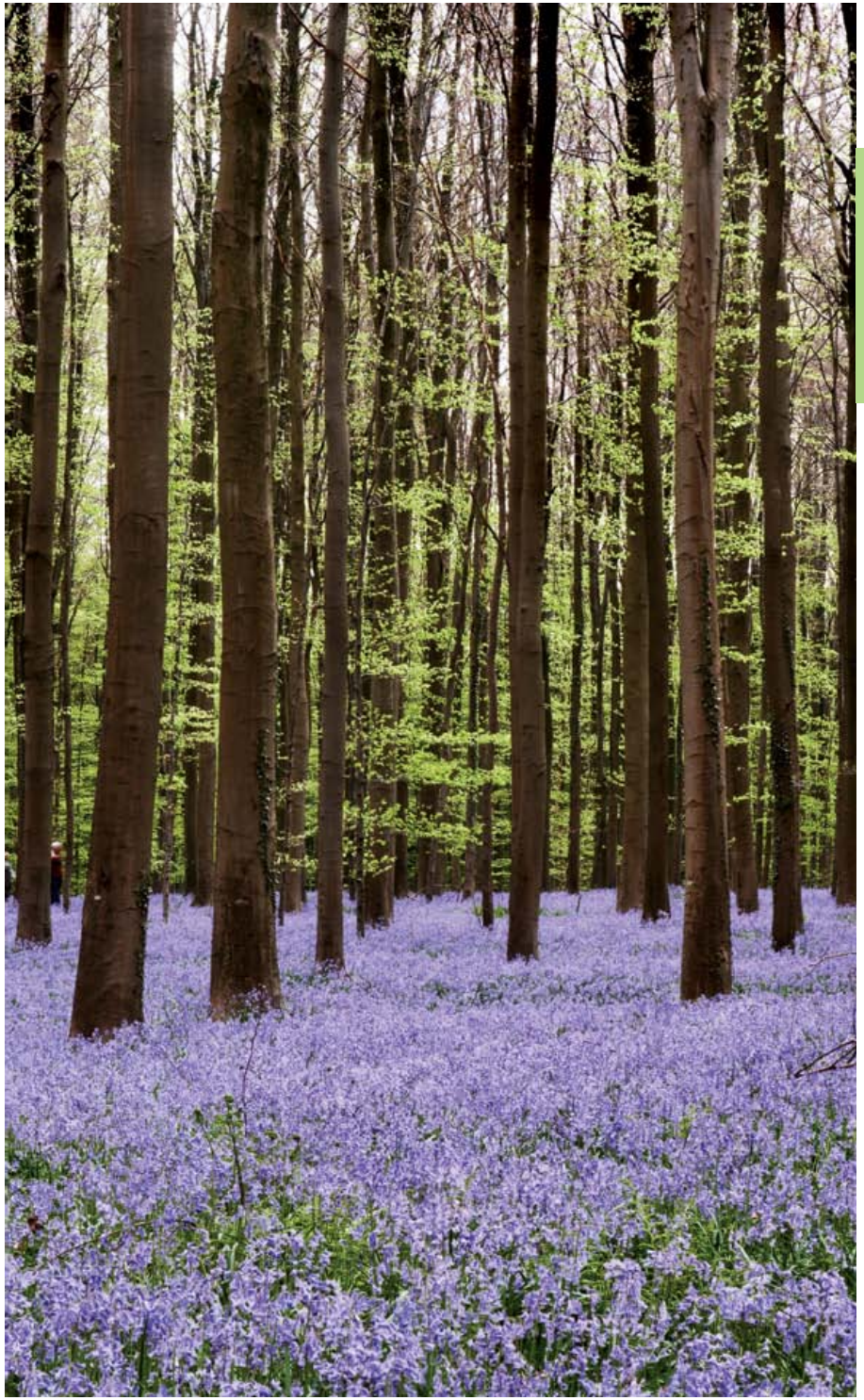

# AN INTRODUCTORY STORY

It was a brisk, clear day in Germany's Rhön Mountains; the magnificent beech forest surrounding us made a perfect setting for our outdoor program. The participants were playing *Silent Sharing Walk*, one of many Sharing Nature activities we enjoyed that day.

In *Silent Sharing Walk*, participants in teams of three stroll serenely through an area chosen for its natural beauty. When a walker is captivated by something, he or she gently taps the shoulder of other players, then points to the object. The players silently share the experience.

The German "sharing teams" walked slowly and silently under a canopy of stately beeches. The forest floor was populated with early spring wildflowers and a few small shrubs. I sensed among the members a tangible harmony with one another as well as with the forest.

The *Silent Sharing Walk* was not long: 120 feet. I stationed myself at the end of the trail to silently greet each finishing team. One German naturalist approached with twinkling eyes and a bright smile. He gestured for me to follow; I knew he had found something special. He led me back along the trail for perhaps fifty feet, then gestured toward the edge of the trail; he wanted *me* to find the magical surprise. I looked carefully over the ground before me; I saw blue wildflowers, a mossy rock, and forest litter, but I knew I should be seeking something unusual. Then it came into focus: a perfectly round nest, stitched together with spider silk—filled with four baby birds, their feathers just beginning to fill out. Superbly camouflaged, the nest and fledglings were all but invisible.

Most people would not have spotted the nest of birds. When absorbed in deep play, however, our sensory awareness is heightened; we become immersed in the present moment and feel intensely alert and alive. Because play is fun and rewarding, we operate at the peak of our mental and physical capacity.

How does deep nature play differ from regular play? Deep play has greater absorption with the object of play. It is a matter of degree—an important distinction for any parent, educator, or outdoor leader who wants to help others to *feel* a part of nature, or to truly understand any other field of study.

This book is for those who perhaps have forgotten how to play, or who wish to incorporate more play into their lives, and for educators who want to teach their subject matter with greater impact and inspiration. This book is also for parents and early childhood educators who desire to nourish and keep alive their children's innate curiosity and playful spirit. Most of all, this book is for those who want to touch and feel life deeply.

In 1979, I published my first book, *Sharing Nature with Children.* Soon after its release, there was a tremendous worldwide response to the book's playful games and uplifting message. Soon I began leading nature awareness programs throughout North America, Europe, Asia, and the South Pacific. The book quickly sparked a worldwide revolution in nature education and connected millions of children and adults with nature.

Why was there such an enthusiastic response to *Sharing Nature with Children* and its experiential games? The answer readers have given me over the decades is that they have, through practice of the book's principles, through nature play, felt in themselves joy, intense aliveness, and inner illumination. My sincere hope is that the present book will take you even deeper into the wonders and joy of nature.



*Chapter Six*

# PLAY ACTIVATES THE WHOLE PERSON

Johann, a professional German forester, described to me a profound change of attitude toward his work: "I was trained in my profession to see trees as a commercial commodity. But now, after experiencing the Sharing Nature activities, I realize that the grasses are my friends, the trees are my friends, that every living thing in the woodland is my friend. This, for me, is a new way of looking at trees. This awareness is going to fundamentally change the way I work with the forest."

As a participant in a Sharing Nature workshop, Johann interacted with trees in a variety of innovative ways. First, he and his co-participants, foresters from all over Germany, built a tree together. Several foresters acted out each tree part—tap root, lateral roots, sapwood, cambium, phloem, and bark—and in doing so experienced the nature and function of that tree part kinesthetically.

Johann was then guided through a visualization of himself as a deciduous tree, living through the seasons of the year. During the guided imagery, Johann planted himself firmly in the earth, spread his branches out, drew nourishment from the sun and sky, and turned air and light into life. With his sheltering branches, Johann cooled the summer air and warmed the winter air, thus making a more favorable environment for other life forms. Reenacting a tree's life enabled him to *experience* personally the role trees play in the forest ecosystem and to *feel* in himself many of the noble qualities of trees. By imagining himself living as a tree and nurturing the nearby plants and animals, Johann strengthened his sense of stewardship and love for the earth.

Earlier in the workshop, Johann, blindfolded, had "met a tree"; through his sense of touch, smell, and hearing, he explored the tree's unique features. Johann was then asked to remove his blindfold and—guided by what he remembered about his tree and the path leading to it—to find his tree again.

Johann also interviewed a venerable tree: "What events have you seen in your life?" Trying to feel the tree's response to this question, he looked for signs that could tell him how wind, high water, snow, fire, or an animal might have shaped the tree. He reflected on the



many dramatic and commonplace events the tree had witnessed during its centuries of life.

The day closed with a song accompanied by graceful arm movements, an exercise that allowed Johann and his fellow foresters to celebrate their kinship with the forest and all living things.

The variety of learning modes enhanced Johann's imagination, intuition, reason, empathy, and love, as well as his kinesthetic and sensory awareness, and thus enriched his appreciation and understanding of trees. Sharing Nature exercises activate multiple centers of perception and cognition; they stimulate different parts of the brain and strengthen the neural connections between brain regions, thereby enhancing understanding, long-term memory, and creativity.

Just as different parts of the brain communicate with one another, trees communicate and share nutrients with other trees through what scientists call the "wood wide web," an underground fungal network connecting roots of trees in a forest. Contemporary botanists see a remarkable prescience in words spoken by the *Avatar* movie's fictional character Dr. Grace Augustine:* "What we think we know—is that there's some kind of electrochemical communication between the roots of the trees. Like the synapses between neurons."

A recent study by forest ecologist Suzanne Simard and her graduate students shows that Douglas fir and paper birch trees shuttle carbon seasonally back and forth to one another. During the shady summer months, the birch trees pass carbon to the sun-starved Douglas fir seedlings. And during autumn—after the deciduous paper birches lose their leaves—the fir seedlings, now receiving more sunlight, send carbon back to the birch trees.

When the fungal web is intact, plant diversity and the viability of a woodland community are significantly greater. Foresters in Germany have discovered that spacing trees artificially far apart to allow them to get more sunlight and grow faster, prevents them from establishing a viable fungal network and thereby lessens their resilience.

Similarly, when certain neural pathways in the human brain are never connected, or die off from disuse, one's ability to function in

* Although the movie was set in the year 2154, it was released in 2009.

ways associated with those brain pathways is diminished. The Swedish Pediatrics Institute found, for example, that children with little imagination, when confronted with an unpleasant, demeaning, or threatening situation, would lash out; they were simply unable to imagine an alternative response. Children with a strong sense of imagination, on the other hand, were far less prone to violence, because they could create an alternative inner scenario and thus respond harmoniously.

Simard's research found that large, older trees act as "Mother Trees," ones which transmit through the fungal web resources and biochemical signals to young tree seedlings as well as to other plants. In similar fashion, every flowering human faculty (and quality) nurtures and contributes to our sense of wholeness and integration. We are physical, mental, feeling, and spiritual beings; our learning and life activities should address and nurture our whole nature. Because of its multifaceted character, play can enhance many valuable human qualities: openness, curiosity, wholeheartedness, self-confidence, attentiveness, self-control, calmness, imaginativeness, and optimism.

Every field of study has its own principles and practical content that are essential for students to know. The more the learning process engages the whole person, however, the more interested, creatively inspired, and personally transformed the student will be. In environments where children, adolescents, or adults typically learn while simply sitting and listening, a sprinkling of carefully planned play activities can:

- Revitalize students by changing the style and pace of learning;
- Reinforce and deepen understanding of class topics;
- Act as a catalyst for future exploration.

"Nature must be experienced through feeling," said legendary naturalist Alexander von Humboldt. It is through the heart that we



understand new and profound truths. If you want to motivate people, first touch their hearts, because it is their feelings that will inspire their thoughts and behavior.

In the words of the Japanese politician and social activist Tanaka Shozo (considered his country's first conservationist), the "care of rivers is not a question of rivers, but of the human heart." If learning is mainly mental, one's viewpoint on the subject tends to be materialistic. As a trained, practicing forester, Johann understood tree science well; but, alas, his scientific training had caused him (in his own words) to see trees simply as "a commodity."

Playful, multifaceted exercises enriched Johann's whole being. As he experienced the forest in a more living, nuanced way, Johann himself became a more empathetic human being.