

Hope for the Future by Nel Noddings

Many of us are rightly worried about the health and future of Earth—our planet in peril. The worry is justified, but the concern it has generated is a cause for hope, because it is one that moves us beyond our personal concerns for economic success, professional prestige, romantic love, and the acquisition of material goods. That is to say, in our worry over the health of the planet, we may contribute to the development of a new, more humane and whole human being.

We need not get bogged down in the debate over the role of human behavior in global warming, the extinction of species, and the general degradation of the environment. Put the debate aside for a moment. No matter how great or small human influence is on environmental problems, we would do well to change our ways and to prevent further damage. Surely it would be a good thing to clean up our air, water, and soil and to explore vigorously ways of life that are sustainable.

Besides the obvious goal—a healthy home for all living things—we should welcome the many possible positive effects of the effort. A widely embraced emphasis on the well-being of the Earth might have dramatic effects on the goals of schooling. Instead of the present single-minded emphasis on economic success, schools might encourage students to think seriously about their responsibilities and very special privileges as dwellers on this Earth. It is a new emphasis that has natural appeal for children and teenagers. The reduction of the competitive race for the highest grades and the best possible economic status would be a wonderful result—one that would contribute to a restoration of true education. There might be time again in the curriculum to talk about the meaning of life, the nature of happiness, the value of true friendship, and other topics once thought to be central, even critical, in education.

An emphasis on the health of the Earth might well promote the inclusion of socially relevant topics in all of the disciplines. Such a shift would provide encouragement to those who already advocate ethno-mathematics (mathematics attributed to or applied to specific cultures) and other disciplinary variants. As we focus attention on the natural environment, we are more likely to attend also to the full range of living things—including the minority groups among us. And beyond minority groups of human beings, there is the whole universe of living plants and animals toward which we may develop a sense of unity, as E. O. Wilson writes in *The Future of Life*.

As we commit ourselves to work on the environment, we will get our kids outdoors more often—not just to play soccer or tennis, but also to clean streams, plant gardens, and just *look at* the natural world. Children who have opportunities to interact with the natural world might have fewer allergies, and they are less likely to grow into adults who recoil in fear from spiders and think of all insects as objects to be obliterated. As they plant gardens and cultivate them, they may become interested in where vegetables and fruits are grown and how they are harvested and transported. In keeping with the main theme—preserving the Earth—they may become locavores and persuade their families to use foods grown or raised locally. In the past

few years, local children (mostly summer visitors) have become fascinated with the vegetable garden my husband and I grow. They want to help with the picking and digging, and they react with disappointment if we pick beans without them. Children are natural lovers of living things.

Gardens require work, but we are rewarded with actual produce as a result of our bending, lifting, and stretching. Again, although we are exercising our bodies, our focus is more on the garden and less on ourselves. That, too, may be a move in the right direction for a society so bound up in its individual bodies and interests. But it is not only our bodies that benefit from gardening. There are pauses in the work that bring appreciation for the sunshine, fresh air, fragrances, and the beauty of butterflies and dragonflies. I like to lie flat on my back with my arms stretched out, palms against the grass. As a child doing this, I believed that I could feel the Earth “going around.” Moments of quiet appreciation restore the body and encourage a serenity of mind described by the Epicureans.

How different this approach is from the usual procedures in schools today, where “time on task” has become a fetish. Students are expected to attend unswervingly to the tasks set by their teachers. A student caught gazing out the window may be scolded for being “off task.” Never mind whether said student is watching the progress of a spider on the upper pane, settling her soul, or perhaps even thinking about the actual task. Never mind also that another student staring dutifully at the work sheet in front of him may be indulging in an erotic daydream or thinking ahead to the evening’s television shows. An emphasis on a whole life lived cooperatively with other whole lives could enliven education itself.

Increased attention to the living world affirms the human tendency toward biophilia—a preference for life and life-forms over buildings and inanimate objects. We want to be among green plants, and we have a preference for views of open spaces, mountains, and water. Many of us acquire a genuine love of place (what the Greeks called *chorophilia*). Aristophanes said, “What a powerful thing one’s love for a place can be!” This love of place should be encouraged, and it can be used to promote global understanding. When we recognize our own love for a place, we may learn to appreciate the love other people have for *their* places. Such an appreciation should be a major topic in peace education. It might become unthinkable to destroy places deeply loved by fellow human beings.

Focusing on the health of the Earth should induce a commitment to care for our own backyards; that is where ecological sensitivity begins. There are many fine resources available to help teachers, parents, and students acquire a deeper understanding of how to share our yards and neighborhoods with other living things. [1] Place-based education is attracting serious attention among educators.

I’ll mention one other possible benefit of the growing interest in Earth/place/home-centered education: it might serve to reduce friction among various religious groups. It might even help to bridge the chasm between belief and unbelief. In his beautiful book *The Creation*, written as a letter to a Southern Baptist pastor, E. O. Wilson notes the substantial differences between his own views as a secular humanist and those of the pastor. However, despite these differences,

Wilson argues, they should be able to work together to “save the creation.” I would add that in doing so, although neither will convert the other, they might develop greater respect or affection for each other—for people who hold dramatically different beliefs.

Working to preserve the Earth offers hope not only for the future of the planet but also for stronger bodies and minds—lives enriched by a commitment to lives beyond our own and to education for all of humanity.

[1] For useful references, see Nel Noddings, ed., *Educating Citizens for Global Awareness* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2005), and Noddings, *Happiness and Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).