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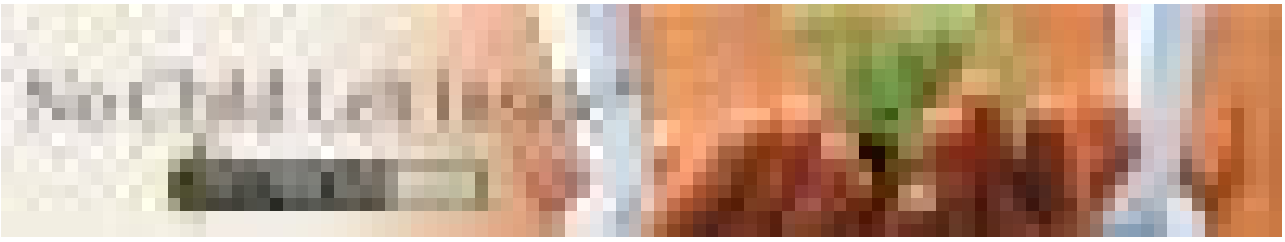
Nature Deficit Disorder: Spiritual fallout from our disconnect with God's creation

Charles Morris | Nov. 18, 2011 Eco Catholic



"If one steps out on a starry night and observes one's inner state, one asks if one could hate or be overwhelmed by envy or resentment. ... Is it not true that no man or woman has ever committed a crime while in a state of wonder?" -- Jacob Needleman from A Sense of the Cosmos

What memories do you treasure from childhood? Growing up in Xenia, Ohio, our house abutted a farm. Whether it was exploring that farm, going down to the creek, making a snowman or riding my bike with friends, most of my early memories and those of my generation were of running around in the outdoors, climbing trees or hanging out at the lake. A sense of place was as real to us as the air we breathed.

But, as Tom Occhipinti, environmental education coordinator of the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality, points out in a recent paper, children born in the last couple of decades have replaced formative experiences in the out-of-doors with text messaging, the iPod, etc.

As he points out, while the Oxford Junior Dictionary has removed words such as dandelion, heron, otter, acorn, clover and willow, they have added words such as Blackberry, blog, mp3 player and broadband. The implications, according to Tom, are clear: "The very generation that will face the most difficult environmental issues will have the least exposure, understanding, and appreciation for the environment."

Richard Louv, in his groundbreaking book *Last Child In The Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder*, outlines the horrific consequences of this disconnect from the created world -- spiritually as well as emotionally and physically. As Louv outlines, there are ever-emerging consequences of this indoor-centered life: ADD, near-sightedness, obesity, hypertension, sleep disorders and increased aggressiveness.

Louv's book struck a chord. The term "nature deficit disorder" has subsequently entered the mainstream. It describes the horrific consequences that derive from our increasing disconnect from nature. Nature deficit disorder has also birthed a new social movement: No Child Left Inside.

No Child Left Inside (NCLI) has its own website [1] and has garnered much support from the National Wildlife Federation. According to NCLI proponents, one of the unintended consequences of the No Child Left Behind legislation was that so much emphasis was placed on book and technical knowledge to pass standardized exams that the need to develop the whole child with exposure to nature and to the out-of-doors was further neglected. What is required, according Louv in his new book *The Nature Principle* is a healthy dose of Vitamin N, or

"Vitamin Nature." Much of his current work demonstrates how children might experience a deep connection with the natural world even in traditional urban settings.

Legislation has been introduced to induce our youth back into a direct experience of the natural world. No Child Left Inside (NCLI) is legislation that would give money to states to develop and implement state environmental literacy plans to encourage understanding of the natural world. Both Houses of Congress have current NCLI legislation on the floor. The Healthy Kids Outdoors Act (HKO) encourages the development of state plans to connect children with nature for their health and well-being outside of their school day.

NCLI-proposed legislation is found in Senate number S. 1372 [2] and House number H.R. 2547 [3]. HKO-proposed legislation is addressed in Senate Number S. 1802 [4] and House number H.R. 3353 [5].

In addition, there are initiatives at the state level. Maryland now requires "green graduates," environmental literacy for all high school graduates. The Michigan effort [6] is being led by the Michigan Outdoor Recreation and Education (MORE) Movement. MORE is seeking partnerships from across societal sectors, including the faith community.

In a recent conversation, I suggested to a local representative of a major religious education publishing house that it would behoove them (and other publishers of religious education material) to incorporate educational material that addresses remedies for nature deficit disorder. What an impact it would make on our youth if consideration of God's revelation in creation were infused into the lesson plans of our religious educators! How might the faith come alive if immersion into the natural world were integrated into sacramental preparation programs!

This is part of our great Catholic tradition. This vision is not new. As St. Augustine stated: "Some people, in order to discover God, read books. But there is a great book: The very appearance of created things. Look above you! Look below you! Note it. Read it. God, whom you want to discover, never wrote that book with ink. Instead he set before your eyes the things that he had made. Can you ask for a louder voice than that?"

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Links:
[1] http://www.nclicoalition.org
[2] http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bill.xpd?bill=s112-1372
[3] http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bill.xpd?bill=h112-2547
[4] http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bill.xpd?bill=s112-1802
[5] http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bill.xpd?bill=h112-3353
[6] http://www.mncli.org