



Earth Path Stories and Highlights – Spring 2016 – Saturdays

The Group That Doesn't Give Up

(Note: the children's names have been changed for this version)

This spring the group of children in our Saturday Earth Path program amazed us with their perpetual curiosity and perseverance. The group consisted of eight children, seven of whom were with us during the previous fall session, and one of whom was a very welcome addition. Together we had the opportunity to watch the land and waters awaken as spring returned, and each week the children discovered new ways to collaborate, problem-solve, and connect with the natural world around them. Collaborative problem-solving and letting nature guide us toward new discoveries were two of the dominant themes this session.

During our first few weeks in April, there was still snow on the ground, but the sun was warm and high in the sky. We spent our days tromping through slushy snow, exploring new rivulets and small streams that appeared below the snow pack, wending their way toward Green's Creek. James took an avid interest in tracking, and we came across a clear set of tracks that piqued our curiosity- the animal appeared to be walking in an alternating pattern, followed by an angled two-print pattern, and although at first we only saw four toes, in a clearer track we saw a fifth toe. We wondered whether it could have been a fisher- very exciting if so! What was it doing here? James thought it had come down to the stream for a drink or followed another animal down to the stream.

The other children seemed very curious to walk further upstream to see where it goes, perhaps to find its headwaters. Every time we rounded another bend, they wanted to keep going to see what lay beyond the next meander of the stream. Why is it that whatever is just out of sight beckons us to follow? Eventually our stomachs grumbled and we decided to return to our backpacks near the culvert for snack, still holding the mystery of what lies beyond that last bend.

As the snowpack disappeared, revealing mud, leaves, old branches, and sticks upon the ground (natural tools and building materials), the children saw limitless possibilities in how they could use these simple local resources to solve problems and construct the world around them. Earth Day transformed into an epic mission that the children devised when we were casually walking by the culvert stream on our way to camp. Maryse and I had brought nitrile and leather gloves and a big garbage bag so that we could all collect garbage that day, as our contribution to Earth Day clean-up. A few children noticed that a large tractor wheel had been dumped in the stream near the culvert. Someone exclaimed, "There's garbage, we need to take it out!"

I looked at the size of the wheel, estimating that it weighed well over 100 pounds, and immediately rejected the idea internally ("Nice idea, but there's no way we'd be able to lift the wheel up this steep slope" I thought.) I turned to continue walking toward camp, saying we might have to leave that one there. But fortunately, Maryse's response was different. She decided to follow the children's interest and clambered down the slope to inspect the wheel closer with the children. She began asking



them questions about how they might be able to haul the wheel up the slope. First the children tried to use logs and large branches to lever the wheel out of the mud. That helped pry it out of the mud, but we still had to haul it up the slope. When we tried rolling it uphill, its sheer weight and the steepness of the slope overwhelmed the strength of the two people pushing on the wheel. The children realized that we needed to implement an all-hands-on-deck approach; we needed everyone's help pulling the wheel. So one of the children called out, "We need rope. Go get the rope!"

The ropes were in my car a minute away, so I trotted off to retrieve them. I came back with two ropes, which the children fastened around the wheel and the two strongest trees they could find at the top of the slope. A few of the children were in the stream with the wheel, while the others lined up on either side of the rope in order to heave-ho. On a synchronized count of three, all the children pulled the rope, while Maryse and I pushed on the wheel from the gully. It took about 20 pushes/pulls and a few resting breaks to lug the wheel to the very top of the slope, but the children persisted and were triumphant. It was the most remarkable child-led and coordinated problem-solving effort Maryse and I had ever seen. Later, I asked a farmer friend how much he thought the wheel actually weighed, and he estimated 140 pounds! The children taught us that day that many small hands can do great work, and that a problem that initially appears unsolvable can be solved with inspiration, coordination, and tenacity.

We saw several examples of this problem-solving determination with our Saturday group. A few weeks later when we were exploring the pine forest north of camp, we found a small gully that the children wanted to cross. There was a narrow log already going across the gully, but the children wisely deemed it insecure, so they decided to build a bridge. We discussed how big the sticks would need to be in order to carry our weight, how we could test their strength, and where we could find bigger sticks. Then they scouted out a dead tree on the forest floor that seemed the perfect diameter for one of the bridge beams. With Maryse's help they sawed it into sections, while Charlie and I carved another stick into a sharp digging tool that could be used to poke holes in the ground, in which to fasten the bridge beams. (Charlie had already had his one-on-one mentoring in safe knife use and had proven to be a mindful, responsible whittler). Ella, Nicole, and Sara enjoyed the physical challenge of crossing the beams, each time feeling more proficient in their traverse. Meanwhile, James investigated the plants and insects in the gully, reporting back to us everything he was finding.

A few weeks later, the children also worked together building a dock/ramp on the beach at Green's Creek, so they could more easily access the water without becoming stuck in the deep clay. Some of the children were in charge of locating sticks of an appropriate size, relaying their sawing requests to Bryarly, a few volunteered to shuttle the cut sticks between the forested slope and the beach, and the remaining children constructed the dock.

For all of these projects, Maryse and I realized that in addition to monitoring safety, our main function was to facilitate the implementation of the children's ideas simply by providing a few tools (e.g. ropes, saws for those ready), and by asking questions in order to help the children think past a barrier.



Spring also presented us with many opportunities to connect with the birds and plants around Green's Creek. We did a spring scavenger hunt, wherein the children were asked to notice which plants were flowering, plants with different leaf shapes, where water was flowing near camp, the changing weather patterns. Suzie was particularly keen about the scavenger hunt and came back with a sheet full of checkmarks and an enthusiastic report of everything she had found.

We also observed the plants through crafts. One day the children made a "flower tree" by drawing a tree outline and filling its boughs with different wildflowers and grass florets they had found en route to camp. There were cow vetch, timothy grass, snap dragon, goatsbeard, red clover, and many more. The resulting trees were beautiful- something one might see in a magical fairy land.

One popular activity was making pine bark spoons with our guest instructor Pierre Blin. He explained that the bark of pine trees peels off very easily in May, and when cut in sections it feels like pliable leather. Marie, Sara, and Ella were proud of their creations and made use of them when eating their lunches.

Some of the animal discoveries made by the children this session were phenomenal: a bird egg that had been recently predated (probably the previous night); an iridescent blue/violet/white moth that we've never encountered before; a green frog in Green's Creek (we had thought it too polluted to have frogs and had never seen any there before); and bobolink (a species classified as "threatened" in Ontario) nesting in the fields of Just Food Farm.

Perhaps the pinnacle of our wildlife encounters was witnessing the emergence of a colony of (harmless) garter snakes from their hibernaculum on the first warm dry day of spring. At first we saw about 10 slithering through the grasses near camp, which gave us a clue that the snakes were coming out of winter hibernation. So we tracked the snakes westward, noticing their increasing abundance as we moved toward the sandy slope about 200 m from camp. Sure enough, they were slithering out of holes at the top of the sandy slope. Some were basking in the sun, half out of their holes, and they acted very sleepy and docile, giving us a chance to touch them.

We also enjoyed games such as Bat Eats Bug, Camouflage, and Park Ranger from week to week, and circle time when we shared nature sightings and stories such as Tidalik the Frog, and Yona the Bear. Once again, as we finished up the spring session and bid adieu to camp, Green's Creek, and our friends, we felt grateful for all the good times spent together, the challenges and the silliness, and all that we had discovered, both within and around us.