

**If you wish your children to think deep things – to know the holiest emotions – take them to the woods and hills and give them the freedom of the meadows**

# The secret

*All of you with little children and who have no need to count expense, or even if you had such need, take them somehow into the country among green grass and yellow wheat – among trees – by hills and streams, if you wish their highest education, that of the heart and the soul, to be completed.*

*Therein shall they find a Secret, a knowledge not to be written, nor to be found in books. They shall know the sun and the wind, the running water, and the breast of the broad earth. Under the green spray, among the hazel boughs where the nightingale sings, they shall find a secret, a feeling, a sense that fills the heart with an emotion never to be forgotten. They will forget their books – they will never forget the grassy fields.*

*If you wish your children to think deep things – to know the holiest emotions – take them to the woods and hills and give them the freedom of the meadows.*

So wrote Richard Jefferies in *The Dewy Morn* (1884). His message is heartily endorsed by those who have experienced such good fortune when young. Often they were unaccompanied by adults. It is a sad reflection of our times that children cannot wander freely and unprotected.

Talking to people who have been lucky enough to experience the freedom of meadows, woods and rivers at an early age, there are some overall impressions, but one in particular – wonder, a religious experience. Children, even though accompanied, must be allowed their own reactions. They touch the bark of a tree, not because they have been told to do so; they place stepping stones

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***EDWARD THOMAS***

across a shallow stream because it occurs to them; they sit on a log in a copse, experiencing the amazing scent of spring flowers in a private state of surprise. When they return home, they have the realisation that all those inspirations are still there.

Nothing man-made can compare, and that is the gift for children; there is something beyond our cleverness. Natural beauty is a shock, however it is perceived, through whichever of the senses and the reflections and realisations of the mind. The benefits are limitless, and always point not only to the here and now, but beyond.

How dramatically the scene changes, season to season, so that when it comes round again, children remember and instinctively look for the root of violets, or the nut tree.

We have to remember the never-ending inspiration for other activities, stored in the young mind. Natural history is fundamental for every other subject, be it the sciences or the arts, so we have to respect it. There must be no wanton disregard or destruction of our heritage.

We see work by great artists; we hear work by great musicians, but our appreciation is so much greater if we have the experience of contact with the countryside when young. How else can we judge and appreciate works which have been created from that source.

It is health-giving for mind and body. The child can run, not on carefully prepared tracks, but uneven ground, perhaps up or down slopes to more unexplored territory. The life-giving air, with

its vast range of degree, is experienced, from the merest hint of a breeze to wild lashings of wind; a physical freedom.

When wild creatures are encountered, there is a sense of sharing the wonders of which the creatures are a part.

What of those still living who experienced the magic, so natural all those years ago? They are the people we hear lamenting the deprivations of our age through the rape of our land; who, when young, understood the humility before something greater than anything human beings can devise. We hear them speak in trains and buses, or on the streets. It is common to hear them express regret that their grandchildren and great grandchildren cannot commune spontaneously with the natural world, so learning respect for the work of farmers and for our heritage. The organised educational trip has its place, but is not the same. Those people take the advice of Walter de la Mare in *Fare Well* (1918) to 'Look thy last on all things lovely', and they agree with Edward Thomas in *The Country* (1913) when he says 'The Country relates us all to eternity.'

Here is a simple tale which I have called *The Space*.

Once upon a time there was a man called Jack who inherited three acres of land. Immediately he learned of his inheritance, he set out for the inn to tell his friends about the news. They would all drink to celebrate and they would suggest what Jack might do. At the thought of this Jack stopped, turned round, and went home again to work it out for himself.

## *Children, even though accompanied, must be allowed their own reactions*

Jack knew his friends would advise him to sell the land so that he could make his fortune. He thought hard until another idea occurred to him. First he must clear away the huge invasive weeds, for this land, miles from anywhere and approached by a disused cart track, had been neglected.

Jack laboured day after day and week after week until the land no longer looked like a jungle. He left some of the old trees and planted new ones to make a copse. He cleared a path down to the stream. He brought plants from the wildest part of his home so that all through the year, according to the season, there would be wild flowers.

One day, with his dog Gem beside him, he sat on a tree stump, admiring the result of his labours, and he said to himself, 'If someone could paint a picture of this scene, others could admire it, just as I do.'

## *'They will forget their books — they will never forget the grassy fields'* RICHARD JEFFERIES

At his invitation, a famous artist came and painted a very beautiful picture. It was hung in an exhibition in London. But Jack said to himself, 'Some people can't see and others would not know about this exhibition; it is not the solution to my problem.'

One day, with his dog beside him, he was sitting on the tree stump and he said to himself, 'If someone could compose music inspired by the songs of the birds and the tunes of the wind and the little stream, others could admire it as I do.'

A famous musician came and listened to all the sounds. He wrote a very beautiful tune to be played at a concert in London. But Jack said to himself, 'Some people can't hear and others would not know about this concert. It is not the solution to my problem.'

One day, with Gem beside him, he sat on the tree stump and he said to himself, 'If a poet could write a poem about this scene of nature, others could read it and be inspired as I am.'

A famous poet came and wrote a very beautiful poem which was included in a book of his poems. But Jack said to himself, 'Some people cannot read and others would not know about this book of poems. It is not a solution to my problem.'

He sat on the tree stump every day until he thought of the answer to the problem. It would be a place for young children. Their parents would bring them and wait while the children were free to roam. Looking after them would be Jack's dog. Gem would bark to let Jack know if the children were in trouble. Later on, it would be a magical place for the children's children. Later still, it would be a special place for the children's children's children. They would see the beautiful scenes and hear nature's music; they would touch the bark of the trees, the grass and the stones in the stream; they would see and smell the wild flowers and herbs, and taste the nuts and blackberries. Their souls would be filled with wonder, and they would never forget.

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## *'Look thy last on all things lovely'*

WALTER DE LA MARE