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“When we engage in restoring childhood to some place in our thinking and recognize that childhood has significance in the development of the adult, it’s all right to talk generally about ‘childhood’ and ‘the child’. But as a theoretical concept, ‘the child’ is a fiction” - Margaret Mead

Children, Culture, and Edith Cobb

by MARGARET MEAD, *American Museum of Natural History, New York.*

ABSTRACT. When we engage in restoring childhood to some place in our thinking and recognize that childhood has significance in the development of the adult, its all right to talk generally about "childhood" and the "child." But as a theoretical concept, "the Child" is a fiction. We do not know enough about what children, as biologically given creatures, will do at different stages in development or under different cultural circumstances. Much of what is "known" is based on inadequate evidence from widely scattered sources. We can't take what we find out about children in one culture and combine it uncritically with what children do in another culture; the result is unadulterated nonsense. We will not develop a useful theory of child development until we recognize that "the Child" doesn't exist. Only children exist; children in a particular context; children who are different from each other; children with different senses.

Editor's Note

Margaret Mead was a member of a panel chaired by Roger Hart. The first panel member called upon to speak was Florence Ladd. She asked each person present to search his or her memory for the earliest possible recollection of an experience with nature, and then to draw a picture of it. Dr. Mead had this to say:

I'm very used to dealing with early memories; always had them; I've always worked with them; there's nothing new about them. In this context, I quite consciously picked the one place in the world that is able to evoke homesickness in me. This is a place called Lavallette, on the Atlantic Coast, where I spent the first summer of my life. I was born in December. I went back to Lavallette as a 17-year-old with an old teacher of mine. I had the most horrible attack of homesickness. I've never been so homesick before or since. I am not a homesick person, in general. My grandmother said I would go off with the ragman. So, this attack of homesickness was very odd. I decided that it was associated with the sound of the surf. I had never been anywhere, since that first summer, that had that same sound. I thought, well, I'll draw

that surf, and I'll draw myself in a baby carriage on the boardwalk, totally safe as the surf came in.

Then I remembered that we had been told by Florence to think about mixed sensory modalities. It suddenly occurred to me that a figure of speech I like very much is "to learn to nest in a gale". I thought that the roar of the surf, and the roar of the wind, was the same thing. Nesting in the gale was the same thing as being in a baby carriage on the boardwalk as the roar of the surf came in.

In calling upon Dr. Mead for her comments—just after Professor Tuan's presentation of the paper included in this volume—Roger Hart asked for news of Edith Cobb, and mentioned her article (1959).

In this seminal article, highly relevant to the subject matter of this symposium—fair, Edith Cobb wrote: "...I became acutely aware that what a child wanted to do most of all was to make a world in which to find a place to discover a self".

Dr. Mead's comments were extemporaneous; they have been rearranged slightly for clarity.

—Calvin W. Stillman

I ENJOYED Professor Tuan's paper.

I was very struck by the similarities between his paper and many of the things that Edith Cobb worked on. She, of course, took off also from Wordsworth. Wordsworth has been a taking-off point for people who wanted to work on the effect of imagination in childhood.

Edith Cobb is still alive. She is almost blind. I hope she will live until her book, "The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood" is published by the Columbia University Press. If she hadn't become ill, perhaps the book would still be growing. It's only the accident that she can't work on it any longer, that makes her really want it to be published. It was something that she worked on, and worked on, and worked on. She would give us a manuscript to read, and before we had got it out of the post box we would get another letter, with another little piece that had to go in somewhere. This because she had read something that was even more exciting and important than anything she had read before. Her paper, "The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood" (1959)—it is reprinted in Paul Shepard's book (1969)—was an article for *Daedalus* that got rewritten three times in proof.

Edith Cobb suggests that we must think about a human capacity that is just as basic, and just as necessary to human well-being (though not to mere survival), as food and drink. She called this the "necessary relationship to the natural world—the satisfaction of a cosmic sense". When I first read this in her work, I found it an extraordinary useful figure of speech, and a very useful statement of the relationship of human beings—not just children—to the world around them. This relationship can be highly elaborated by culture, or it can be very much truncated, shrunken, and simplified.

Edith Cobb's work dealt with the discovery of the relationship between childhood experience and adult philosophy, scientific perceptions, and artistic perceptions. This was one of the subjects of Professor Tuan's paper today. But Edith Cobb went further: she identified the "cosmic sense" with breathing, which I think is an effective figure of speech. She suggested that it is necessary for human beings to take in the natural world, to do something with it, and then to "breathe" it out. She said that a relationship

with the cosmos is a need of human beings that could be more or less developed in individuals, and in particular cultures. Interference with this relationship could have as dangerous a result as interference with breathing, or drinking water, or taking food, or getting rest. It involves a recognition that human beings share a great many of their basic needs with animals, but also have needs that animals don't have. These human needs may develop through life, as Professor Tuan's paper has suggested to us.

We have the task of identifying the records made by sensitive, highly introspective people of their own childhoods—Wordsworth, of course, was an outstanding example—and the role of those experiences in their later lives.

When we are engaged in restoring childhood to some place in our thinking; when we recognize that childhood has significance in the development of the scientist, or the poet, or the philosopher, it's all right to talk about "childhood" and "the child". But "The Child" is no good as a concept beyond just getting it in, any more than is "The Primitive" or "Paleolithic Man". We don't know anything about Paleolithic Man at all. There may have been a hundred kinds of men living at that time, and we look at a few things on a cave and make him up. "The Savage" is a fiction, and "The Child" is a fiction.

A great many of the things that we have identified as being associated with children are either associated with children in our society or they are associated with some other children, in some other place; both are cultural.

Children usually don't know anything about historical contexts, and there are lots of human beings who never learn them. There are whole societies who think that a fountain pen, a monkey wrench, a chisel, and an airplane were all invented at once. They saw them all at once, and they have no reason to impute different histories to them. So there's a continual need to discriminate between what we find characteristic of children in our society, of children in other societies, and of adults.

I have studied primitive people on an island in New Guinea (the Manus), who didn't know where the things they used came from, because they were all traded. They were just like urban children among ourselves who think that milk comes out of a can. Although they were still in the Stone Age, they became magnificent

mechanics the minute they were introduced to mechanical things; they understood them at once. When the Manus were faced with electronic equipment, they used numerals that are applied to living things, and so distinguished it from equipment that was activated by springs.

They got along with Americans like a house afire. Both Americans and Manus liked mechanical objects and handled them well. Both thought that doing something was more important than feeling or thinking. They got along magnificently. The only difference was they came from 10,000 years ago, and we came from now.

We do not know what children, as biologically given creatures, will do at different stages.

That we do know is a myth based on very, very, inadequate evidence; based in most cases, on a few Swiss children. It is true that Swiss children have to learn reversibility, because they live in an irreversible world. They had jolly well better find out that a lump of clay can be moved in two directions if they are to survive. But look at the work of Vygotsky, with children who all lived in a totally reversible world. Russian children were swaddled and unswaddled, and night and day were alike. What Russian children need to learn is something about irreversibility. So, Piaget finds children who have rigid notions, and can't tell that a lump of clay, and a piece of clay that looks like a snake, contain the same amount of clay. But Vygotsky identified opposite kinds of thinking in Russia. Taking Piaget's notions about a bunch of Swiss children and saying that this is Human Psychology gets us nowhere in terms of a general developmental theory. Taking what American children do and saying that is Human Psychology also gets us nowhere.

The things that many children do, neurologists tell us they cannot do. Neurologists are absolutely certain that they know about myelination, so they know that a child of 6 weeks cannot appreciate that its mother didn't come. They cannot explain the fact that the child sheds real tears the first time its mother doesn't come.

Our physiology doesn't match our experience. Building up any developmental sequence that we happen to have noticed in a few children somewhere and putting that down as gospel truth doesn't get us anywhere. Neither does it get us anywhere to take children from here,

there, and anywhere, and put them together into "Childhood".

We do that with animals, you know; all these people like Ardrey have been writing stuff on the "territorial instinct". They take a robin from here, a goose from there, a pigeon from somewhere else, a few fish, and a gorilla or so, and mix them; and get unadulterated nonsense. We do the same thing if we take what children do in one culture and combine it uncritically with what children do in another culture.

If we consider the childhoods of everybody here, and the enormous differences between periods in our own childhoods, and think what they meant to us, we see the enormous differences between what cities mean to city children and what country means to country children. The country is exciting to city children and the city is exciting to country children, for exactly opposite reasons. But they both enjoy excitement.

I particularly liked your point, Professor Tuan, that you can take a child's work of art (a child's drawing, that is) and put it on a pedestal in a museum and it looks almost like a work of art. *Almost* is the absolute point, because it is not a work of art at all. It is a work of freshness, and freshness is one characteristic of art.

We take a child's drawing, and put it up on the kitchen wall, and tell the child it is magnificent. If the child takes that as a model, he is very unlikely to become an artist. That is one of the things that has been forgotten when parents are encouraged to put up anything a child draws on the wall, and admire it.

Our appreciation is enormously mutilated.

You know those Balinese heads that you buy in airports—those carvings of men and women? The girls have headdresses and the men have headcloths, and they are all varnished. Everybody says, "Aren't they terrible!" I had one made by one of the best headmakers. I had him leave it unfinished; he left the marks of the chisel on and no varnish. I put it on a pedestal, and everyone says, "How beautiful!"

This is just because they haven't seen others like it, and because we know that if we see copies of something, it can't be very good. This is the opposite of your point about the rainbow, Professor Tuan, but in a sense it is related. We think that any time we see two of anything, any time anything recurs, it has lost its charm. Americans than can't do anything twice, or ap-

preciate anything twice, or go to the same opera a second time, or read the same poem over again. Mass production has been part of it; we've disqualified ourselves from appreciating anything twice. This is serious.

As I was listening to Professor Tuan's delicious paper (can I use an adjective that includes taste?), I suddenly realized the extent to which one of the things that is said about heroin addiction may be true. Nothing that is said about drugs at the present has much truth, but still there's a possibility that it's true. This is that the first experience of taking heroin is so overwhelming that no other experience of taking heroin ever equals it. One of the elements of addiction, therefore, is trying to get back to the original experience. A child who is overwhelmed by an enormous experience is not only empowered to do things he would never have done before, but also is condemned, if you like, to get back to the undifferentiated ecstasy which we call mysticism.

One of the roots of mysticism is that the individual wants always to get to a point of no discrimination. This is distinct from the roots of esthetic appreciation, where one is moving toward greater and greater discrimination.

We have a lot of difficulty, of course, with people who want to identify the basic thrill in sex, religion, and art as the same. These evidently are people who, as in Professor Tuan's marvelous story, put their toes together with a little girl when they were five, or something, and never got over it. Other people feel that sex, art, and religion are extraordinarily different; that it is totally impossible to equate the experience of one with another.

It's quite possible that the people who feel that sex, religion, and art are all the same had some extraordinarily overwhelming experience as children. Pierre de Chardin has a beautiful passage about the way he fell in love with iron. He had this magnificent ecstasy over iron! Well, he had a lot of ecstasies in his life, over the lithosphere. Falling in love with iron, and with metal, and with what was the original substance of this earth, probably never left him; it entered into his whole later religious position about evolution and man.

I think we should realize that these ecstasies may not be unmitigated delights; in a sense they disqualify people for the kind of discriminating appreciation that we have just heard about in

Professor Tuan's paper. This may be a useful thing to think about.

I was up near Peterborough, which is a beautiful place in New Hampshire where a lot of sensitive, appreciative, highly educated people had gone outdoors to appreciate nature, on the first day of Spring. We had a lovely, expensive, simple meal of cheese and homemade bread of hand-ground grain. My hosts said, "Isn't it dreadful? All the natives are sitting indoors, looking at television, wishing they were in New York".

We have to think about this rather hard: the differences between the sensitivities of the people who are bored to death in the city and the people who are bored to death in the country. The country is not perceived by all people who live in it as something marvelous. You can choke off an appreciation of the cosmos, perhaps, more effectively in the country than you can in the city.

The next step we are going to have to talk about a good deal, I think, is how to discriminate between our own children. There are the children who grew up in the city with one set of rhythms and one set of understandings, and the children who grew up in the country. There are differences among our own children in their response to toys and their response to the living world.

The country child, who has only seen the garden as a place to weed, loses all its sense of wonder far more rapidly than a city child who only sees goldenrod through a window, once a year. We're not allowing for that, you know.

I think the reason that boredom is the principle affliction of school children in the United States—and it is the most serious thing that happens to them, really—is that they are bored with the artificial world. The artificial world is boring.

Think of the most imaginative toy in the world. You know what it can do. You can say that you are building a castle for a princess, but still you know what you can do with those infernal blocks. They aren't ever going to do anything different. They fall down if you overbalance them, and they will clutter the floor, and there are that many of them.

You take that same child out in the country, and just let it sit in the grass and watch an ant. Nobody knows what that ant is going to do. The child isn't bored.

I think we have to look very seriously at the enormous number of runaway girls in this country. The number is in the hundreds of thousands. Cincinnati alone has something like five thousand runaway girls going through the city. Boys are not running away in the same numbers. People who are thinking about the urban environment, about what happens in school, and what are the consequences of restrictions, should take a very good look at this.

What is happening to these girls, now? What is it that is so intolerable about their parents? Why is it so much better to run away across the country, and to take every conceivable risk, than it is to stay at home?

Something is happening. We think of farm children, and still lyrically and sentimentally talk about children living on the farm as if they were still harnessing horses. Actually, they are kept indoors till they are 9 or 10 because of those dangerous machines out there. Instead of being children that have some sense of freedom, they may be even *more* restricted today than urban children.

One of our real problems is to get those things back into perspective; to look at the things back into perspective; to look at the things that are happening all at once, rather than talk about what little girls did when they climbed trees, or didn't climb trees, 25 years ago. Let us not project the present sense of restriction of women who are scout leaders, on children who are actually experiencing something different. How are we going to make these differences part of our own experience, and deal with them?

It's a good thing to think about "the child", if you remember that "The Child" doesn't exist. Only *children* exist; children in a particular context; children who are different from each other; children with different senses.

The sense of smell is distributed very, very capriciously across the spectrum, and the sense of hearing, and sense of sight. We are beginning to recognize that these modalities change all through life.

It isn't only children who suffer from psychiatric disorder because they are left-handed. Dominance in the brain changes, all through life. Some people cease to be visual and become auditory. Some cease to be as auditory and become visual. Some cease to be right-handed and become left-handed. All these things happen in the course of their lives.

Partly because we haven't recognized that children differ, we haven't been able to see that these things happen in adulthood. The first step is to recognize the importance of childhood: to recognize what we can do with the freshness of the imagination; to recognize how valuable it is to keep these experiences accessible. The next step is to differentiate among children; differentiate among different parts of our society.

Take black Americans. Their whole stance in relation to life is different. First we discover that something is a little different; we discover that maybe black children see things a little differently from white children. Then we lump them all together again as black children. We lump all rural children. We lump all suburban children. And every time we lump them, we lose something.

An overdependence on the notion of "The Child" does something. It is true that children cannot talk before a certain age. But children at the Manchu court are said to have learned two complete sets of etiquette by the time they were four. We have no idea how complex are the things children can learn. Nor the things adults can learn later. We need to fit the two together.

I think that things must be relatively homemade in a given locality.

One of the great dangers of a symposium like this is that somebody has a bright idea in San Francisco, and before we know it we have it in the middle of New York, dumped down with no reference to what happens to be happening there; with no reference to the ethnic groups involved; with no reference to the difference between a Puerto Rican juvenile delinquent, a German juvenile delinquent, and an Italian juvenile delinquent—all of which are quite different.

One of the things we are going to have to do is to relate the things we set up for children to who they are and where they came from. We have found in New York City, for instance, that Puerto Rican parents are divided into two groups: the ones who keep their children upstairs and won't let them out, and the ones who let them out and give them up. There's nothing in between. These parents don't know any way of letting their children out just a little. They either lock them up or let them go completely. That has very different consequences from giving children a limited, but defined, range for exploration.

If we start making blanket solutions that are related to a theory that all the children of a given age want to pretend they are animals, or that all the children of a given age want to do something else, and then add to that someone's very imaginative solution that worked in one spot, we keep on imposing styles that don't fit.

May I make one final point.

I think it's terribly dangerous to talk about planned danger. What you are talking about is planned activities where children can test their bravery and their skill. You are planning for op-

portunities to be brave, and to be skillful. If you say you are talking about planned danger, that's like talking about divorce insurance. We don't say death insurance; we say life insurance.

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“Just as the anthropologists discovered Freud thirty years ago, now physicists, lawyers, and others with rigorously trained minds are discovering the beauties of nature as seen through romantic poetry, and finding transcendental uses of the notion of ecology”
-Calvin W. Stillman