



From my Sit Spot... "The Art of Mentoring"

by Peter Harrity

In his 2005 bestselling book, Last Child in the Woods, Richard Louv reawakened our nation's awareness about our children's disconnection with nature and urged parents and educators to find creative solutions to saving our children from "nature-deficit disorder." However novel Louv's ideas may seem, discussions regarding the importance of fostering strong connections to nature have been debated for many years. The writings of Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, John Burroughs, and Aldo Leopold provide the reader with endless nuggets of wisdom about this connection. Locally, Cornell University's eminent botanist and educator, Liberty Hyde Bailey, founded the American Nature Study Society, America's oldest environmental organization, in 1908 because he felt that if children developed a love of nature they would be less inclined to leave rural areas to seek fortunes elsewhere. In his book, The Nature Study Idea, written in 1909, Bailey saw nature study as a means to "put the pupil in a sympathetic attitude toward nature for the purpose of increasing his joy of living." He added, "We must define nature study in terms of its purpose, not in terms of its methods. It is not doing this or that, it is putting the person into intimate and sympathetic contact with things of the external world."

Lime Hollow has long recognized the importance of studying the environment and connecting children with nature and made environmental education a top priority. Our own Dr. John Gustafson, a retired SUNY Cortland professor and past president of the American Nature Study Society, noted back in 1965, "It is my firm conviction that there is a tremendously important place for nature study in our culture. In the first place, nature study *is* the grassroots from which science springs. The child who stands in wide-eyed wonder as a frog's eggs hatch or a meteor streaks overhead may be the herpetologist or astronomer of tomorrow." Dr. "Gus" also agreed with Liberty Hyde Bailey's main strategy by "not defining nature study as a synonym for natural history. Nature study may include a great deal of natural history—but the primary objective is to develop a feeling of kinship with the natural world."

While not new, the concepts of nature study and its benefits are still debated by our culture, but regrettably they are often *not* acted upon. Fortunately, Lime Hollow has a summer full of wonderful nature camps where we *do* focus on developing our children's connections to nature. While Louv's book and many other authors detailed the "why" we should remain connected to the natural world, they fall short of addressing the "how." In 2008, the Coyote's Guide to Connecting with Nature answered the "how" portion of the equation. Introducing a person to nature, especially guiding one to a more empathetic relationship with our environment, is not a short-term or narrow endeavor. The Coyote's Guide and its "Art of Mentoring" approach provided Lime Hollow's leadership with a comprehensive approach and a compass setting to follow in reconnecting us to nature.

The “Art of Mentoring” concept was first introduced over two decades ago by Jon Young, founder of the Wilderness Awareness School in Duvall, Washington. Inspired by his childhood mentor, world famous tracker and author, Tom Brown, Jr., Jon set out to locate the world's most knowledgeable naturalists. Inevitably, he found them in traditional societies whose members lived close to the land. Oddly, in all these naturalist cultures, Jon found no visible organized schooling. How, then, did these children become so knowledgeable about their environments? In studying these cultures further, Jon discovered many similarities in the ways children were introduced to nature. Jon modeled his "Art of Mentoring" programs on these core ideas and pioneered blending mentoring techniques from around the world with the tools of modern science.

In early 2009, we began to plan for bringing the “Art of Mentoring” to Lime Hollow and the core routines into our summer camps. As the camps began, our staff fully embraced and implemented this mentoring model, generating a high level of excitement from both campers and parents.

An essential component of the “Art of Mentoring” is the implementation of core routines. These are meaningful exercises or activities done repeatedly over time to develop learning habits, build awareness, and deepen one’s bond with nature. Thirteen core routines are described in detail in the Coyote's Guide. During our summer camps, we use many of these routines, some more so than others. Let me spend a few minutes discussing a few of our favorites.

- Sit Spot - A key starting point in any “Art of Mentoring” program is the sit spot routine. We ask our campers to visit one place in nature repeatedly and to get to know it as well as they can, sort of like a best friend. In this special spot, we learn to sit still, be by ourselves, and enjoy the feeling of familiarity and knowledge of place that develops over time. At camp, we introduce the sit spot routine by asking each group of campers to choose a group sit spot and to mark the center of their spot with a clearly visible post or rock. Once the group has chosen their location and gotten to know the area well, we'll then ask each camper to find a spot close by, but one where they can sit alone. The sit spot can be in sight of each other and within a short distance to the center of the group spot. Ultimately, a camper’s sit spot will become like a safe home from which their curiosity can spark an interest in nature's countless mysteries.
- Story of the Day - While the sit spot routine is important to the development of highly refined naturalist skills, equally significant in that process is having some way to catch the stories of one’s nature experiences. In all the naturalist cultures that Jon Young studied, when a hunter returned from a successful hunt, or a child came back from a walk, there was time set aside for the retelling of the experience. Simply by recalling the Story of the Day, discoveries and knowledge are shared and our awareness of place is strengthened. Many times these stories are told aloud, but at camp we also use a nature journal to catch the stories. According to the Coyote’s Guide’s authors, "The antidote to Nature Deficit Disorder may be this simple: get people to spend time in nature, and when they return, be there to catch their stories."

- Mapping - This core routine supplements the sit spot exercise very well, and it begins a process of creating a mind's-eye image with the actual terrain that one experienced. Campers are asked to draw a map of their personal sit spot or group sit spot. We encourage the group to work together and sketch a map of the trails that they explored during their morning wander and create memorable place names for their favorite trails. We frequently ask the campers to orient their maps to the cardinal compass directions; campers are also encouraged to check in with the sun's position and the time of day. The routine of mapping helps develop a better knowledge of place—where the sun rises and sets, and ultimately helps lost-proof each child.
- Journaling - We use journaling routinely to help catch stories of the day and to add details about plants or animals of interest. Journaling reinforces lessons of a nature experience and develops the memory for details. It helps us all pay attention, interpret experiences, and fosters creativity.
- Wandering – Taking a wander is a chance for our campers to be free of the structured and goal-driven schedules we live with in our everyday lives. Nature is full of unexpected surprises, so we routinely go on hikes without time, agenda, or destination in mind. We stay open to the surprises along the way and learn to trust our intuitions. It is also a time to relax and unwind from a busy morning or the hectic first few days of a week. For our older Camp McLean children, we sometimes schedule several hours to a half a day to wander and explore. Inevitably, our campers find an off-trail location they had never been to before, like a patch of wild flowers, or encounter unique wildlife.
- Exploring Field Guides and Nature Names – At each camp, our campers receive a “nature name” of a plant or animal that they may encounter at Lime Hollow. During the week we set aside a journaling period for the campers to research and write about the name they picked. The campers are guided to our library of field guides and taught how to use the index to find their particular nature name. Oftentimes our campers discover or observe their plant or animal in a field setting during our daily hikes. This exercise builds nature literacy, skills, and in many cases, fosters a stronger personal connection to their nature name.
- “Critttering” - This is our term for developing a nature museum during the camp week. Along with a fully stocked library of nature field guides, we have terrariums and aquariums set up to temporarily hold and care for "critters" collected during the week on viewing tables. We collect and try to identify bones, feathers, nests, and occasionally live animals such as snakes, frogs, turtles, and salamanders. Critttering not only allows campers to increase their natural history knowledge, but also teaches them how to properly care for an animal. At the end of the week, we return our guests to the spot where we collected them and anxiously look forward to next week’s surprises.
- Gardening – This summer we’re adding organic vegetable and flower gardening as a core routine.

Since 2008, Lime Hollow has operated three distinct camps: Camp Gracie Half Day for ages 3-5, Camp Gracie Full Day for ages 6-9, and Camp McLean for ages 9-14. This summer, we will continue to refine weaving age-appropriate elements of the core routines into and across our various camps. This approach offers continuity as our campers mature from camp to camp. While the core routines allow our mentors to program predictability into our daily camp schedule, we give our staff maximum flexibility to let our young naturalists wander and explore the mysteries and wonders of nature.

Last summer, Lime Hollow focused its efforts on the full implementation of the “Art of Mentoring” at Camp McLean. We recognized that these older campers wanted and needed more field experience, crittering, and wandering time. One of these campers was Ethan Stiles and his story is a great example of mentoring and the integration of the core routines into our camp philosophy. Here’s a little more about our friend Ethan. Like most boys his age, Ethan is a sports-focused, rough and tumble fellow. He likes archery, camping, skiing, lacrosse, and riding dirt bikes. Ethan is also a straight A student! A veteran of many Lime Hollow camps, last summer was his first experience at Camp McLean.

During one of our hikes, Ethan wandered slightly off trail to examine a bright orange-colored, exotic mushroom. Fascinated by this unusual specimen, Ethan asked one of our mentors about the mushroom. The mentor who had a rudimentary knowledge of mushrooms could not identify the mushroom and, instead, posed a series of questions for Ethan to answer. What color is it? What do you notice about the area around the mushroom? The mentor asked Ethan to study the mushroom and make a mental picture of it. At the completion of the hike, the two headed directly for our field guide library in our barn. Together, the pair shared the excitement of solving the mystery of the mushroom and poured over several field guides attempting to match from memory his mushroom. After a half hour search and much discussion, Ethan settled on the Orange Peel Cup mushroom with a high degree of certainty.

From this camper-mentor exchange, we see the Art of Mentoring and the “core routines” in action. The hike was not so programmed so as to prevent campers from exploring and wandering because of a rigid timeline. The mentor, who incidentally became fascinated with mushrooms at Lime Hollow, shared the same inquisitive spirit and excitement as Ethan. Through the questioning routine he encouraged Ethan to seek his *own* answers and to stretch his knowledge base even further.

Ethan’s mentoring story is not unique. The “Art of Mentoring” is a powerful approach to bonding our children to nature and Lime Hollow is really excited about the impact it continues to have on our campers. Rachel Carson once said, “If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder, he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in.” Here at Lime Hollow, our *entire* staff is prepared to share the joy and excitement of nature with all our campers. We look forward to seeing you this summer!