

WILD FLOWERS AND THE WOUNDED BIRD

By Dr Usha Bande

Retd Principal & Former Fellow IIAS, Shimla



Walking up and down the slopes of Kaithu, I often adore the wildflowers blooming all along the old retaining walls or peeping through their chinks. Usually, these seasonal blooms, richly tinged the hillsides, are symbolic of the never-failing cycle of nature. In the spring, an occasional dandelion unfurls its bright yellow petals, heralding the season's awakening. May brings the mesmerizing display of tiny button daisies transforming the hillsides into a canvas of shimmering white that almost illuminates the walls. The rainy season conjures up emerald ferns with the soft green sheen. And in winter the golden hue of hay gleams in the mellow winter sun.

The bounty of nature is perennial but one needs to have an eye to understand their cyclic rhythm; a willingness to see, appreciate and cherish the interconnectedness of life -- both human and non-human. Destroying or harming nature is sacrilegious. Nature finds its way to survive even in toughest conditions. As poet S.T Coleridge says, "No plot so narrow, be but nature there." Nature has the power to lift the heart with lively joy and concomitantly, this joy has the energy to lift the soul; these esoteric experiences can be contemplated but cannot be shared.

That said, I would like to recount a transformative experience that shook me out of my intellectual appreciation of nature and stirred a deeper sense of accountability within me.

It was a beautiful May morning, and I was walking up the slope to the college when I spotted our neighbor's teenage son ahead of me beating the roadside flowers mercilessly with a stick. The wild button daisies innocently decorating the retaining wall were ravaged, scattered on the road and were eventually trampled over by the pedestrians. I felt a pang of pain seeing the boy at his weird sport with careless exuberance, absorbed in the thrill of the game.

I just could not let it be. I increased my speed, caught up with him and intervened.

"Child, why are you smashing those flowers?"

He looked at me casually, shrugged his shoulders and without responding walked away, to catch up with his friends.

Aesop's fable about some mischievous boys hurling stones in a pond and exulting in the excitement of their game, came to my mind.





An old frog comes up the water and says, “Children, for you, it is a sport, but for us, frogs, it is a matter of life and death. If your stone hits us we may die.” Probably, the boys in this fable understood the gravity of their thoughtless sport and mended their ways.

Can we make our children understand that shattering and destroying nature in any manner is not entertainment?

The story of our neighbor’s son moves forward.....

A week later, I saw the same lad cradling a small bird carefully in his arms. He had found a wounded fledgling in the bushes; he took it out and was carrying it home to be nursed to health. For a couple days, he did not go out to play; he was assiduously busy with the bird-- feeding it, caressing it and monitoring its progress with dedication; and then when it recovered, he released it to be free. I could see the shine of satisfaction on his face amid tears in his eyes. What a change, thought I!

The boy’s story is a reminder that transformation is possible; only we need to inculcate empathy and a sense of responsibility in the children. School curriculum in Environmental Sciences is replete with bookish knowledge. When environment and ecology become a subject to be regurgitated, it loses its practicality. We need to make it a vibrant reality. For children, particularly for boys, anything can be a sport; they just want fun for fun’s sake; to derive excitement out of mischief. That is understandable and natural. But when it comes to preparing them for the future, we have an inviolable responsibility to work out ways and means to mould them.

As the world grapples with environmental challenges, instilling environmental consciousness in children has become crucial for a sustainable future. Training children to appreciate and respect the natural world can have profound impact on their relationship with the environment and their role as future agents. Ecology is not just love for flowers and birds and butterflies. It is an awareness of the interconnectedness of all things – living and non-living, an appreciation for the intricate relationship between living organisms and their environment.



The very fact that urban children are removed away from nature speaks for their casual or even callous approach to nature. A story circulating in social media eloquently expresses the environmental consciousness that comes naturally to a villager – ingrained with birth. The story goes that once a high official was driving through the countryside when his wife caught sight of a number of nests of Baya birds. Attracted by their immaculate craftsmanship, she wanted one for home décor. The driver asked a shepherd boy standing in a nearby field to pluck one from the trees, but he boy stubbornly refused to do this, even when offered money; because the nests had baby birds, and the parents would suffer if disturbed.

This type of empathetic understanding is needed in our approach to nature which in turn will develop compassion for animals, birds, trees, plants and other features of nature. Hands-on experiences like caring for injured animals or participating in environmental projects are important to impact children positively. Storytelling, folk wisdom that we have side-tracked, also have great potential to develop environment friendly attitude.

Nature's bounty is a perpetual gift, yet its splendor remains hidden to those who do not seek it. The world around us is full of subtle wonders and it is for us to track down the treasure. Empowering the next generation to become responsible agents of the planet, is an investment for a sustainable future. All it requires is collective efforts from parents, educators, caregivers and communities.