

Barefoot Days

The fireflies are out and according to my backyard calendar that means that summer is here – regardless of the calculation of the Farmer's Almanac or differing school schedules. And in my mind that brings back memories of my own childhood barefoot days.

I can remember and almost feel it now, the cool green grass between my toes and remember the great joy and elation we children in the foot hills of North Carolina had when we were allowed to go barefoot for the first time at the beginning of each summer. Was it the day after school let out, or Memorial Day weekend, or the day the thermometer hit an all time seasonal high?

It took great discernment of our mothers to know when the ground was sufficiently warmed and we could safely plod our feet in the soil without dampening our immune systems and catching colds. Generally though they could let the fireflies speak or show the way. They had their own built in thermometers and inner calendars.

However, one memorable occasion for me was an early spring day – too soon for summer time bare feet – when my mother was working in her flower beds and I was assisting her, so to speak. I had asked for temporary reprieve of my shoes just briefly enough to feel the freshly hoed soil under my feet. On this rare occasion my mother allowed me an early pre-season dip in the dirt.

I was about ten at the time and could not fully register the strange and wonderful sensation that rushed through my body as I felt the cool damp dirt covering my feet while sinking into the freshly loosened soil. I stood there in all of my youthful wonder almost enraptured among the spring flowers, feeling as if I too had been planted and was growing out of the ground.

I feel sad to think that my own children were thoughtfully shod to protect their feet from summer snares. Not that I would wish stubbed toes, rusty nails, broken glass or stinging bees on anyone's feet; but I hope for an occasional "grass between the toes" opportunity for today's children. It might be the best foot massage around as the thick cool blades of grass tingle the bottom of little feet in which nerve ending connect to all parts of the body – sending messages of green peace and groundedness.

Some children are shod by more than shoes. Being from the country it's easy to take soft green grass for granted. But I had a shocking awareness when we lived in New York City while my husband was a student at General Theological Seminary and I worked there as a receptionist. Still vivid in my memory more than fifty years later was a small incident that happened when a neighborhood Kindergarten class came on a field trip to visit the Seminary Close – a beautiful enclosed area that had been well tended since the late Victorian era.

I was really taken aback and deeply touched as I witnessed a little five year old girl stoop down to pat the thickly carpeted grass with great tenderness as she would a favorite furry pet. My next trip past her school helped me to notice a few blades of grass struggling for life between the cracks in the asphalt and at the edges of on the well trodden ground of her school yard.

I can't help but wonder if this child might be symbolic of today's child so sensory deprived of nature and expressing a deep yearning to be reconnected. Maybe the deprivation is not the kind of socio-economic one of the inner city child in our Seminary neighborhood – but could it be a “*soci-electronic*” one within our own congregations?

Children have a unique gift of wonder, an innate sense of being creatures of earth and have a need to be at one with it and with their Creator. More than ever there is a call for parents to be keepers of wonder for their children, to saturate their senses with all that the good earth has to offer. Parents need all the support they can get – so let's encourage our teachers, catechists, clergy, community leaders, grandparents and others to join in this effort – and just maybe, we can let these children be also keepers of wonder for us.

It all makes me wonder why it was so important for Moses to take off his shoes and sink his bare feet into holy ground in order to worship the Great I AM.

Genelda Woggon has been ministered to and by children for over 40 years in her professional work as a Christian Formation Leader, most especially through the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd for the past 20 years. She coordinates the work of the Catechesis at St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Asheville, NC and also serves as Consultant for the Catechesis in the Diocese of Western North Carolina.