

# Kinderen en de ervaring van verbondenheid met de *more-than-human world*

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In her book *The Ecology of Imagination in Early Childhood*, Edith Cobb (1977/1993) studied the biographies of three hundred creative thinkers since the sixteenth century and found that each of them seemed to have had particular strong experiences of self and nature, and these experiences took place during a specific phase of their childhood. They were awakened to some new potential, and that awakening itself was caused by “an acute sensory response to the natural world” (p. 30). For this to happen, there seems to be a relatively short “window of opportunity” in a human’s life, according to Cobb: “There is a special period, the little-understood, prepubertal, halcyon, middle age of childhood, approximately from five or six to eleven or twelve ... when the natural world is experienced in some highly evocative way, producing in the child a sense of some profound continuity with natural processes...” (1959, p. 538). She held that this ecological sense of continuity with nature was not something mystical in its colloquial sense. Rather, she believed it was basically aesthetic and infused with a deep longing to know and to be. Cobb is not alone in this idea of demarcating a specific period in childhood in which this openness to the natural world is most strongly present.<sup>8</sup> For my discussion here I find two aspects of Cobb’s “special period”

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8 Joseph Chilton Pearce (1977/1992) in his *Magical Child*, for example, speaks of the period of the earth matrix, when the child, at an age between seven and eleven, functionally separates from direct dependence on its mother and is ready to move out to learn about the earth. And David Sobel (1996) points out that for children from eight to eleven, the geographical range expands rapidly beyond the house and yard. Their central focus becomes the “explorable landscape” (p. 12). In the period between ages twelve and fifteen, their maps continue to expand in scope, but they also become more abstract. Favorite places are now *out* of the woods, into town. Thus in that latter age group, the special window, allowing for strong and evocative experiences of the natural world, diminishes again.

particularly important. The first is that there must be something in the relationship between children of that age and nature that evokes such strong experiences – clearly there seems to be particular strong receptivity in humans during this period in their lives. The second is that this window of potentiality seems to shut itself when adolescence begins and we move to maturity. If this is the case can we then, as adults, still experience a sense of profound continuity with nature?

In the opening pages of this thesis I inserted a long quotation of Rainer Maria Rilke, in which he suggests that the tragedy of ordinary humans is that they only see the surface of things, as their eyes are focused almost entirely on other humans. Rilke contrasts this with what he observes among certain solitary children, who relate to nature in a special way. They feel “a kind of like-mindedness and life within her” and are “entirely at one with the happenings of forest and sky.” When these children grow up physically, he says, they enter a period of deep melancholy: they feel that nature no longer has sympathy for them. Some of these persons remain unwilling to leave the nature they have lost. Consciously and willfully, they try to come as near to her again as they were in their childhood *without knowing it* at that time. For Rilke, these latter people are artists: poets, painters, composers or architects. Because they cannot get nature to care for them, “they see their task to be the understanding of Nature so that they may take their place somewhere in her great design.” By doing so, they deliver a service to mankind, he believed. Through these isolated and lonely ones, all of humanity comes nearer to nature:

[T]he peculiar value of art, [is] that it is the medium in which man and landscape, form and world, meet and find one another. In actuality they live beside one another, scarcely knowing aught of one another, and in the picture, the piece of architecture, the symphony, in a word, in art, they seem to come together in a higher, prophetic truth, to rely upon one another, and it is as if, by completing one another, they become that perfect unity, which is the very essence of a work of art. (Rilke, 1902/1965)