



## Escaping the Bee Gees

A Green Hearts Essay by Ken Finch  
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I'm in route to a speech, eating breakfast in the Memphis airport. The café is nearly deserted, but I feel like I'm among friends — for the piped-in music takes me back to high school. It's the Bee Gees' early hits: pleasant but forgettable pap from a trio of Australian siblings. In Memphis. *Memphis, Tennessee*. One of the great music cities of the western hemisphere. A city that can claim Elvis, W.C. Handy, B.B. King, Otis Redding, and Sun Studios in its stellar acoustic history.

And I'm having breakfast with the Brothers Gibb.

I was experiencing the homogenization of America. Not only wasn't the music indigenous, the diner décor could have been from any restaurant, anywhere, and most of the airport stores were the same ones I find in St. Paul, Pittsburgh, and Phoenix — if not in name, then at least in style and merchandise.

This affliction is now widespread. Every mall seems the same. Every office park must be taken from the same style manual. Every little playground has the same equipment. Every new suburban home sits on a quarter-acre lot with a spindly tree, bland swaths of lawn, and a few boring shrubs hugging the foundation.

This is not good for conservation. Why? Because just as no one pays attention to milk-toast elevator music, neither does anyone take note of boring, cookie-cutter landscapes. Green Hearts wants folks to care about their surroundings — especially the natural ones. We want kids and adults to love nature, and to feel a bond with it. But first they need to at least notice it! Only then can a personal connection begin to form.

When Frank Lloyd Wright wrote, "The future of mankind is dependent on every human being intimately associated with a half acre of ground," he reflected a crucial truth: personal bonds come from intimacy. Can we feel intimate with something that is one of hundreds or thousands of near-exact replicas? I doubt it.

What Wright was talking about is a *sense of place*: a feeling of belonging to a unique landscape or location that one knows well, and has a real connection to. That bond can help develop a personal identity, create a broader sense of community, and even spark a little patriotism — as well as fuel environmental concern. But it must be nurtured by intimate experiences with land and

nature — experiences that are most powerful during childhood. A true sense of place comes from being out on the land, day after day, with no agenda other than to explore, discover, and enjoy.

Many of us had such places as children. They were wild and magical to us, and we spent a lot of time playing in them. The hollow tree we hid in, the stream with crawdads to catch, the shallow cave, the perfect climbing tree: these gave us a sense of place for our particular corner of the earth. It was a place we felt a bond with, a place uniquely our own — no matter the actual ownership or any “No Trespassing” signs.

Today childhood is different. The primary spaces where kids now play — family rooms and ball fields — look just about the same in Omaha as in Anaheim. The video games they play in Bar Harbor are the same as in Anchorage. Schoolyards in Minnesota, paved with turf grass and asphalt, are nearly identical to schoolyards in Mississippi. And suburban yards everywhere seem to be competing to be the most boring lot on their street.

Amidst such uniformity, how can parents help their young children to develop a unique sense of place? First, get them outside — a lot! Second, create diverse and “messy” yards for play. Not pristine lawns and formal rose beds, but digging pits, boulder piles, shrub hideaways, little streams and ponds, wildflower borders, insect gardens, and other enhancements that mimic the natural richness of their area and the play it can stimulate. This “kidscaping” needn't be expensive or difficult, just creative! So if you want your kids' backyard play to be something more than just the recreational equivalent of elevator music, create a diverse, kid-friendly home landscape that can help them develop their own enduring sense of place.

If I'd been treated to a little of Memphis' unique sense of place in that airport restaurant — perhaps Otis pleading *Try a Little Tenderness*, or Elvis belting out *Devil in Disguise* — my breakfast would surely have been more memorable. But hold the Bee Gees, please.