



Nooks and Crannies

*A Green Hearts essay by Ken Finch
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It brought the fear-tinged euphoria of a carnival ride and the oscillating peace of a rocking chair — neatly paralleling the little world around it, where hazy blue skies and softly cooing doves contrasted sharply with lurking black widows and the humming danger of stacked bee hives. “It” was the tallest swing in the world, with a long, flowing arc that so easily induced daydreaming. Here, in my grandparents’ Arizona backyard, grade-school me swung away hours, while my mind molded the delights and dangers into a lasting memory of a place that I loved.

That house and yard beckoned me throughout years of family visits. It was just nine blocks from Mexico, yet I remember rare cold snaps that created an unlikely play challenge: trying to lift the disc of ice, intact, out of Gramps’ concrete bird bath. Why was that fun? Why do I even remember that? Who knows?! I was a kid. My mind, my values, and my joys were all a work in progress.

I also smile at the recollection of the two front porch swings — always shady and enticing, with a fine view of the world passing by. And I recall the lizards with the tails that would break off if you grabbed them — tails that kept wriggling while the now-stub-ended reptiles scurried off to safety. No failure there: the writhing tail was almost as much fun as catching the whole animal!

A half century later, my surviving memories of that place are all good: the swings, the lizards, the bees, the spiders, the heat, and the ice. There must have also been lawn, shrubs, flowers, and toys, though I don’t recall them. Instead, I find myself wondering what mnemonic filter sifted those experiences down into the ones that remain in the storage bays of my adult mind.

There are so many influences on our childhoods; who could even catalog them, much less predict which ones will have the greatest impact? But the ones that do “stick” can be surprising; they’re not necessarily the experiences that parents think are most powerful! On the many Southwest trips of my youth (for we lived in nearby California), I visited spectacular places like the Grand Canyon, Zion, Bryce, Sedona, and the Chiricahuas. Yet my best, warmest memories of those family vacations are of that Arizona backyard and its wonderful, sky-scraping swing.

How about you? What childhood play do you recall most passionately? Was it swimming pools, mini-golf, sports leagues, and school carnivals? Or was it tiny outdoor adventures that delighted you: the ones that brought discoveries, challenges, fears, and quiet time? Perhaps it was even the ambitious nature "expeditions" that you enjoyed alone or with a buddy, without an adult in sight....

No algorithm can calculate which early-life experiences will crystalize into core facets of who we are, what we love, and how we live as adults. But nature has a vital role in the equation, and we must remember that even a seemingly innocuous bit of play can foster powerful memories. We must give our children plenty of those nooks and crannies of nature-based play; plenty of chances to revel in everyday wonders and delight in tiny epiphanies.

Thankfully, nature doesn't need to be sensational in order to impact children's lives — but it must be a regular and positive part of their worlds. It needs to be familiar and friendly, mysterious and magical, comfortable and comforting. Certainly it won't much resemble other play sites, like ball fields and standard-issue playgrounds. Instead it will more likely look like tall swings, small beasts, a few fears, and bird baths full of ice. It will look a lot like my Gramp's yard did, and like any family yard should.