Changed by Nature

We all have, I’m sure, a personal savings account where we bank our “education moments”—those little vignettes of children learning and loving to learn—that we’ve accumulated during our careers. These are the little touchstones I keep in my pocket to refer to whenever I need to re-center myself on our mission as educators. With all that is swirling around in education, I need to keep my best stones always where I can feel them in my pocket. Here is one of my best:

A class of first graders is out in the woods. A little girl in pigtails is crouched in that wonderful crouch that only children can get into. She’s very still with that kind of concentration that only children can get into. She’s watching the universe on a leaf. Bugs come and bugs go on the leaf. She watches. And she keeps watching. No words, no vocabulary list. Just watching. Then it’s time to go. Back in school I know something important happened. I just don’t know what; I’ll never know what. But what I do know is that she was somehow changed by nature.

I like feeling this little stone because today I fear that crouching quietly won’t keep us off the “in need of improvement” list. Being “changed by nature” is the heart of science. And science today is our way of knowing the world. But according to my friend and colleague Claude Mayberry, science instruction is lacking in elementary schools. Claude is president of Science Weekly, publisher of Science News, a wonderful resource for getting elementary students and teachers to be changed by nature.

“In 1983 when I served on the committee that wrote the ‘Nation at Risk’ report,” Claude says, “we spent about 17 minutes a week on formal science instruction at the elementary level. It’s not much better now. It might be worse now.” Thus began our rather discouraging discussion on the sad state of science instruction today. How could this be in what is surely the leading nation in science research and application?

“‘It’s amazing, isn’t it?’ Claude said. ‘It’s testing that has driven us further away from being able to let kids explore the natural world. We don’t have time for that because the kids are busy making multiple-choice responses.’ Claude also believes the low level of content about the natural world that elementary teachers have contributes to the deficient state of science instruction. He says that we use a superficial methodology and that textbooks divide the integrated world of nature into unnatural “subjects.”

“There are no standards that demand that our elementary teachers understand science,” Claude adds. “No demands from principals that teachers must love the natural world themselves. You can’t expect the student to achieve beyond the teacher! We don’t have an achievement gap in science. We have an instructional gap.”

Closing the instructional gap in science is our job. It is as important a job as we have. There isn’t any time to waste. Science is our future and it is the future of our children. We really must insist, as Claude reminds me, that we have teachers capable of helping our children get changed by nature. We must protect those moments of wonder, and capitalize on those moments. We must give our urban children teachers who can do this. We must ourselves be changed by nature.

* * *

Now I must say goodbye to you. I’m moving on to a new position in a new place. I will miss being able to talk to you about things I really care about. I will miss working with you on improving our professional abilities to improve the lives of children. But I will carry with me many touchstones from my years with our Association—stones I will carry in my pocket to hold in my hand when I need to remember some of the wonderful things I’ve seen during my tenure here. They will be among my best stones. Thank you all so much for teaching me about our wonderful profession. I will miss you.

Cheryl G. Riggins was associate executive director for NAESP’s Leadership Academy and Urban Alliances from October 2000 through September 2007. As director of staff development for Chesterfield County Public Schools in Virginia, her new e-mail address is cheryl_riggins@ccpsnet.net.
Teachers have needs, too. That’s why we offer special insurance rates, retirement solutions and a wealth of educational support. To learn more, see your local Horace Mann agent or visit horacemann.com.