

Dads, Boys, and Tomboys of Santa Cruz: Giving Magic a Chance

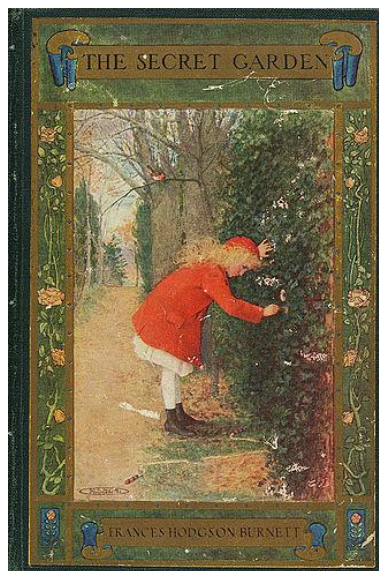
Absract.

In this presentation we revisit the notion of Magic from Secret Garden and how it needs children to play in nature for it to work. A list of what the Magic can do and what happens in its absence is offered. Next we show how an emphasis on effectively helping our children to develop their potential to its fullest doesn't leave any space for the Magic and thus backfires. The dynamic described in Rousseau's treatise *Emile*: or on Education is used for illuminating what exactly is going wrong and how Dads, Boys, and Tomboys Club strives to give the Magic a chance by providing children with an opportunity to play in nature. In conclusion, some lessons learned from 8 years of the Club's history are drawn.

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I suppose many of you have chosen to attend this session because of your interest in the magic mentioned in its title. So let me start with a quote from *Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett, where Colin explains:

“ ‘When Mary found this garden it looked quite dead. ... Then something began pushing things up out of the soil and making things out of nothing. One day things weren't there and another day they were. ... Sometimes since I've been in the garden I've looked up through the trees at the sky and I have had a strange feeling of being happy as if something were pushing and drawing in my chest and making me breathe fast. Magic is always pushing and drawing and making things out of nothing. Everything is made out of Magic, leaves and trees, flowers and birds, badgers and foxes and squirrels and people. So it must be all round us. In this garden—in all the places.’ ”



This is what the Magic is: the ubiquitous nature force, which “is always pushing and drawing and making things out of nothing.” All what we need to do is to step back and give it time and space.

The book, which many of us have read in childhood, is well worth re-reading. I recently listened to it as an audiobook while driving with my children and realized that, essentially, it is a gentle plea to let children play in nature without adults’ supervision.

The book tells us how two closely supervised and well-cared for gifted children—Mary and Colin—are both growing up sickish, spoiled, selfish, aggressive, surly, rude, and obstinate. Several attempts by well-meaning adults to reform them end up in resentment on both sides. Then Mary is pretty much left on her own beyond being provided with food and shelter. She has nothing else to do as to play outside in beautiful surroundings of Misselthwaite Manor. With very little assistance from a servant girl Martha, the Magic starts working and turns Mary into a healthy, inquisitive, and kind child. After she discovers 11-year old boy Colin—the son of the manor’s owner—confined to his not just lovely, but majestic, room, because of the concern about his supposedly weak spine, Mary has enough Magic in her to help him heal too. All what is needed is to spend plenty of time in their secret garden away from grownups.

Let me leave now the poetic world of *Secret Garden* and present a brief list of benefits, other than getting healthier, derived from the Magic, when children play outdoors without adults constantly keeping them “in the line of eyesight”:

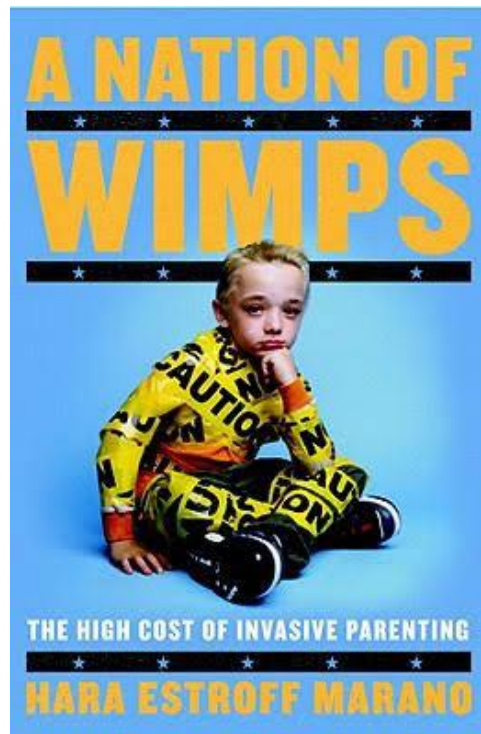
- opportunity to develop at their pace and in their own way (being noisy, repeating the same million times, doing things extremely inefficiently for hours, days, and weeks, being socially cumbersome and aggressive, etc.);
- chance to preserve creativity (contrary to common opinion, we don’t need to cultivate it);
- chance to develop healthy self-esteem (contrary to common opinion, preserving it is not enough);
- environment to learn what honor is (see [more about this forgotten subject](#) on “The Art of Manliness” website);
- chance to develop deep life-long friendships.

And when children do not have a refuge in their own world of unsupervised play:

- teacher-led classroom education is destroyed;
- children grow-up incapable of solving problems and resolving their interpersonal conflicts without assistance from formal authority (parent → teacher → boss or policeman);
- children develop sophisticated tattling and whining skills (see the book [A Nation of Wimps by Hara Marano](#) for an illuminating analysis of neurological,

psychological, social, economic, and political dynamics leading to formation of these skills and their persistence);

- children acquire “gimme mentality” of entitlement;
- children uncritically mimic the adults’ relationships and interactions, which are largely shaped by the world of work. At some point they have difficulty telling the difference between “boss” and “parent”;
- adults imperceptibly pass onto children their fears and anxieties (aka “bad Magic”), when the later are not ready to react to them adequately;
- adults are worn out by constantly being in presence of children and are not at their best.



Despite of all the above reasons to give children the space they need, it is so easy—almost natural-- to believe that the more time our children spend with us and enthusiastic teachers the quicker they will develop to the fullest of their potential. Don't we need to do our best to create safe nourishing environment, where children can learn effectively?

The answer is: “No!” The problems stemming from this kind of best intentions are known since the time when nascent aristocracy would have all the necessary resources to provide their offspring with best education, healthcare, and fulfillment of all developmental needs to become competent and capable leaders. They practiced the parenting approach that recently was called “[concerted cultivation](#).” Yet their children would often grow up not only incapable of leading others, but even unable to control their own lives. Many of them were becoming prime examples of psychopathy misusing their power to harm others and often themselves. Suicide rate shoot up.

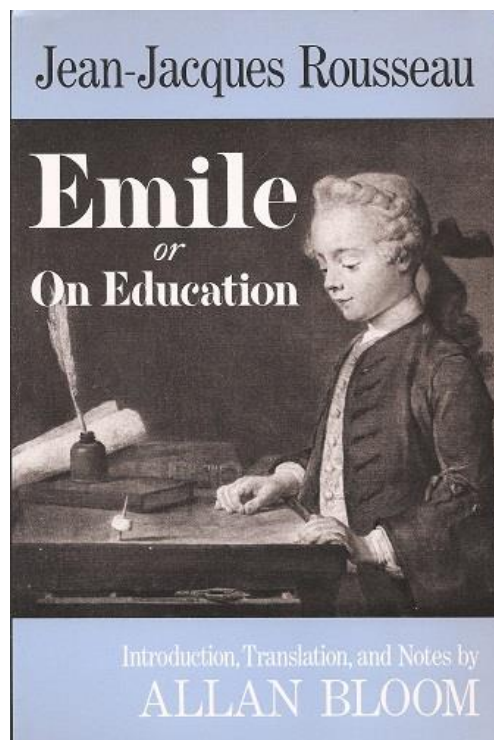
It took several centuries for aristocracy to realize what was happening and to come up with so-called “aristocratic approach to upbringing.” I heard about it a lot, but couldn’t find any sources with specific information until one day I walked into Logos—a wonderful (though increasingly expensive) used book store here in Santa Cruz--and saw a book laying on the floor. While putting it back on the shelf, I looked at the cover, which read *Emile: or On Education* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. More importantly, it was translated by Allan Bloom: a brilliant classicist, who was teaching at University of Chicago and wrote an insightful volume *The Closing of the American Mind* based on his observations of students at this Ivy League university.

So I decided to take a brief look, opened a random page, and read:

“The first tears of children are prayers. If one is not careful, they soon become orders.”

And several lines later:

“...when a child desires something that he sees and one wants to give it to him, it is better to carry the child to the object than to bring the object to the child. He draws from the practice a conclusion appropriate to his age, and there is no other means to suggest it to him.”



I was hooked. I bought the book. Later I learned that Immanuel Kant considered publication of this least known work by Rousseau to be an event comparable to French Revolution. And this was an exceedingly detailed and nuanced exposition of “aristocratic upbringing”, which can be expected only from a man of Rousseau’s talent.

By the way, at the very beginning he makes one important distinction explicitly stating that everything in the book applies to upbringing of a boy, and in order to remain as specific as he would like to be, an advice on upbringing a girl has to be made in a separate volume.

In his introduction Allan Bloom writes:

“*Emile* consists of a series of stories, and its teaching comes to light only when one has grasped each of these stories in its complex detail and artistic unity.”

This is absolutely true. Actually, most of the criticism by impatient modern readers clearly shows that they just had read a page or two and hastened to come up with their final conclusion.

Yet I will dare to briefly summarize the gist of the book. Every child is born equipped only with a powerful instinct of self-preservation. Because it is common to humans and animals, the parents focused on effectiveness and misunderstood humanity, jump into action and start—using only very gentle psychological methods, of course—stamping out this animal-like instinct from a tiny helpless creature, doing the damage, which will be very difficult to correct.

Rousseau recommends taking plenty of time for gradually shaping this powerful natural instinct and complimenting it with two more capacities: capacity for compassion and capacity for reason. And here Rousseau comes with a very big and important BUT: a boy has to be ready to learn compassion and reason. If we start pushing them on him too early, more harm than good will be made. And here lies the paramount importance for children of being with other children away from adult society, so that they can properly mature and become ready for both moral and academic education. Rousseau explicates that during this stage it is ideal for a child to spend as much time as possible playing in nature. And this is exactly the purpose of [*Dads, Boys, and Tomboys Club*](#).

I would like to finish my presentation by telling a story of the Club, which is about 8 year old by now. The group started when our oldest son was about 1 year old. It slowly grew as a place where young children could play with each other in the wonderful (yes, it means full of wonder) outdoors surrounding Santa Cruz, CA. The idea was to let children interact with each other and nature in their own way and at their own pace with adults staying back and away as far as possible, trying not to initiate contacts with children and even discouraging them by being those boring grownups, who don't like loud noise and can't appreciate the excitement of endlessly throwing rocks or pointing out every Poison Oak plant.

When our children grew older (the ages of children in the Club still vary from 3 to 14 year old with a majority being between 6 and 10), boys and girls started to play separately and interact less and less. Also, it was clearly easier for dads than for moms to let children out of site and tolerate risks of climbing trees, having quite unrefined altercations, throwing rocks and sticks, catching reptiles, and of other boyish activities.

With time we learned a couple of lessons:

- We realized how important it is for children to play with each other on continuous basis. The quality and depth of interaction is incomparably better in this case than when children see each other let's say once every couple of months;
- It's a club for children. After parents know each other, and it is fine with them, we can take turns. All what we need for a group for up to about 10 children is 2 parents;
- There are now about 60 families in the club, but rarely more than one family in addition to ours will come on any particular Sunday;
- And finally, moms are, sure, welcome anytime. They also often enjoy just listening to the stories their excited children hurry to tell them upon returning and exclaiming with a shudder: "Wow! I am so glad I was not there!"



References.

- [Secret Garden](#) by Frances Hodgson Burnett
- ["The Art of Manliness"](#) website
- [Emile: or On Education](#) by Jean-Jacques Rousseau
- [The Closing of the American Mind](#) by Allan Bloom
- [A Nation of Wimps](#) by Hara Marano

Good local nature programs.

- [Nature Explorations by Pine Mountain Arts](#) led by independent Waldorf teacher Bodo Langen.
- Nature-based Ongoing Group (NBOG) directed by John Rible. For more information about NBOG, please contact Marcy Reynolds at marcy@baymoon.com or at (831) 247-5617.
- Foxtracks, which was created by Jon and Nicole Young here in Santa Cruz and is currently administered by [Riekes Center](#).