

Hayes, Tracy ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6330-6520> and Tremble, Samantha (2022) Noticing magic moments outdoors. *Horizons* (96).

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ISSUE 96 WINTER 2022

HORIZONS

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN OUTDOOR LEARNING

IN THIS ISSUE

PRIORITISING WELLBEING

NATURE AND NURTURE

MAKING MAGIC AND
DECISION-MAKING

WHAT NEXT FOR THE SECTOR?

IMAGINATION, OPPORTUNITIES
AND CHALLENGES

PLUS MORE

ISSN 2634-8799

MAGIC MOMENTS

OUTDOOR DISCOVERIES
NOTICING MAGIC
MOMENTS OUTDOORS



This article follows on from a webinar I (Tracy) facilitated with Elspeth Mason in March 2021, linked to the IOL Spirituality in Outdoor Learning special interest group. (This followed on from an earlier webinar which informed the first article in this series (1).) In this second webinar, we explored a range of concepts, including: the importance of open space and taking the time to listen e.g. to bird song; noticing, for example, the light through leaves; and ‘coming out of ourselves’, ‘being’ rather than ‘doing’, for peace and self-care.

One of the webinar participants remarked that they liked the term ‘magic moments’ because it is a little vague but brings with it a hope to explore the non-technical aspects of being in the outdoors. We talked about a sense of connectedness and being part of something bigger than the world of only humans, and of looking at detail: how the act of ‘zoning in’ or noticing may help people connect and appreciate the differences between plants. Some spoke of finding time to get ‘out of your worries’, of how seeing the bigger picture can bring perspective, a sense of place and belonging.

We all spoke of memorable, magic or troublesome moments – those times that stick in our minds. We considered some of the value-laden words that we use, for example: noticing, magic, craft, mindfulness, holding-space, listening, nature, outside.

In this article, I move the discussion forward to focus on:

- Magic/memorable moments, including the un/planned and un/expected.
- The concept and practice of noticing, how we can enable and support others to notice and see things they might normally miss, and how we can draw on this in research and practice.

To do this, I am drawing on my own research and practice, blended with Sam’s, a recently qualified teacher.

Magic moments

Whenever I speak or write the words ‘magic moments’, I inevitably hear a song in my head: ‘Magic moments’, the popular song with music by Burt Bacharach and lyrics by Hal David; recorded by Perry Como, it was released in December 1957 and became a hit early in 1958 (2). In 1995 it was used by Nestlé to promote Quality Street chocolates (3). The advert celebrated everyday culture, showing a child who gifts chocolates to their neighbour as a way of apologising for disturbing them with their games (playing with a football, a kite, bow and arrow).

Watching this advert in 2022 evokes contrasting emotions: warm feelings from memories of my own childhood, playing simple games in our back garden, eating chocolates, trying not to annoy my neighbours; discomfort at the sight of a young boy dressed up as a ‘Red Indian’. What is seen by some as harmless dressing-up, as role play, a beloved tradition, is perceived differently by others, as (at best) a form of insensitive cultural appropriation, or at worst, as outright racist, disrespectful behaviour (4).

This advert provides a useful example for framing discussions about ethical, philosophical and political questions relating to childhood. It is important to consider the context and the intention(s) behind the actions, and how these are shaped by cultural, historical and socio-political norms. It is important to remember that there are cultural and power sensitivities involved, and a need to avoid binary



thinking of what is right/ wrong. And it is important to recognise this before moving on to explore childhood memories. I feel sure that many (if not all of us over a certain age) have treasured memories of happy times in our childhoods that we are reluctant to share, for fear of judgement.

Magic – what is it and how can we find/create it?

According to the online Cambridge dictionary (5), magic may be defined in several ways, including:

1 The use of special powers to make things happen that would usually be impossible, such as in stories for children.

2 The skill of performing tricks to entertain people, such as making things appear and disappear.

3 A special and exciting quality that makes something seem different from ordinary things.

I started consciously using the term ‘magic moments’ during my PhD research to identify specific incidents and/or moments that made me stop and wonder – to question and extract meaning.

Some of my magic moments are encounters which continue to haunt me, to trouble me and cause me to really question what I think is happening, how and why. There was nothing really momentous or out-of-the-ordinary about these moments, they were pretty ordinary,

BEING INCLUSIVE IN THE WILD

Read more by Tracy Hayes, along with Anne Faulkner and Felicity Harris:

We're all in the wild: an inclusive guide to supporting young people with SEN/D to discover their local outdoor spaces can be downloaded here: <http://insight.cumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/5829/>

CONTEMPORARY CHILDHOODS

Find more reflections about childhood, with a focus on anxiety, from page 25.

MAGIC MOMENTS

mundane. Indeed it was their everydayness (6) that made them so special – they were/are relatable to other people and contexts. However, they are moments that are both moving and memorable and a valuable resource for practice. Although I had used the word magic in my practice as an environmental youth and community worker, studying at this higher level required me to consider both what I did and how I explained it – to be more open to and aware of different perspectives and interpretations.

Magic may be found through providing opportunities that have the potential to enable people to look anew at their environment, to see things in a different way.

This may be fun, enjoyable, challenging or frightening. Not all magic moments are pleasurable. When planning activities, there are practical things we can do to provide these opportunities, for example, using locations that have been designed with this in mind (see photo on page 36 of a labyrinth of interwoven rhododendrons), or using poetry, art, stories, music to conjure up a sense of the magical. Some landscapes evoke a sense of awe, that can feel magical. Encountering the ordinary at an unusual time (for example, walking at night, looking at things by moon or torchlight) may make us say 'wow' (7). There are many imaginative ways to create these moments; the magic lies in ensuring they don't appear contrived and/or forced.

Noticing

Reminding yourself to take notice can strengthen and broaden awareness, and enhance our observational skills. Studies have shown that being aware of what is taking place in the present directly

enhances your wellbeing and savouring 'the moment' can help to reaffirm life priorities. Heightened awareness also enhances self-understanding and allows us to make positive choices based on our own values and motivations, to understand what matters to us (8). This approach formed the basis for Sam's research, which we discuss below.

SAM'S RESEARCH

Sam was a student I taught on undergraduate programme in working with children and families, and she has gone on to complete training as a primary school teacher. For her final year dissertation project, she explored changing attitudes towards play, involving teachers who were also parents, to understand things from both personal and professional perspectives.

One day, driving through her local town, Sam suddenly noticed that there were no children in sight. She remembered being a child, playing on those same streets with stones, sticks, riding her bike, being with friends. Why couldn't she see any children? Curious, she started asking questions:

"What outdoor experiences do children have? Where do they go/ not go? What do they do/ not do and why? Who/ what is influencing these experiences?"

She looked first at the literature, then she talked with teachers who were parents/ carers and asked them about what they did as a child:

"Where did you go? What did you do?"

First, they captured their answers in visual representations, using crayons and pencils before exploring through conversation. They recalled playing by rivers, in gardens, fields, dens and sheds, playing football, making fires, going for walks, picnics, sunshine, and organised clubs and activities. Then she asked them how their outdoor experiences compared with that of their own children's outdoor time. They shared concerns about traffic, strangers, risk, stories from the media (print and social media) causing worry and anxiety. Yet, they recognised that the things they did outdoors as a child gave them many opportunities to learn to manage risks for themselves.

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IMAGES

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One participant's quote became the title for her study:

I think it's important, but at the same time it scares me to death."

There are no easy answers or neat findings from Sam's research. But it made the participants stop and think, to remember how it felt to be a child, to play outdoors, to notice how contemporary childhoods may be different, and then to consider how this awareness may/ not be informing their current practice.

Sam noticed things had changed since she was a child – and unlike me, this was not that long ago. She noticed what was missing and this led her to question why this was so and what she could do about it. She is now taking this learning forward into her practice as a teacher. The technique she used was one I developed during my doctoral research, which I taught her on the undergraduate programme. It draws on our memories, enables us to notice, to question, to explore our values and become more aware, both of what is going on and of our role within this. We summarise it below in individual steps.

Guidance for activity

Step 1: Think back to your childhood and remember an experience that you had outside as a child.

- Question 1: Where did you go?
- Question 2: What did you do?
- Question 3: Who (if anyone) was with you; people, pets, toys?
- Question 4: Why did you go outside; what was your motivation?
- Question 5: How did you feel; think about your senses and emotions?

Step 2: With these questions in mind, please now draw your outdoor experience and be prepared to discuss afterwards.

Step 3: Share your picture and discuss with someone else.

- What sort of activities are shown?
- What similarities / differences are there in your pictures?

Aim to encourage discussion between participants as they show and talk about their drawings.

Step 4: Switch discussion to the outdoor experiences of children today (their own, those they teach) and how this compares to their own. Remember to avoid being judgemental and encourage consideration of the context, the norms of the time.

As practitioners, our roles as the facilitator, co-participant and interpreter of experiences provide us with a privileged 'insider' role that allows us to share, and capture, these magic moments. Therefore, we have a duty of care to ensure that we do this in way that respects cultural and power sensitivities, and that acknowledges changing cultural, historical and socio-political norms.

Discussions like this also offer a way to explore equality, diversity and inclusion issues. IOL's *Raising our game* report identifies perceptions and understanding as the biggest barrier to making the outdoors a diverse and inclusive place, highlighting a need to take responsibility for action (9).

Conclusion

Sometimes we may not feel open to magic, even though we may be



surrounded by it, and yet we may feel obliged to 'manufacture' it for others with stage-managed 'wow' moments such as views from mountain tops and 'magic moment' sit spots. In our practice, how can we buck the '... trend to commodify, corporatise, entertain, and specialise' (10) to provide experiences and offer opportunities for people to find their own magic moments?

The focus for the next article in this series is how stories, imagination and creativity can add awe, wonder and fun in a way that enables us to find our own magic outdoors. It will be co-authored with another graduate student, Charlotte, who followed the steps in the activity outlined above to recall the fairies that she shared her life with, when she was a child.

This article concludes with a line from a poem by Becky Hemsley's poem 'Magic' (11)

...if we stop looking for magic then we'll never see it there."

Let's keep looking ■

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A qualified youth worker and community development professional, Tracy takes a playfully narrative approach to her work. She is lead editor of the book *Storytelling: Global perspectives on narrative* (Brill, 2019) and is convenor of the British Educational Research Association's (BERA) Nature, Outdoor Learning and Play Special Interest Group, and Social Media and Website Officer for the Royal Geographical Society's (RGS) Social and Cultural Geographies Research Group (SCGRG).

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Sam Tremble is a Year 1 Primary School Teacher with a passion for all children to be happy, unique and have amazing experiences in their lives.

