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CORNER

Big ideas make the best stories

ALEX GORMAN TAKES US ON A
SCIENCE JOURNEY THROUGH THE
EYES OF A CHILD, AGED 41³/₄



The author
in 1966

To be honest I can't remember my first encounters with nature. I don't think it was in any way formal. I guess I spent a lot of time in the garden as a child and from there I began looking at ants and anthills. I was amazed that a small ant could carry so much. It was the breaking up of the task amongst the group. It was beautiful. But how could it carry so much? I remember being taught about flowers and bees and pollination. I must have been 5 or 6 years old.

I watched the birds and wanted to fly. I flapped my wings but couldn't take off. Why? Even now, as an adult, I have the same dreams of being able to fly. I thought all I had to do was flap. As a rational adult, I still wake up and believe I escaped night-time danger by flying. I remember reading about how birds fly and differ from humans. I began looking at life from a distance. I became inquisitive. 'Why did this happen?' I would ask myself about many things.

I loved patterns. I began seeing them around me. I saw them in leaves and road networks and in cobwebs and in the way that my cat always climbed on to the sofa to get to the window rather than jump straight up. I asked 'Why?' and was told that it was easier to jump up halfway so the cat used less energy. At first I thought the cat was hyper-intelligent but later thought it was just lazy. When I didn't know the answer I asked someone who did. But what if no one knew why cats do all the things they do? Would the cat be seen as having strange powers? Just because we don't know the answer today doesn't mean we won't find out tomorrow. To me this is science.

But why does nature repeat or

make things identical? I began to realise it might be to perform tasks, that is, to make things work.

I loved to draw what I saw. I loved painting and making things. I wanted to draw perfectly. To me, there was only one way to draw or paint things – to make a picture like a photograph. Right or wrong – no grey areas. But then I got bored and began to use my imagination to look for ways to look at things differently. I began to paint recognisable everyday objects in extraordinary ways – to exaggerate. My ideas involved colour and texture. I often painted birds – I imagined them with huge wings. Then one day, I saw a book with pictures of birds. All wonderful and bright and varied. So why were they all different? I wanted to know. I read books and asked questions. I watched them nest. They grew and changed so fast. Then they left. I felt sad but wondered why. But next year they returned. It was a pattern. Why?

As I grew a little older I remember playing tennis against the wall of the house. Why was the ball so difficult to hit off the pebbledash? Why did superballs bounce more and higher? How could I master hitting the ball every time to make it return to the racket each time? To me early science was about discovery. I saw things. I thought about them. I read about them. I asked questions. I saw other things that didn't make sense. I asked more questions. I then began making suggestions and asking whether they were right. It was all about creativity. It was all about imagination. It was nature. It was life.

My formal science education in school and university was quite different. I do not remember having a science class until secondary school. It was boring. No imagination. It was about tables and

formulae. How did this relate to life? It seemed to forget how to inspire. It was a challenge to remain focused. I had to learn. I wanted to get things right. I had to get good marks. I had to pass science as well as other subjects. But is this the right approach? I don't think so. Maybe science teaching needs to be as creative as science and nature themselves.

Science is an essential part of the National Curriculum. But why are so many creative, brilliant and reflective children disillusioned by the time they reach secondary school? Is the system producing uninspiring, 'identikit' teachers? Natural empathy and enthusiasm began for me at an early age but was almost extinguished by adulthood.

To make it work, science teaching has to be relevant to life. Children want to learn. It is an intrinsic part of them. But it is easy to forget how to teach simply. Facilitating the desire to know is essential. Planning your teaching by objectives is rational; but children may not learn in a logical way. Children want to know more, which is great. 'Big ideas' make the best stories; provide the narrative. Add the colour. Let them feel the texture. Watch their eyes twinkle. Make it relevant. Allow them to see what's in it for them. Once they sense this, they'll be inspired to progress.

Oh, and I did fly, didn't I?

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