Dedication

To my father, William S. Sobel, a truly conscientious parent. Many of my values and commitments as a parent and educator are rooted in his care, support, and adventurous spirit.
Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ........................................................................................................ ix

CHAPTER 1: Replacing Contempt with Love ........................................................................ 1

CHAPTER 2: “Appareled in Celestial Light”:
Transcendent Nature Experiences in Childhood ...................................................... 9

CHAPTER 3: Children and Nature Design Principles .................................................. 19

INTRODUCTION TO CHAPTERS 4–11: The Rest of the Stories ................................. 59

CHART OF DESIGN PRINCIPLES ............................................................................... 61

CHAPTER 4: Take Back the Afternoon ........................................................................... 63

CHAPTER 5: Mapping McCabe:
Connecting Curriculum and Community ................................................................. 71

CHAPTER 6: Authentic Curriculum ............................................................................... 75

CHAPTER 7: Valley Quest:
Strengthening Community Through Educational Treasure Hunts ........................ 99

CHAPTER 8: The Sky Above, the Internet Below .......................................................... 109

CHAPTER 9: Island Play:
Disney World Is Like a Flea Compared to Whitehead ............................................. 117

CHAPTER 10: Place-Based Education in Guilford, Vermont:
Thinking Locally, Understanding Globally ............................................................... 131
Acknowledgments

I’ve been following the path to this book for the last twenty years, and there have been many fellow travelers along the way who have provided me with guidance. I apologize in advance if I’ve overlooked any of my gracious hosts.

Two of these essays were coauthored and I am indebted to the authors for their fine words. Susie Spikol, coauthor of Chapter 5, “Mapping McCabe,” and codirector of education at the Harris Center for Conservation Education, is both a lucid and sprightly writer and one of the most child-sensitive environmental educators I know. Matt Dubel, coauthor (actually, 90 percent author) of Chapter 10, “Place-based Education in Guilford, Vermont,” similarly is both a fine teacher and writer.

The other codirector of education at the Harris Center, Janet Altobello, is equally attuned to how children connect with nature. Her program designs and work with children have informed my writing continuously.

Each of the design principles has emerged somewhat independently for me, and different people have played a role in helping them come to clarity. My grasp of the significance of nature in the life of the child was inspired, in part, by Louise Chawla. For many years before we met, we had one of those classically wonderful correspondences, mostly handwritten and always intellectually rich. I appreciate my annual research dinners with her.

I learned the importance of special places and, more broadly, children’s geographical development through the seminal work of Roger Hart. My deeper understanding of the role of special places in the developing psyche of the child was further shaped by Joseph Chilton Pearce. When he picked me up hitchhiking in my early twenties, we had a deeply rich twenty-minute conversation that shaped my intellectual development. Later on, a graduate student essay by Patrice Maynard opened my eyes to the significance of school-yard villages and the role they can play in the life of schools.

I am indebted to Paul Shepard for showing me that much of children’s play and development is shaped by our hunting and gathering genetic heritage. His writings are a constant source of new ideas for me.

Steve Glazer, the impresario of Valley Questing, has taken the hunting and gathering impulse and turned it into the compelling educational adventure of Questing.
Check out all the quests of Vital Communities in the Upper Valley of New Hampshire and Vermont in his books Valley Quest I (2001) and Valley Quest II (2004).

I learned the potency of small worlds from both Ty Minton and Cia Iselin. Ty taught Marine Ecology, one of the best courses I’ve ever taken. He used the microcosmic experience of mapping two tide pools in the rocky intertidal zone to serve as the bridge to understanding the macrocosmic principles of ocean ecology. I’m also indebted to both him and his wife, Gael Rockwell, for providing one of my favorite writing haunts on an island off the coast of Maine.

Cia Iselin, inspired by the miniature world of Madurodam in the Netherlands, created the Game of Village, a curriculum for summer camps and schools involving the construction of a 1:25 scale miniature village. The Game of Village remains one of the most potent learning tools I’ve ever come across. Iselin’s vision lives on in many examples in this book.

I learned a lot about adventures from my children, Tara Elliott and Elijah Sobel. Canyoneering with Tara and tree skiing with Eli have provided some of the most challenging and fulfilling experiences of my past few years.

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The term animal allies comes from a provocative Orion article by Brenda Petersen, which opened my eyes to the powerful relationships between children and animals. Katie Slivovsky and all the education staff at the Brookfield Zoo near Chicago deserve praise for their creation of the Hamill Family Play Zoo—one of the most developmentally appropriate zoo facilities in the country that honors children’s relationships with animals.

Maps and paths have been a personal fascination since my father read My Father’s Dragon to me when I was six. I’ve pored over hundreds of maps with my good friend Toby Wood, who has been my map-reading companion on countless outings and expeditions in Washington’s Olympic Mountains, on Canadian rivers, in Maine’s Penobscot Bay fog, and on New Hampshire mountains. Thanks to Casey Murrow, who got me started down this path through being interested in a book about mapmaking with children. Similarly, my appreciation to Julie King, faculty emerita, who helped me cocreate the mapmaking course in which many projects flourished.

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children’s literature puppet productions and his lavish impromptu circuses are testimonies to the power of imagination.

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