10. The Bogeyman Syndrome Redux

"Man's heart away from nature, becomes hard; [the Lakota] knew that lack of respect for growing, living things soon led to lack of respect for humans too."

—LUTHER STANDING BEAR (C. 1868–1939)

Fear is the most potent force that prevents parents from allowing their children the freedom they themselves enjoyed when they were young. Fear is the emotion that separates a developing child from the full, essential benefits of nature. Fear of traffic, of crime, of stranger-danger—and of nature itself.

The boundaries of children's lives are growing ever tighter. A 1991 study of three generations of nine-year-olds found that, between 1970 and 1990, the radius around the home where children were allowed to roam on their own had shrunk to a ninth of what it had been in 1970. In the winter 2003 issue of American Demographics magazine, TNS Intersearch reported that 56 percent of today's parents say that by the time they were ten years old they were allowed to walk or bike to school. Today, only 36 percent of those same parents say their own kids should be allowed similar freedoms. A separate study by Taylor Research and Consulting found that 41 percent of children ages eight to eleven worry about being safe in their neighborhoods.

When landscape and play expert Robin Moore studied the San Francisco Bay region in 1980, he combined his findings with a review of international research and came to "one inescapable conclusion": Increasing residential and arterial traffic "was the one universal factor
above all others that restricted the development of children’s spatial range, thereby limiting children’s knowledge of the community environment—including its natural characteristics and components.”

My unscientific hunch, however, is that since 1980, fear of strangers—and beyond that a generalized, unfocused fear—has come to outrank the fear of traffic. For all of these reasons, many children never get to know their neighborhoods or parks or the surviving natural areas at their fringes.

Long before the terror of 9/11 magnified our generalized fear, I spent a day with the Fitzsimmons family in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania. They lived in a Victorian house; the porch swing in front creaked slightly in the wind. Swarthmore is an idyllic town filled with old trees and young children and wide sidewalks, where, as Beth Fitzsimmons told me later, there is one rule: Nobody can hurt trees or children. This, in short, the last place where one would expect parents to express fear. Yet, Beth said:

> When I was a little kid, there were woods at the foot of my street, and I would get up at six o’clock in the morning and go down there for two or three hours and pick blueberries by myself, and nobody ever had to worry about it... Guns and drugs are the reasons that we say no to things that our kids would probably like to do. There are a lot of lunatics out there. It’s so different. Even if [my daughter] Elizabeth goes down to Crum Creek behind the college, I want her to take the dog and make sure she’s with at least one friend.

I was surprised to find the fear as intense in Kansas as it was in Pennsylvania. One father said:

> I have a rule. I want to know where my kid is twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. I want to know where that kid is. Which house. Which square foot. Which telephone number. That’s just my way of dealing with it. Both of my kids have heard my preaching that the world is full of crazy people. And it is. There’re nuts running loose.

People that need to go through years of therapy and need to be incarcerated. They’re out there driving around in cars and they’ve got guns on their seats. They’re out there. And you have to deal with that situation. I’d be hesitant to let my kids go over to the park alone. Everyone tells you to never leave your kids alone.

Also in Kansas, a pleasant middle-aged teacher spoke with sorrow about how daily life is colored by fear.

> I was standing in line the other day at the airport and a little kid was going around to look behind the counter, and his mother said to him, ‘Do you want somebody to snatch you? Don’t walk away from me like that.’ And here I’m standing behind them in line, and I’m saying to myself, well, I really didn’t look like a child snatcher. But we teach our kids so young to be aware of everything. They lose their time to be innocent. My seventh-graders have had to deal with situations that we didn’t know about until we were adults. Teaching kids intelligent caution around strangers is certainly important; how to say ‘no’ to potential child abusers is essential. But we need to create a balanced view of danger. The damage that has been caused when you have families teaching their kids never to talk to another adult in a society where you desperately need more communication—what does that do to the kid?

In the oddest ways, many Americans’ view of the woods has reverted to ancient irrationality, conjuring dread behind the branches.

**Scared Stupid**

In the early 1990s, Joel Best, then a professor and chairman of the sociology department at California State, Fresno, had conducted a study of stranger-danger—Halloween terrorism, in particular; all those reports of candy laced with drugs or pins, razor blades or poison. He reviewed seventy-six specific stories and rumors reported from 1958 to 1984 in the *New York Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Fresno Bee*. “We couldn’t find a single case of any child killed or
found that local TV news is creating a powerful “crime script” in the public’s mind—a distorted shorthand that we carry around in our heads. “The nightly news, much more visceral and powerful than print media, actually promotes racism and violence,” he says. “Viewers now automatically link race with crime.”

Isn’t TV simply telling us unpleasant, though accurate, news? “No,” says Gilliam. “Violent crime coverage, connected to race, has disproportionately come to dominate local news.” In Los Angeles, coverage of violence overwhelmingly outstrips the incidents of violent crime—by a factor of as much as 30 to 1 in the case of murder. Some TV newsrooms work hard to provide balance and context to crime coverage. But Gilliam insists that “body-bag” news coverage, by conditioning us to “crude stereotypes of members of racial minority groups,” is shaping public policy and spreading inaccurate fear.

Such fear may actually make our children less safe. In 1995, a “shyness inventory” revealed that 48 percent of people surveyed described themselves as shy, up from 40 percent in the mid-1970s. “People see social interactions as more dangerous than they are,” says Lynn Henderson, a clinical psychologist and visiting scholar at Stanford. She worries that, as more parents keep their children inside the house or under rigid control, youngsters will be deprived of chances to become self-confident and discerning, to interact with neighbors, or to learn how to build real community—which is one defense against sociopaths.

Excessive fear can transform a person and modify behavior permanently; it can change the very structure of the brain. The same can happen to a whole culture. What will it be like for children to grow up in socially and environmentally controlled environments—condominiums and planned developments and covenant-controlled housing developments surrounded with walls, gates, and surveillance systems, where covenants prevent families from planting gardens? One wonders how the children growing up in this culture of control will define freedom when they are adults.
Parents may now buy a cheerfully colored, three-ounce bracelet called the global positioning system (GPS) personal locator, and lock it on their child’s wrist. If the water-resistant bracelet is cut or forcefully removed, its continuous signal activates an alarm and notifies the manufacturer’s emergency operators. At least at first glance, resistance to global personal tracking seems not only futile but also selfish—because we love our children and want to protect them. But guaranteed safety, or the illusion of it, can only be bought at a dangerous price. Imagine future generations of children who have been raised to accept the inevitability of being electronically tracked every day, every second, in every room of their lives, in the un-brave new world. Such technology may work in the short run, but it may also create a false sense of security and serve as a poor substitute for the proven antidotes to crime: an active community, more human eyes on the streets, and self-confident children.

When Nature Becomes the Bogeyman

Stranger danger isn’t the only reason families draw the boundaries of children’s life tighter. Children and adults are even beginning to see nature as our natural enemy—a bogeyman, a stand-in for other, less identifiable reasons for fear.

Has our relationship with the outdoors reversed, or more accurately, regressed? Earlier generations of Americans were not sanguine about their chances of survival in the great outdoors. As development encroaches on the territories of bears and mountain lions, wild animals do sometimes attack humans—and remind us why many of our forebears perceived nature as a threat.

Our greatest parks, once viewed as refuges from urban ills, are becoming suspect—at least in the media. A few years ago, a motel handyman confessed to the FBI that he killed three Yosemite sightseers just outside the national park, and later decapitated a naturalist in the park. Other recent stories may have jarred Americans’ confidence in the outdoors. In Washington’s Olympic National Park in 1998, there were eighty-two car break-ins, forty-seven cases of vandalism, sixty-four incidents involving drug and alcohol abuse, one sexual assault, and one aggravated assault with a weapon. The park’s rangers now carry semi-automatic weapons. Also in 1998, in the Great Smoky Mountains, a deranged landscaper who enjoyed singing gospel music shot and killed National Park Service ranger Joe Kolodski. Elsewhere, two park rangers were shot, one fatally, in Oregon’s Oswald West State Park.

Movies tap into this fear. The 1930s Wolfman seems mild compared with the terror exploited in the lengthening string of summer-camp slasher films or The Blair Witch Project, a horror movie set in the forest.

Jerry Schad, a naturalist of repute and the author of a series of Afoot and Afield guides to the Southern California backcountry, works tirelessly to help young people bond with the natural world. He reports:

Every semester I invite the students in my Survey of Physical Science course at Mesa College on a trip to Mt. Laguna Observatory. The students are required to write a short report on what they learned or what impressed them the most. As the years go by, fewer and fewer students have any notion of what is out there one hour east of San Diego. Relatively few now have ever seen the Milky Way until (perhaps) the date of the trip. Most are very impressed with what they see and learn, but for a significant number the trip is downright frightening. Several have mentioned the trees in the forest at dusk in the same sentence as Blair Witch Project.

In the 1970s, concern about outdoor air pollution, energy conservation, and fear of strangers converged with advances in technology; new houses, workplaces, public buildings, and schools became virtual biospheres, sealed from the outside with windows that don’t open. Seeking a safe alternative to outdoor play, some parents drive their children to fast-food restaurants and let them loose in admission-free indoor tunnel-mazes and accompanying “ball pits.”
Real dangers do exist in nature, but the threat is greatly exaggerated by the media. Reality is different. Take the park scare, for example.

Joe Kolodski was only the third U.S. Park Service ranger killed in the line of duty in the agency’s 82-year history. As the Seattle Times reports, the crime rate in the Olympic National Forest “wasn’t exactly a crime wave,” considering that the park counted 4.6 million visits. No city that size could claim so little crime. Some 286 million people trekked through America’s national parks last year, and few of them suffered much more than mosquito bites.

In fact, the crime rate is falling in most wilderness parks. From 1990 to 1998, reported robberies in the national parks dropped from 184 to 25, murders from 24 to 10, and rapes from 92 to 29. Yosemite is, in fact, one of the safest of the nation’s parks. The killing of the young naturalist in Yosemite, though tragic, was the first murder reported there in a decade.

Worried about lions, tigers, and bears? The number of attacks is minuscule. Or West Nile virus? Mosquitoes, who love a good night-light, can transfer that bug indoors, too. And the brown recluse spider—often more deadly than any rattlesnake—prefers staying indoors. Brown recluse spiders take refuge in clothing that has been placed on the floor; they bite when trapped and pressed between the patient’s skin and clothing. We may fear the outdoors, but kids may generally face more dangers in their own home. The Environmental Protection Agency now warns us that indoor air pollution is the nation’s number one environmental threat to health—and it’s from two to ten times worse than outdoor air pollution. A child indoors is more susceptible to spores of toxic molds growing under that plush carpet; or bacteria or allergens carried by household vermin; or carbon monoxide, radon, and lead dust. The allergen level of newer, sealed buildings can be as much as two hundred times greater than that of older structures. Pediatric Nursing journal reports that those indoor ball-pit playgrounds at the fast-food restaurants can spread serious infectious diseases: “Although these commercial food establishments must adhere to the Food and Drug Administration’s model of sanitation and food protection,” none of their guidelines followed the “Centers for Disease Control recommendations for cleaning and disinfecting the areas in which these children play.”

Some experts link indoor play (not to mention fast food) to the epidemic of childhood obesity. Ironically, a generation of parents fixated on being buff is raising a generation of physical weaklings. Two-thirds of American children can’t pass a basic physical: 40 percent of boys and 70 percent of girls ages six to seventeen can’t manage more than one pull-up; and 40 percent show early signs of heart and circulation problems, according to a new report by the President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports.

So where is the greatest danger? Outdoors, in the woods and fields? Or on the couch in front of the TV? A blanket wrapped too tightly has its own consequences. One is that we may end up teaching our children, in the same breath, that life is too risky but also not real—that there is a medical (or if that fails, a legal) remedy for every mistake. In 2001, the British Medical Journal announced that it would no longer allow the word “accident” to appear in its pages, based on the notion that when most bad things happen to good people, such injuries could have been foreseen and avoided, if proper measures had been taken. Such absolutist thinking is not only delusional, but dangerous.