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When Children Discover America by Harper Lee

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Wordsworth was right when he said that we trail clouds of glory as we come into the world, that we are born with a divine sense of perception. As we grow older, the world closes in on us, and we gradually lose the freshness of viewpoint that we had as children. That is why I think children should get to know this country while they are young.

I do not think the youngest or even the most jaded citizen could go to Washington and through the Capitol or the Smithsonian Institution without having the feeling of yes, we *are* something; yes, we *do* have a history. It may be a short one, but every bit of it has worked to make us what we are, and it's there to be felt in Washington.

I would like to take children to the South, perhaps to Charleston, a small city of great character and great historic interest--a seaport town with a distinct air of something that *was*. In the Far West, I would show children San Francisco. The Chinese people there are *such* wonderful Americans. They are people with their own ancient culture, and yet they have become part of our civilization. New England, of course--in autumn, you can get drunk on maple trees. And that first sight of the Rockies from the plains in Colorado. You go through miles and miles of flatland country--and then suddenly, there they are, snow-capped in all their majesty. Oceans and beaches--the Gulf side of Florida, down around Naples and Sarasota, with green, green water. And my own part of home--pine-forest country, dense and beautiful.

I would like to show children my own town, my own street, my own neighbors. I live on the corner. My next-door neighbor is a barber, and his wife owns a dress shop. My down-the-street neighbor has a grocery store, and my neighbor down the hill is a teacher. My neighbor to the rear is a doctor; behind him is a druggist. If children were visiting--from abroad or from other parts of the country--they would have cookies and ice cream for them, and take them to the park with the lake and the swimming pool, and my cook, Mary, would make them an enormous cake covered with caramel frosting, and for dinner give them fresh vegetables from the garden and Southern chicken cooked right.

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And then we would let them alone, to explore on their own. It's stifling to have adults with you all the time when you are a child, to tell you about everything and explain things away for you. There is no sense of discovery for a young, exploring spirit when adults are with you all the time to give absolutely straight answers to everything.

I don't think, for instance, that the Lincoln Memorial needs to be pointed out to any human being of any age. I would let children discover the beauty and mystery and grandeur of it. They'll ask questions later. No child can possibly leave the Lincoln Memorial without questions, often important questions.

If more young people traveled with their eyes and minds open and saw this country, they would have a deeper feeling about it. Adventuring across the country is out of style. Whatever happened to working after school in a grocery store to get enough money to hitchhike to California during your vacation? My youngest nephew may be one of the last to do that, and he did it when he was fifteen. His parents were terrified, but he got himself to the World's Fair. His mother had thoughtfully sewn a bus ticket into the cuff of his trousers, but he swore he would never use it. He ended up in Chicago and lived on milk and rolls for three days because he didn't have any money. When he finally got home, he had lost thirty pounds; but he was the happiest boy I had ever seen in my life. He had discovered America for himself. It will mean something to him for the rest of his life.

Younger children may not respond in words, but they will drink everything in with their eyes, and fill their minds with awareness and wonder. It's an experience they will enjoy and remember all their lives; and it will give them greater pride in their own country.