The Image of Nature

by Richard Lewis

The Touchstone Center for Children, Inc.

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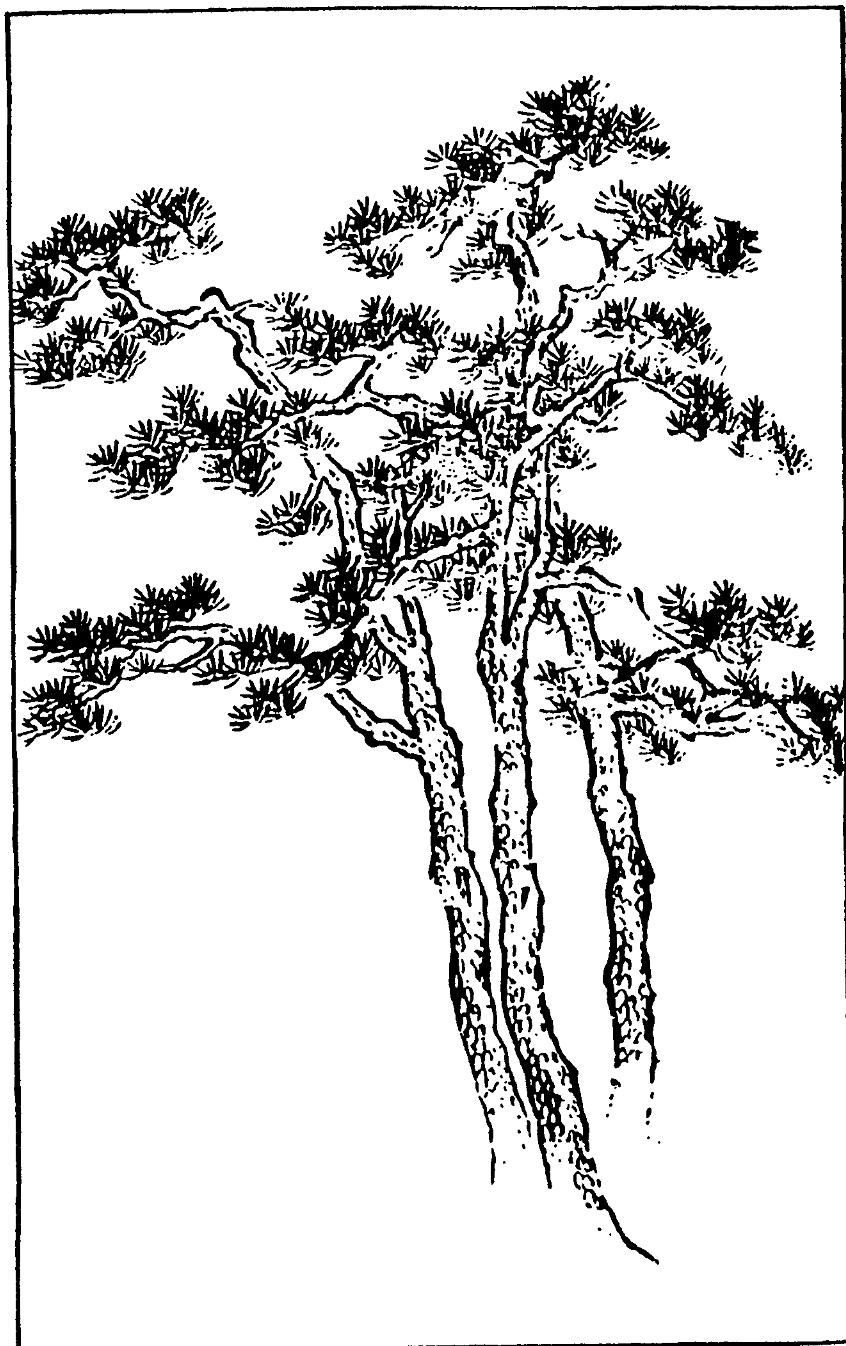

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Foreword

Recently I had opportunity to take a class of sixth-graders to a large park in New York City. The majority of these children had spent almost no time in any kind of wilderness or natural landscape. To most of them the *city* was the world.

What fascinated me about this group of children as they entered the park was their initial reluctance to become part of the surrounding landscape. To them trees, grass, insects, and even the birds seemed forbidding. Realizing this reluctance, I gathered the class in a circle and asked them to imagine, if only momentarily, what it must feel like to be a tree, or a clump of grass, or a hovering dragonfly. Could they forget who they were for a while, and just concentrate on a small detail of the tree's branch—perhaps a leaf's serrated edge or the moisture along the surface of the leaf itself! What would it feel like to be that detail?

With this kind of a focus, most of the children found little difficulty in becoming some element of nature. And with this security of perception in hand, a few eventually wandered off in a group by themselves—only to reappear a while later very excited. To everyone's delight, they had discovered a waterfall. Before long, nearly the whole class sat fascinated by the sight of the falling water, with all its free-flowing energy and spontaneity. They had established an empathy with the landscape. Without realizing it, they had exercised the poetic part of themselves in order to see and experience beyond just the *idea* of a waterfall. Somehow, through their enthusiasm, a part of them had become an element *of* the waterfall.

Like the Japanese haiku poet, Basho, they had uncovered a kind of truth, pulsating within the waterfall.

> Your poetry issues of its own accord when you and the object have become one—when you have plunged deep enough into the object to see something like a hidden glimmering there.

In their own way, these early adolescents had found a way back to their own innocence and wonder. Becoming childlike again, they had changed how they most often expected themselves to express nature, and intuitively sensed their connectiveness to the source of nature in themselves. Their poetic instinct had been utilized to enable them to view the world more closely and attentively. Like Thoreau, they were responding to the question of "not what to look at but what you see."

Interest in working with children in this way has been part of the philosophy of the Touchstone Center since its inception. Through its programs over the past two decades in schools, parks, museums, and environmental centers, we have sought to bring the attention of children to what they could express in regard to their experience of nature through writing, art, drama, dance, and music. What has become clear to me as I have observed children over these years is each child's often startling poetic understanding of the processes of nature itself. For many children, the sight of a tree, of a bird in flight, or of their own reflections in water has produced not just "pretty" images but also significant insights into the meaning of nature and of themselves. Unfortunately, these understandings have often been in conflict with the academic demands of having to see the natural world only as a series of scientific occurrences.

My own involvement in Oriental literature led me to see a connection between children's instinctive poetic understandings and some

major tenets of Chinese and Japanese poetics. I became partially fascinated by the possibility of using certain poetic ideas of China and Japan to reinforce what already exists in children—and to make these elements bridges to a wider perspective from which the children could themselves gain another way of making sense of the complexity and life we call "nature."

What has also become clear to me, as I have worked with children and used various Oriental perspectives with them, has been the fact that many teachers have themselves not been given the opportunity of experiencing the significance of these perspectives in relation to observing nature. With these thoughts in mind, the Touchstone Center applied for and received a grant from the Christadora Foundation to organize a series of six workshop sessions. The workshops, given during October and November of 1987 in association with the Queens College Center for the Improvement of Education, were entitled "The Image of Nature: Using Chinese and Japanese Poetry To Help Children Perceive the Natural Environment."

Through classroom discussions, lectures in the Japanese Stroll Garden and the Oriental collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and a full day of writing at the Caumsett Environmental Center of Queens College, participants were encouraged to see natural phenomena through an Asian perspective. They were also asked to apply the materials and understandings of these workshops to their own teaching situations in elementary and junior high schools. Eventually some fine poetry began to emerge from each of the participants, and from their students as well.

The purpose of this short monograph is to invite you, the reader, to partake in the discussions that were part of the workshops. I hope that such a sharing will help more teachers to see the potential in using the profound Oriental sensibility toward nature as a means to bring to children renewed confidence in *their* innate ability to appreciate the natural world...and to feel that "hidden glimmering" in nature.

I. Seeing Nature

Eastern and Western Perspectives

Living as we of the Western world do in a highly mechanized and industrialized society, the way we perceive "nature" is often different from the perceptions of natural phenomena by traditional Chinese and Japanese cultures. A great influence on the Western mind has been the birth, during the early years of Greek thought, of a scientific method or approach toward the workings of nature. One of the most appealing aspects of this method is its emphasis on categorization and analysis, and on our ability to *prove* something through sequential testing. We have sought to master nature through our intellectual abilities. As Aristotle says, in his book *Physica:*

> For we do not think that we know a thing until we are acquainted with its primary conditions or first principles, and have carried out analysis as far as its simplest element. Plainly therefore in the science of nature, as in other branches of studies, our first task will be to try to determine what relates to its principles.[2]

Certainly this curiosity about *principles* or what makes nature "work" has enabled us to amass over time an extraordinary amount of information, if not expertise. In fact our world, with its ever-increasing understanding of everything from subatomic particles to the flow of blood in the human heart, has become a scientifc marvel—but a marvel with a toll attached to it.

In China, around the very time that Aristotle was working through his brilliant analysis of nature's principles, a completely different course of seeing nature had taken hold. What was crucial to the Chinese was not that we human beings could master nature's mysteries, but that nature and ourselves were in harmony, and that *harmonic relationship* was something we should ultimately strive for. The dualism that dominates so much of our Western thinking —such as the separation between spirit and matter, creator and created, animate and inanimate, human and nonhuman—did not cause problems in Chinese thought. To the Chinese, the first principle of nature, or primal source, was something known as Tao.

What is Tao? One way to describe this concept is to think of a rock, which for most of us in the West is no more than a hardened piece of matter without life. To the Chinese, this rock has a life of its own. Indeed, to them it has more: it has energy or spirit, known as "ch'i:"

> The essential energy of soil forms rock . . . . Rocks are kernels of energy; the generation of rock from energy is like body's arterial system producing nails and teeth.[3]

And what is this energy? It is a force the pervades everything, and animates everything. In terms of Tao, this energy is

> something that was formless yet complete, that existed before heaven and earth, without sound, without substance, depending on nothing, unchanging, all-pervading, unfailing.[4]

Taoism became a main tenet of Chinese philosophy, and ultimately influenced in a profound and lasting way that culture's attitude toward nature as well as its expression of that attitude through painting and poetry. When we look at Chinese paintings, some of them with vast stretches of mountains enveloped in clouds and mists, we experience a nature of endless proportions. We might notice, as we examine one of the paintings, a very small human figure climbing the landscape, or simply sitting within it. As we enter this landscape, our eye follows or watches along with the person in the painting. We have lost all the shackles of everyday life. If only for the moment, we feel the great striv-

ings and energies of *our* personal being in rhythm with the natural world around us. We are no longer separate from nature or superior or inferior to nature. Like the trees and its leaves, we are interdependent and inseparable.

The infusion of this sense of nature's interconnectiveness can be seen in this description of rocks by the Chinese poet Jie Zi Yuan Hua Zhuan:

> Large and small rocks mingle and are related like the pieces on a chessboard. Small rocks near water are like children gathered around with arms outstretched toward the mother rock. On a mountain it is the large rock, the elder, that seems to reach out and gather the children about him. There is a kinship among rocks.[5]

This kind of observation is based not only on the respect of the Chinese for seeing "into" things but also on their faith in an intuitive approach to thinking. Unlike the Western mind, which so often requires pragmatic proof of a thing's existence, the Chinese are comfortable with the hidden order within things. To them, the space we cannot see with our eyes is as important as the space we can see. Even in a rock or a mountain there is that special element of life, of "chi'i," its energy or spirit which, like our own hearts and our own inner thoughts and feelings, contains the essence of what we are.

These are concepts that science, in the Western idea of itself, cannot define or prove. We must assume, then, that through the power of intuitive thought, nature—the all-inclusive understanding of the deeper resonances of meaning—does indeed exist.

No mere fantasizing is the following epitaph to the Chinese painter Yuan Meng-hûi; it is a *truth* on a level that few of us in the Western world experience:

> In the mountains
> One sees
> Human-heartedness,
> In water, wisdom.[6]

Taoism had a great influence on Japanese thought, too, particularly in the offshoot of Buddhism known as Zen. What distinguishes the Japanese view of nature from the Chinese is an attention in the former to the momentary existence of things: the falling leaf, the wind's fingering across water, the quick stillness of a squirrel as the light descends—all of these are perceptive observations of nature; but they also are ways of highlighting the fragility and sense of mortality we feel within nature.

In a Japanese garden, the attention to detail, such as where and how a patch of moss grows on the side of a specific stone, has as much to do with the beauty of the moss and the stone as it does with suggesting the way water washes over a stone in a stream. The Japanese have an acute understanding of the translucent quality within nature: Everything is what it is, but also the mirror or shadow of something else. Again, as with the Chinese, we find a belief in the unity of nature, and of our part within that unity.

Both the Chinese and Japanese peoples thus possess a profound love of nature. For them, contained within the sight of a flower or a tree is a great mingling of our senses that allows us to penetrate beneath the surface of things to the *is-ness* and *such-ness* of these things, where one can come in touch with the part of us that is in the tree and with what of the tree is within us.

Written on the wall at West Forest Temple in 1084

> From the side, a whole range: from the end,
>   a single peak:
> Far, near, high, low, no two parts alike.
> Why can't I tell the true shape of Lu-Shan?
> Because I myself am in the mountain.[7]

II. Childhood and the Drama of Nature

Japanese Haiku

Japanese haiku poems are some of the shortest in all of the world's literature. Just three lines long and using only seventeen syllables, they stress simplicity and refer to the varied and rich elements of nature. I will not attempt here to analyze the structure of haiku poetry, but rather to speak of a way of using haiku as a means of heightening and enlarging a child's perception of nature.

In the desk-laden environment of schoolrooms, most children find little opportunity to experience, firsthand, something actually happening in the natural world. Sometimes, we teachers point out the snow beginning to fall outside, or a tree's first blossoming, or even a plant growing on our desk and its desire for water. Rarely do we give children time just to sit quietly observing the opening of a cocoon, or a leaf's running leaps along the ground, or a bird's gazing past some trees.

By simply rolling up a piece of paper as if it were a microscope so that one can look through it at the specific details of nature, we notice very quickly that this view of what is happening in nature highlights and expands the drama of the natural world. Children who have used this simple technique are amazed at how much occurs inside a very defined area of seeing. Looking at and experiencing the natural world in this microscopic fashion is to see, as did William Blake, "a world in a grain of sand." It is also close to the spirit of haiku, in that it emphasizes the abundance of nature's drama by seeing a small detail in all its unfolding.

When small children are at play on a beach or a grassy field, their attention is often focused on what is occurring along the edge of a seashell or hanging precipitously from a blade of grass. And just as we shouldn't have to justify the experience of play, the haiku poem is a way of seeing that cannot so much be analyzed as experienced. As D.T. Suzuki said, "...a haiku does not express ideas..it puts forward images reflecting images."[7]

In this famous poem by Buson, one of the great eighteenth-century haiku poets, we have no need to search for a literal meaning and categorization. We can experience the poem as a series of images suggesting other images:

The peony;
A silver cat;
A golden butterfly.[8]

We can also empathize with what we are observing. Again, as Suzuki reminds us, being an adult assumes the possibility of becoming, once more, the child we once were:

> Man is a thinking reed but his great works are done when he is not calculating and thinking: "Childlikeness" has to be restored with long years of training in the art of self-forgetfulness. When this is attained, man thinks yet he does not think. He thinks like the showers coming down from the sky; he thinks like the waves rolling on the ocean; he thinks like the stars illuminating the nightly heavens; he thinks like the green shooting forth in the relaxing spring breeze. Indeed, he is the showers, the ocean, the stars, the foliage.[9]

Working with children in haiku not only helps them gain a greater mastery over the power of language when it is concentrated and simplified, it also reinforces the part of childhood that feels an allegiance with natural phenomena. The spirit of haiku enables both child and adult to feel comfortable with the subtleties of nature, to feel a part of those subtleties, so that the separation we often experience between ourselves and the objects

and occurrences of nature are no longer a matter of dispute.

In this regard, John Kominski, a participant in the workshop, wrote:

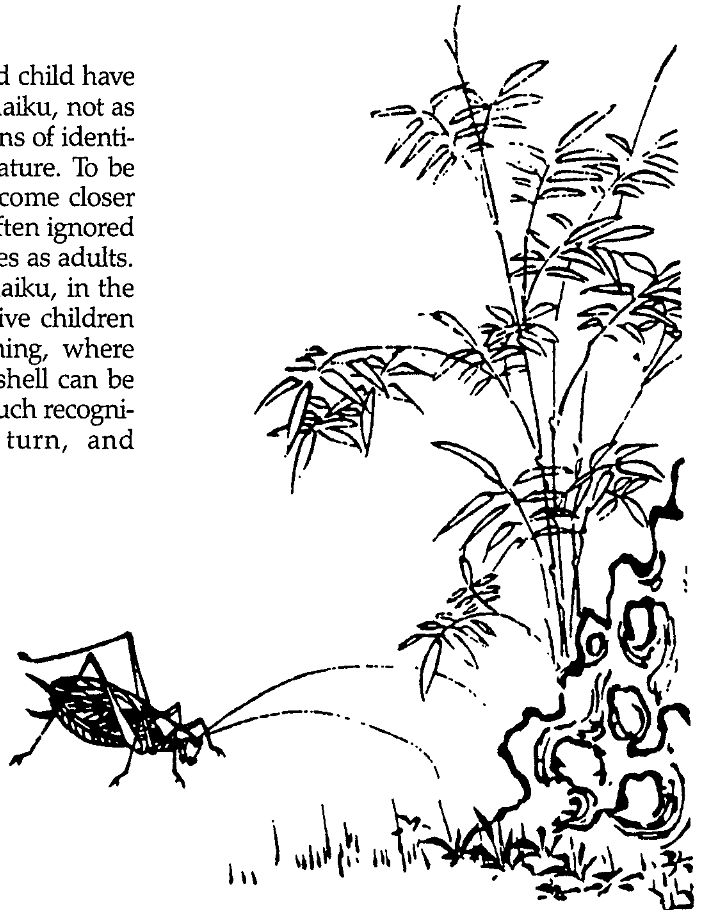
The frozen lawn
crunches
Beneath my feet.

And Jon Wank, a nine-year-old taught by another workshop participant, Susan Astor, wrote:

I am a whale and
I am happy when
I get my breath.

In these poems, both adult and child have caught the important quality of haiku, not as a technical exercise, but as a means of identifying oneself (as nature) with nature. To be able to resond in this way is to come closer to those elements of reality too often ignored in children, schools, and ourselves as adults.

By both reading and writing haiku, in the spirit of haiku poetry, we can give children a breathing space in their learning, where even a leaf, or a stone, or a seashell can be recognized for the life that it is. Such recognition embraces the child in turn, and ourselves, for what *we* are.



III. Nature as Image

The Chinese Landscape Poem

An old Chinese proverb says, "A picture is a voiceless poem; a poem is a vocal picture." Few cultures have so intermingled poetry and painting, due in large part to the Chinese language itself, which is built on ideograms.

> Art and poetry in China were closely allied. This was due in part to the role of calligraphy, in which the actual writing of words was based on depicting an image of representation of the word itself. Thus a tree in calligraphy is 木, a mountain is 山, the moon is 月, the rain is 雨, etc. Very often poets and painters collaborated. In many instances poems were actually inscribed on the paintings themselves.[10]

The implications for children are significant. Children, no matter what culture they are from, are close to imagery. The desire of young children to make images of the sun, for example, is similar to that of the Chinese, in that the shape the children create (a circle with extending lines) is as much a symbol as it is a picture of the sun. Because of the fluidity of their imagination, children often think in a series of images, and can quite easily feel comfortable being an emotional part of those images. Stories, fairy tales, and myths, when shared with children, become detailed landscapes they can enter into and explore with their senses as they would explore a beach or a garden.

To speak to children about Chinese paintings and poems is therefore not as foreign as we might think. Those dramatic and evocative images are meant to depict the life of nature, just as in Western thought a novel can be a series of evolving images depicting the life of people. As we have stated earlier, however, a key element in Chinese thought is the fact that human life is not just something apart from nature, but a growing aspect of it.

Let us remember the importance of landscape to the Chinese: it is the living, breathing universe through which we can come in touch with the essence and rhythms of all nature, including ourselves. The Chinese term for landscape painting is "shan-shui," or "mountain-water picture." Mountains and water play a significant part in the image of ourselves in nature, and are constantly mirrors of the diverse qualities of human nature.

In this poem by Chan Fang-Sheng. (Circa 400 A.D.), the landscape (mountains and waters) that he sees on his return home are also a return to the nature that is our "home":

Sailing Homeward

Cliffs that rise a thousand feet
Without a break,
Lake that stretches a hundred miles
Without a wave,
Sands that are white through all the year
Without a stain,
Pine-tree woods, winter and summer
Ever-green,
Streams that forever flow and flow
Without a pause,
Trees that for twenty thousand years
Your vows are kept,
You have suddenly healed the pain of a
traveller's heart,
And moved his brush to write a new
song.[11]

When we are working with children, this kind of poetic rendering of the bond between ourselves and the natural world can be an exciting reinforcement of the child's intuitive sense of connectiveness to natural phenomena. It can also free children from having to explain (or moralize) their reactions to nature. For many children, the emphasis on the significance of the image for itself can be a real affirmation of their own natural imaginative way of thinking and expressing themselves.

Recently I asked a group of fourth-graders who had been studying Chinese culture and art to sit, very quietly, near some water. I wanted them to wait until the things they were seeing began to reverberate, not just as images in their minds but as images that have textures, and perhaps deeper meanings, below their surfaces. After sitting for a short time, Jane, one of the fourth-graders, wrote this:

I'm sitting next to a waterfall. It is right
  before sunset
It was cold. A never ending river.
Someone laying down.
Desert of waterfalls.

Danny, another fourth-grader, reached for the philosophical elements within water:

Water is the carver,
the healer
and the life giver
of nature.

Both poems exhibit the same direct simplicity and sensitivity as this poem by Yuan Zhong-dao, a Chinese poet (1568-1610):

Miscellaneous Poem at Three Lakes

Distant water
  spread out behind misty trees
With a few black dots
  among the waves:
It is like a newly finished painting,
The rich ink still slightly moist.[12]

When children are shown, either through examples of Chinese poetry or painting, the power of the image as a taproot to our feelings of empathy with all of nature, then a whole new way of perceiving oneself within nature is possible. What we must constantly remember, however, is the real strength that lies in children initially. By and large, their response to the natural environment is filled with wonder. And what they see and experience is often not only attuned to nature's details but to the broader landscape of their feelings for what is real and alive in nature.

The Chinese poet Yuan Mei (18th C.) said: "A poet is one who has not lost the heart of a child." This poem by yet another fourth-grader, Joe, attests that the child's sense of nature, if encouraged, can be a source of enlightenment for all:

The moonlight is shining.
A poem.
If you can read the poem in
the moonlight, it will shine on
the universe.
Then everything all
around us will be a poem.
As it hits the water, I see
both communicating. A piece of
reflected moonlight.

Conclusion:
Teaching through the Poetic

One major purpose for bringing Chinese and Japanese poetic thinking into the classroom is to help children find a bridge that will enable them to experience nature in a manner that ultimately allows them to be themselves, as children. What both of these Asian cultures have always emphasized are those childlike attributes of wonder, awe, and attentiveness that are, at their best, universals within childhood. Perhaps this desire to pay attention to nature is the same as that which may have caused Yuan Chieh, in the eighth century, to write:

Of gold and jewels I have not any need;
For caps and coaches I do not care at all.
But I wish I could sit on the rocky banks
of the lake
For ever and ever staring at the stone fish[13]

Or Gina, age 9, to write:

Fish are like little petals of a flower
moving in
the cool spring breeze, tiny and delicate.
When someone blows the flower very hard
the petals ride briskly along in the breeze.

When we see and enter into the life of nature, through the childlike part of ourselves, nature and all its infinite details reveal themselves. By giving children access to what is closest to them, we are reinforcing the part of the child that will continue, as it grows, to value nature not as something foreign—but what is, indeed, ourselves.

To teach through the poetic, and particularly to teach with the poetic insights of China and Japan, is to make clear to children that their instinctive wonder and awe are part of a great tradition of poetic thinking. To lose this tradition, this instinct, is to lose what allows us to see the constant transformation of the elements of nature as being something vitally important to us—because it is life itself. In the words of Dean, yet another of our perceptive fourth-graders:

Life is like the clouds, always changing.
never the same.

And who even after having moved through all the spheres of life's changes, would ever want to give up the beauty of being able, like Issa, the Japanese poet, to say simply:

Tonight in the sky
Even the stars
Seem to whisper
To one another.[14]

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About the Author

Richard Lewis is director of the Touchstone Center for Children, Inc., in New York City. He has edited a number of anthologies of poetry and prose by and for children (e.g., *Miracles: Poems of the English Speaking World,* 1966; *I Breathe a New Song: Poems of the Eskimo,* 1971—both published by Simon & Schuster; *The Way of Silence: The Prose and Poetry of Basho,* 1970—Dial Press; *The Luminous Landscape: Chinese Art of Poetry,* 1981—Doubleday; *In the Night, Still Dark: A Rendering of the Hawaiian Creation Myth,* 1988—Atheneum).

The Touchstone Center was established by Richard Lewis in 1969 as a nonprofit educational organization for supporting the creative and imaginative efforts of children and adults alike. Since its inception, the Center has been engaged in a variety of projects in schools and museums, aimed at exploring ways and means by which the arts may have a more fully realized relationship with all aspects of learning and teaching. Funding for these programs has come from the New York State Council on the Arts, the New York Foundation for the Arts, and Edward J. Noble Foundation, the Exxon Education Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, the New York Times Company Foundation, and the Christadora Foundation, among others.