

# Chrysalis

Volume 10      Fall 2013

*Newsletter of  
The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World*

*As we recover our awareness of the universe as a communion of subjects, a new interior experience awakens within the human. The barriers disappear. An enlargement of soul takes place. The excitement evoked by natural phenomena is renewed. Dawn and sunset are once again transforming experiences, as are the sights, sounds, scents, tastes, and feel of the natural world about us – the surging sea, the sound of the wind, the brooding forests. All this could be continued in a never-ending list of experiences that have been lost to large segments of the human community in recent centuries – not because the phenomena do not surround us constantly, but because we have become locked into ourselves, as though large segments of the human mind have been paralyzed.<sup>1</sup>*

~ Thomas Berry, *Evening Thoughts*

Dear Reader,

The Center now enters its fourteenth year, a year that will close with the centennial of Thomas Berry's birthday in 2014. Looking back over these fourteen years, we recognize that all our efforts have been devoted to a recovery of the universe as a communion of subjects. We have watched the barriers disappear for children and teachers. We have been witness to the enlargement of soul that takes place through a practice of loving attentiveness to the natural world. We have watched as the child's inner sanctuary flows out to the earth sanctuary and universe and the earth sanctuary and universe flow back into the child in a circular movement and flow of living connectedness.

From the beginning, we grounded the work of the Center in Thomas Berry's understanding of the universe as a communion of subjects. Our staff engaged in weekly study over the course of ten years to deepen this understanding and imagine the kind of praxis that would bring it into reality for children and educators. Throughout this time, we co-imagined forms and practices that would create a context where educators and children could experience "a communion of subjects" firsthand – practices that would dissolve the barriers of confinement and bring them into deep seeing, listening and participation with the living world around them.

We've called this a co-research, for the learning has been reciprocal at every turn. Our staff, the educators, the children, the earth and the universe have all played their part. Together, we've woven a living understanding of what it means to enter into reciprocity with the world.

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Berry, *Evening Thoughts: Reflections on Earth as Sacred Community* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2006), p. 18.



## The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World

### STAFF

Peggy Whalen-Levitt, Director  
Sandy Bisdee, Director of Children's Programs  
Rory Bradley, Accounting/Social Media Manager  
Marnie Weigel, Earth Guide  
Ken Moore, Earth Guide  
Mel DeJesus, Earth Guide  
Rosemary McCarthy-Mareka, Earth Guide  
Matthew McGuire, Earth Guide

### EDUCATOR COUNCIL

Trish Corbett  
Andrew Levitt  
Marie Nordgren  
Joanne Rothstein  
Colette Segalla

### ADVISORY COUNCIL

Marti Canipe  
John Shackleton  
Katherine Ziff

### FOUNDER

Carolyn Toben

*Chrysalis* is published twice yearly.  
Copyright 2013, The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World.  
Wood Engraving by Ilya Schor

EDITOR: Peggy Whalen-Levitt  
DESIGN: Peggy Whalen-Levitt  
LAYOUT: Rory Bradley  
PHOTOGRAPHY: Sandy Bisdee & Lisa Tate  
PRINTING: Arrowhead Graphics

By becoming a Friend of the Center, you receive two copies of *Chrysalis* a year.

The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World  
P.O. Box 41108  
Greensboro, NC 27404  
Email: beholdnature@aol.com  
www.beholdnature.org

The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World is a non-profit organization recognized as tax-exempt by the IRS under section 501(c)(3).

Many friends have come forward to help us on this journey over the years; friends who recognize the unique offering and depth of the Center's work through personal donations and foundation gifts. We wish to dedicate this issue of *Chrysalis* to the memory of two special friends of the Center: Doris Dowdell Moore (1923-2013) and John McCarthy (1939-2012).

An anonymous family foundation and the Fenwick Foundation have funded our partnerships with Sedalia and McLeansville Elementary Schools that make it possible for these children to experience our programs year after year in heartfelt relationship with Timberlake Earth Sanctuary. Special partnering schools like Our Lady of Grace Catholic School have made a deep commitment to include our Awakening to Nature and Poetry of Nature programs in their school calendar every year.

The Kalliopiea Foundation has recognized our vision and the groundbreaking work we are doing with educators with gifts of sustaining support since 2008. This year, the Fenwick Foundation joins Kalliopiea in support of The Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice program.

Special gratitude goes to Karen Philion for her guidance in development work and to Marcy Cook who will be our development apprentice this year.

We are especially grateful for an anonymous capacity building gift of \$30,000 this year, matched in part by generous gifts from Sally Anderson, Margaret Berry, Peter Berry, Emily Monk Davidson, Linda Kinne and the Samuel Goldberg Sons Foundation. This gift will enable us to hire an office manager, Matthew McGuire, and settle into a new administrative office/meeting space on Fulton Street in Greensboro later this fall.

Within walking distance of the University of North Carolina, our new office/meeting space is in the newly renovated Wysong & Miles building, built over a hundred years ago by Welsh inventor O.C. Wysong and preserved by Joe Thompson and Joe Bauer of New Age Builders. The building was there when Thomas Berry was born and lived only miles away.

---

Outside the window of our new meeting space is an old green ash tree that is a centenarian as well. Like Thomas, this ash tree watched the automobile come in and the landscape change under the industrial impulses of the century. In Norse mythology, the green ash tree is a symbol of the Tree of Life or Cosmic Tree – a blessing for this new phase of the Center's development.

Our new meeting space will be called the Thomas Berry Meeting Room and will house a special Thomas Berry Book Collection focused on contemplative ecology, science and spirituality, the imaginal realm and nature, and the inner life of the child in nature. We hope this will be a contemplative center, a friendship center and a center for sacred learning in the heart of the city where Thomas Berry was born.

Our programs continue at beautiful Timberlake Earth Sanctuary, where we conduct over 50 programs a year. And new relationships are forming with Sacred Mountain Sanctuary in Candler, NC and Blue Mountain High School located on the campus of Floyd Eco Village in Floyd, VA as the Center's work radiates out into the world.

With gratitude for all that has been given,



Peggy Whalen-Levitt, Director



---

# When Knowing And Being Are One

by

Peggy Whalen-Levitt

## **Gesturing the Moon**

Last spring, we asked the educators in our Inner Life of the Child in Nature program to reflect on remembered moments of Silence in their lives. Bill Wallenbeck was visiting family in California at the time and sent the following reflection across the country from Los Angeles:

I have lived in Southern California twice and have come back to visit many times and every time I return I go through a weird kind of adjustment. Caught in the Twilight Zone or a kind of purgatory, I struggle to find my way out of the illusions and back into reality.

The late afternoon sun sits majestically over the Pacific Ocean, blowing me away, even as I am driving 75 miles an hour on the 5 Freeway headed north from San Diego to LA. Amidst the vast sprawl of trinketeers, drama kings and queens and asphalt hell on wheels called “LA,” towering over this desert basin, Saddleback, Big Bear and their Sisters are close and you feel their cold drawing stare.

It’s hard to escape the “noise of profit.” It feels impossible to overcome the “distractions that keep us from the center of our being, where the stillness of our soul can resonate with Silence...”<sup>1</sup> At the end of my drive up from San Diego I ended up at my sister Carol’s home in La Mirada playing on the front lawn with my son Ben and my grandnephews London and Max. After a good deal of water hose, squirt and run, and wild giggles, a sense of the night falling brought a pleasant quieting and a pause.

London called to me in his sweet 4-year-old voice, his eyes drawing mine into the sky as he looked toward the west. Impatient, he ran over and took my hand and pulled me beyond the view of the neighbor’s house to see the radiant red, purple and orange hue that painted the horizon, the remnant of the Sunset that I had witnessed in its earlier stages as I raced along the freeway. By now the sun once suspended magically over the Pacific was submerged.

London went into a largely unintelligible musing about the beautiful Sun going down and the stars in the sky and yes a space ship appearing and the night about to come. He gestured quietly in a kind of sign language, pointing west and upward and east to the dark and the rising moon, all a spontaneous ritual of wonder and gratitude.

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert Sardello, *Silence* (Benson, NC: Goldenstone Press, 2006), p. 8.

---

No matter how many layers of noise and clutter we raise we cannot remove from ourselves our deepest core, our sacred Earthness. We are born of her, breathed by her, sustained and returned to her. In just a small moment of quiet, in the midst of a very hectic crazy LA existence, it was all he needed to come into the presence of the sacred Mother.

Perhaps this was a kind of Silence, such as Robert Sardello talks about, a serendipitous second where we happened upon a twilight portal and Silence whispered “Come over!” London’s little ears, not long from Mothers forming, yet undeafened, eagerly respond and together we cross over and are touched by Presence.

Let the children lead us; “given the chance, children swim in the sea of Silence as naturally as a peace eagle glides on the wind or as easily as a leaf flutters to the earth.”<sup>2</sup>

Edith Cobb, in her book *The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood*, recognizes such moments as moments of “delighted awareness that knowing and being are in some way coincident and continuous with a larger process.”<sup>3</sup> At the very least, it is a moment of deep connection between a child and the Universe.

London’s experience is an experience of the fullness of life that etches itself in the depth of his being as something living and true. This moment rests within him and will nurture the images and ideas he will bring forth into the world. All of this takes place in the midst of the utilitarian view of nature of the surrounding culture – the asphalt highway, the speeding cars, the “noise of profit.” Undeafened, London feels and celebrates nature’s warm embrace.

### **Relational Knowing**

How different this is from a child going on a school field trip with clipboard and worksheet in hand; twenty questions formulated beforehand, twenty questions to answer. The children, already poised to know the world they will encounter through the filter of these questions, see little else as they focus on the task before them. They have been asked to extract information from the world. If they are fortunate, they will have memorable experiences along the way. But, more likely than not, they will have experienced the world as inquiring spectators and observers. They may come away *knowing about* the world, but they are unlikely to experience the kind of *relational knowing* that London experienced with the setting sun and the rising moon.

Herman Seiberth, in his Foreword to *Awakening to Landscape*, speaks of these two ways of knowing and their implications for the human-earth relationship:

At present our relationship to the physical world involves an incredible knowledge of detail. ‘Point-centred consciousness,’ with the microchip its most telling image, can only be achieved by neglecting the ‘periphery.’ We can see that this ‘to the point’ approach, ‘taking things out of context,’ goes hand in hand with an inner attitude that allows us to use the fruits of our labours for our benefit. It enables us (and this is characteristic of our age) to make our relationship to the world one of purpose and benefit.

---

<sup>2</sup> Sandy Bisdee, “Silence,” in *Only the Sacred: Transforming Education in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Peggy Whalen-Levitt (Whitsett, NC: The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World, 2011), p. 121.

<sup>3</sup> Edith Cobb, *The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), p. 33.

---

... Our actions lack context and in turn cause problems in the sphere of life . . . Something we can all do is to make the inner world created out of loving attentiveness to the world the basis for our actions, so that healing comes to the world. Coming alive to landscape – can this be a way of working towards a new policy for the earth?<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, in his book *Life is a Miracle*, Wendell Berry offers a critique of biologist E. O. Wilson's *Consilience*, which might seem surprising since Wilson's work on biophilia – the instinctive bond between humans and other forms of life – is highly regarded throughout the world. Still, Berry is on to something here and we will do well to pay attention. He begins by bringing the metaphors and language we live by into conscious awareness:

The problem, as it appears to me, is that we are using the wrong language. The language we use to speak of the world and its creatures, including ourselves, has gained a certain analytical power (along with a lot of expertish pomp) but has lost much of its power to designate what is being analyzed or to convey any respect or care or affection or devotion toward it. As a result we have a lot of genuinely concerned people calling upon us to “save” a world which their language simultaneously reduces to an assemblage of perfectly featureless and dispirited “ecosystems,” “organisms,” “environments,” “mechanisms,” and the like. It is impossible to prefigure the salvation of the world in the same language by which the world has been dismembered and defaced.<sup>5</sup>

What then, would a language of *relational knowing* be like, a language that would convey respect, care, affection or devotion toward the world and its creatures? Berry offers the following picture, so close to London's “gesturing the moon”:

The human necessity is not just to know, but also to cherish and protect the things that are known, and to know the things that can be known only by cherishing. If we are to protect the world's multitude of places and creatures, then we must know them, not just conceptually but imaginatively as well. They must be pictured in the mind and in memory; they must be known with affection, ‘by heart,’ so that in seeing or remembering them the heart may be said to ‘sing,’ to make a music peculiar to its recognition of each particular place or creature that it knows well . . . To know imaginatively is to know intimately, particularly, precisely, gratefully, reverently, and with affection.<sup>6</sup>

*Relational knowing* is a way of perceiving the world, just as *knowing about* is a way of perceiving the world. Through each mode of perception, a sense of selfhood is formed in relationship to the world. When a child perceives the world through *knowing about*, the world is split into subject and object; when a child perceives the world through *relational knowing*, there is an intuitive awareness and sense of belonging to the whole. There is a growing recognition that *knowing about* the natural world and even spending time outdoors do not necessarily translate into a compassionate human-earth relationship. Rather, new research reveals that an experience of *connectedness* is at the heart of a compassionate human presence to the earth.<sup>7</sup> And yet, what do we really understand about knowing “intimately, particularly, precisely, gratefully, reverently, and with affection”?

---

<sup>4</sup> Herman Seiberth, “Foreword,” in *Awakening to Nature*, ed. Jochen Bockemuhl (Dornach, Switzerland: Allgemeine Anthroposophische Gesellschaft, 1992), pp. 5-6.

<sup>5</sup> Wendell Berry, *Life is a Miracle: An Essay Against Modern Superstition* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2000), p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> Berry, pp. 137-38.

<sup>7</sup> Linda Tugurian, “An Exploratory Investigation of Children's Connectedness with the Natural World,” a dissertation proposal at NC State University, 2013.

---

## Creating A Context

While London's experience of *relational knowing* was spontaneous, the question arises: How might we cultivate this latent capacity for knowing relationally throughout a child's development? Speaking of the child and the universe, Thomas Berry recognized that "each generation presides over the meeting of these two in the succeeding generation, so that the universe is fulfilled in the child and the child is fulfilled in the universe."<sup>8</sup> How might those of us who have children in our care begin to work in such a way that inner spontaneities of connection between the child and the universe are fulfilled? Will London's moment of fulfillment soon be lost to a world of "point-centered consciousness" and "analytical power," or might it be possible to create contexts where his capacity for intimacy with the world can strengthen and grow as his life unfolds? Is "gesturing the moon" something he will outgrow, or is it really the fundamental core of his being? What happens inside him *when being and knowing are one*, and what is lost when they become separated?

For the past fourteen years, The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World has been exploring this whole realm of relational knowing with children and with educators. Through this co-research, we have begun to understand something about how to foster this mode of perception in the lives of children. We've asked the question: How might we create a context where the child meets the natural world not as a spectator, not as a student with a worksheet for extracting information about the natural world, but rather as a friend, full of the joy, anticipation, interest and courtesy that true friends bring to their encounters with one another?

### "I am a We star"

Marie Nordgren, a graduate of our Inner Life of the Child in Nature program, tells a story from a context she creates each morning in a circle with the young children who come to her home nursery school.

In our preschool circle time, we do a little hand game. With fingers spread out wide like a star, a child will turn to his neighbor, who is also holding out his hand as a star, and pressing their hands together speak the words, "my star meets your star, and now I'm a We star." From child to child the stars meet until we are all holding hands in a circle. We close by gently squeezing each other's hands and giving a joyful shout, "I am a We Star!" One morning, Rose was playing under a small maple tree alone. She was taking the five pointed maple leaves and placing her hand on the leaves one by one. To each leaf she would whisper, "I am a We star!"<sup>9</sup>

The French word for *to know* is *connaître*, which means "to be born together." This word provides a beautiful image of relational knowing. Rose and the maple leaf were "born together" as she placed her hand on the leaf and whispered: "I am We star." At that moment, they came into a circle of reciprocity, belonging and mutual fulfillment within a living world.

---

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Berry, "The Child Awakens to a Universe", <http://www.beholdnature.org>

<sup>9</sup> Marie Nordgren, "I am a We star," in *Only the Sacred: Transforming Education in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Peggy Whalen-Levitt (Whitsett, NC: The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World, 2011), p. 133.

---

## Why Do You Weep?

“These words came floating up from the deepest part of the lake in my heart”

“Why do you weep? You have much. Or do you not know of the beauty of nature all around? Do you not love and respect it? Feel inside the comfort and calmness of everything around. You are one with all the animals and plants you see, and the ones you don’t. Open your eyes to the smallest things’ every detail.”

Written by Alina Gabitov when she was in the sixth grade during one of the Center’s programs, these words mirror the deep levels of connectedness that still live within the middle-age child and suggest also the inner activity that can be evoked when a context is created for *relational knowing*. But there is little in the education of educators that prepares them for creating such a context. Much must be unlearned to bring the adult, as guide, to a place of readiness for being a midwife to *relational knowing* in the child.

The Center’s earth guides experience at least two years of personal inner work and attentiveness to the natural world through the Center’s Inner Life of the Child in Nature Program before they begin to work with the children’s programs. They enter silence on their way to work on the day of a program to bring themselves to a place of inner stillness and readiness for the day ahead. Before the children arrive, they stand together in a circle and ask that each child receive what they need during our time together. So the day begins with reverence and devotion.

These preparations are not lost on the children, who sense an atmosphere of deep courtesy toward human beings and the earth as soon as they arrive. Programs begin at a fire circle with Native American flute music that also brings the children to a place of quiet receptivity. Thoughts about what it means to be an earth sanctuary are shared and the children are invited to think of themselves as guests on the land. All of this creates a context for *relational knowing*.

The Center’s Awakening to Nature Program is based in a threefold practice of Being, Beholding and Belonging:

Being: bringing ourselves into stillness, quieting the chatter of our own minds  
Beholding: engaging in practices that bring us into relationship with the natural world  
Belonging: feeling a sense of oneness with the source of our own being

Through these practices, a feeling of connection to all living things arises within the children. New eyes and ears awaken. The selfhood of the child comes into being within the creative heart of the universe. Words of peace make themselves heard. Seeds of service to the world are sown.

## Bridge

Poetry is a language of deep seeing that reveals dimensions of the world inaccessible to discursive thought, and so it is to poetry that we turn for our programs for middle school and high school students. Our Poetry of Nature program is a passage through three landscapes in the natural world where students listen to a poem, are asked to be fully present to the place, the moment and the feelings and images that arise within them. At each site, students are invited to find a solo spot, enter into a practice of presence, and record their inner

---

experiences through guided writing practices. The poems and landscapes are carefully chosen to resonate with one another. The day culminates in a poetry reading after lunch where each contribution is deeply connected to the student's experience in nature and to his/her inner life. The students read poems, ask questions, and share reflections on the day and on their sense of belonging to the natural world. This program taps a deep wellspring within young adults that rarely is accessed at school.

Consider, for example, this poem entitled "Bridge" written by Sebastian Lucek when he was in the eighth grade:

### Bridge

so soft  
the spirit trickles down  
filling me  
quenching my thirst  
the spirit flows from the tops of trees  
it scrapes across rocks  
below the water of the creek

it soothes  
filling everything with its sound  
so perfectly imperfect  
so quietly brilliant

i want to leap  
leap  
into its arms

i leap  
it catches me  
holds me

i fall  
deeper and deeper  
until we are one

the tree's spirit is my spirit  
the bird's song my own

and i stay perfectly silent  
under the stars  
and the light of the sun

The experience of *knowing and being as one* lives strongly in Sebastian, as it did in Alina, Rose and London, and brings hopefulness that this deep inner knowing, however latent in the child, is alive and well just beneath the surface of daily life.

---

Sebastian's teacher, Lisa Saintsing, has been bringing her eighth graders to the Center's programs for many years now and she offers this view from the outside looking in:

I have experienced the magical spell of Silence as it fell over my students, our earth guide and myself. I have felt the warmth of the autumn sun on my back as we hunkered down in fallen leaves against a chilly wind, our notebooks balanced in our laps as we glean the poems that hide in the natural world all around us. I have watched the most fidgety students relax, breathe deeply and write uninterrupted for fifteen minutes at a time, move to a new spot and write again, still enveloped in Silence. I have then had the honor of listening to their work; their poems, which are full of awe and respect for the beauty they are experiencing. Who would have thought that these youngsters who never stop talking, who chase each other around the desks if I step out of the classroom, who routinely turn in slip-shod work, could produce such beautiful verse that seems all the more profound because it is the voice of innocence reminding us of what role we have in preserving the natural world? I cannot begin to capture in words the high I feel when I return from one of these Poetry of Nature programs. It stays with me for days, and I do my best to preserve this feeling of peace and well-being. I read and re-read my own poems to remind me of the days I spent outside on the forest floor in the waning year.

### **Ethnography of Relational Knowing**

“The universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects.”<sup>10</sup>

~ Thomas Berry

When we work with children in the field, we are not only creating a context for *relational knowing*, we are also entering into an informal ethnography of the experience. We are both creating the context and beholding the experience at the same time. After our programs, we take extensive notes on these experiences that provide a rich description of the “communion of subjects” that has been experienced on a given day.

In all our note taking, we try to stay as close to the lived experience as possible. We are actually “beholding” the day’s experience, not unlike our beholding practice of bringing our full presence and attention to the natural world. We might, for example, take note of the following in an organic way:

- ~ Date
- ~ Time of Day
- ~ Weather
- ~ Group composition
- ~ Setting (Beginnings at the fire circle. Where we are in the natural world as we take our Earth Walks and where we are when we stop to do a practice. What natural presences surround us? Forest, meadow, creek, overlook, pond, animals, birds, insects?)
- ~ Practice (We take note of the practice that we have introduced and the children’s responses to the practice. What is said?)
- ~ Key (We take note of the tone, manner or spirit in which speaking takes place)
- ~ Body Language (We take note of the kinesthetic responses of the children)

---

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Berry, *Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as Sacred Community* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2006), p. 17.

---

- ~ Forms of Relating (Through our practices, we introduce new forms of relating that are different from the norms of interaction at school. We take note of how the children enter into silence, into taking turns, into beholding as a new form of intersubjectivity. We take note of other norms of interactions that enter in).
- ~ Interpretation (We take note of the children's interpretive responses – how they understand what they are experiencing)
- ~ Transitions (We take note of how children transition from one part of the day to another, from one setting to another)

This is a holistic and qualitative approach to understanding the meaning of these experiences for the children. We enter with no hypotheses and no objectives about what our notes will reveal. We let the descriptions of these experiences reveal meaning over time. All of this informs the way we create our programs and develop them through new understandings and insights.

### I and Thou

Martin Buber, in his book *I and Thou*, pondered the question of relational knowing over fifty years ago. He speaks of the different modes of perception involved as he considers a tree:

I can look on it as a picture: stiff column in a shock of light, or splash of green shot with the delicate blue and silver of the background.

I can perceive it as movement: flowing veins on clinging, pressing pith, suck of the roots, breathing of the leaves, ceaseless commerce with earth and air – and the obscure growth itself.

I can classify it in a species and study it as a type in its structure and mode of life.

I can subdue its actual presence and form so sternly that I recognize it only as an expression of law – of the laws in accordance with which a constant opposition of forces is continually adjusted, or of those in accordance with which the component substances mingle and separate.

I can dissipate it and perpetuate it in number, in pure numerical relation.

In all this the tree remains my object, occupies space and time, and has its nature and constitution.

It can, however, also come about, if I have both will and grace, that in considering the tree I become bound up in relation to it. The tree is now no longer *It*. I have been seized by the power of exclusiveness.

To effect this it is not necessary for me to give up any of the ways in which I consider the tree. There is nothing from which I would have to turn eyes away in order to see, and no knowledge that I would have to forget. Rather is everything, picture and movement, species and type, law and number, indivisibly united in this event.

Everything belonging to the tree is in this: its form and structure, its colours and chemical composition, its intercourse with the elements and with the stars, are all present in a single whole.

---

The tree is no impression, no play of my imagination, no value depending on my mood; but it is bodied over and against me and has to do with me, as I with it – only in a different way.

Let no attempt be made to sap the strength from the meaning of relation: relation is mutual.<sup>11</sup>

Here, at the turning point between the tree as *It* and the tree as *Thou*, is a place of great mystery, multidimensionality and wholeness. This is the place where *relational knowing* resides. This is the place where London met the setting sun and the rising moon, the place where Rose placed her hand on the maple leaf, the place where Alina “felt inside the calmness and comfort of everything around”, and the place where Sebastian said, “the tree’s spirit is my spirit, the bird’s song my own.”

Arthur Zajonc, in his book *Meditation as Contemplative Inquiry: When Knowing Becomes Love*, calls this an “epistemology of love” – a new intelligence and theory of knowledge based on respect, gentleness, intimacy and participation with the world.<sup>12</sup>



I and Thou, Nyala and Bamboo

---

<sup>11</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), pp. 7-8.

<sup>10</sup> Arthur Zajonc, *Meditation as Contemplative Inquiry: When Knowing Becomes Love* (Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne Books, 2009), pp. 180-182..

---

# Toward A Communion of Subjects: A Summer Journal

by

Sandy Bisdee

*At the Center, we engage in ongoing journaling about our way of working with children. This reflective practice is a way of understanding more fully and more consciously the nuances and subtleties involved in bringing children into an experience of the earth as “a communion of subjects,” as Thomas Berry would say. In the following Journal of our “Thomas Berry Summer Program for Children,” Sandy Bisdee makes visible the soul mood and depth of this eco-contemplative way of working with children.*

## **Journal I: Thomas Berry Summer Program for Children (8-11 years old) June 10-13, 2013**

This year's first summer program had thirteen children attending, seven who were returning children who had attended some of our other programs over the years and six who were newcomers. Marnie Weigel was co-creator of the program and we had two assistants this year: Corey Smith, a past camper himself for many years, now fourteen, and Cara McClain, an Elon University intern.

The weather started off wet and mild in the 70's and 80's all week. There were periods of sun and clouds and brief showers throughout the week. We were able to get outside every morning and afternoon for our earth walks.

### **June 10, 2013**

The children arrived over a 45-minute period on the first day of the program. It was pouring rain and the earth sanctuary was a blend of verdant greens. For some of them, it was like returning to a home away from home, a place that had become very special to them over the years. For the new children, I can only imagine their thoughts as I greeted them with a large smile and beach umbrella to keep them dry as we walked from their cars into the treehouse. Everyone was gathered in the kitchen at the long table, starting to work on nature mandalas. After exploring the treehouse and finding a place for backpacks and water bottles, the children all settled in quietly to color. The parents lingered around the silent artists until everyone had arrived and they were ready to leave their children in our loving hands. The rain fell softly outside the large kitchen windows. Not a sound was to be heard.

Contemplative art, snack, circle time, earth walks, lunch and creek walks are the order of our days. But first, at our very first circle time together, after learning everyone's names and favorite animals, we explore the question, “What is an earth sanctuary?” “What does it mean to be a guest in an earth sanctuary?” I think of this as Sanctuary Etiquette. It sets the tone for the week, mostly generated from the children's thoughts and feelings about the loving care that we offer each and every person and living being around us. We always take time to remember our salient memories, those of us who have been together at the earth sanctuary during our programs in the past, sharing special memories that have stayed with us over the years. This always brings

---

back an image of what was meaningful for them, a moment that has remained with them: a dragonfly staying on an arm for a long time, a mystery blob in the creek, garden goodies, tiny frogs, old friends and so and many other things. This kind of recollecting helps the new children get a sense of the joy and comfort level of the children who have been at the earth sanctuary before and gives them a feeling for what might be coming our way in the days to come. We also take time for the practicalities of Treehouse Etiquette, which includes safety considerations both inside and outside. And then it is time to be on our way for new adventures in the shady forest, small creeks, ponds, orchard and in the sunny meadows.

After the rain had stopped on the first morning, and after circle time, we donned our water shoes and started out on the Creeping Cedar Trail toward the small creek. Memories of Mud Monster live on, our own legend complete with accompanying tales of stinking, sinking and shoe theft. Corey, our counselor volunteer, brings up the subject on our way down the little creek. He remembers where Mud Monster lives. Corey is fourteen years old and has been coming to many of our programs since he was six. Traipsing up the small creek, he led the way to Mud Monster, only to find that it was very smelly this year, much larger and we all decided it was best to turn around and go back. The twisted tree roots in and out and along the creek banks speak of mysterious places and hidden spaces. Crayfish dart by the rocks and small minnows swim by. Two-lined salamanders live in silence under the stones. The children are immersed in this new world of the small Creeping Cedar Creek. The banks are covered with wildflowers, moss, mushrooms and low growing plants like ginger and hepatica.

It is already time for lunch. After lunch, we take a new trail, new to the newcomers, to where our Woodland Home once stood. Our staff had dismantled it before the program began and I brought in many cedar and bamboo poles that I have been collecting at home for two years. We take twine and scissors to begin to plan to reconstruct it. Tiny little frogs, no bigger than my thumbnail, hop out of the way by the dozens. One girl brought her special frog hat, a hat that she has brought to our programs over many years, to carefully collect little frogs in. She gives an impromptu lesson to the others, eagerly gathered around her, on how to coax them into the palm of her hand, below knee level so they can't hurt themselves if they jump off. Her tender loving care sets the tone for everyone. It takes a long time to move along the trail when these frogs are involved in the journey. By the time we get to the site of the Woodland Home, the children are more interested in climbing the trees that surround the building site. It doesn't take Corey and me long to realize that we are the only ones interested in building today!

I could see that the children needed to move on, so, following their lead, we take off toward the Magical Garden. The lush and cool spring season has given way to a colorful, weedy and abundant garden. Memories of garden fun from the past arrive in the present and the children look for what is growing and potentially harvestable. A few snow peas, onion grass and lots of flowers end up in our bucket. Lilies, yarrow, daisies, yellow sunflowers, gladiolas, and purple coneflowers spill out of the top of our buckets. They will grace our table at lunch. The children are relaxed and happy and getting to know each other. Hard to believe the first day is over and that it is time to go home. The children are already talking about wanting to come back next year. I will hear that from parents and children every day for the rest of the week.

### **June 11, 2013**

We began our papermaking today, a long process with several stages. There is a lot of time in between the stages for relaxing on the back porch of the treehouse and communing with old and new friends. Cara, our intern from Elon University, is helping Marnie with the papermaking process. I make sure that all of the children are accounted for, but more than that, I am making sure that all of them are feeling included in the

---

group. Their mandalas are set out on the wooden tables on the back porch for them to finish as they please. Marnie has set out handmade and natural bowls full of shells, acorns and assorted nature objects for the children to glue to their mandalas. They turn out so beautifully that we need to cut out thirteen cardboard circles to support the weight of their Woodland Mandala Creations. One of the mothers is still at the treehouse and offers to cut out cardboard circles with Corey. When I come to the kitchen later, she is gone, but there is a cardboard sculpture of the Mud Monster next to thirteen circles!

Near the end of papermaking, the younger ones want to go back to the Woodland Home area. Having so many competent assistants this year makes it possible for the children to come and go as they please when they have finished their projects. Questions of "What time is it?" begin to fade away and become a group joke when my predicted answer of "I guess it's about That Time!" becomes a mantra. "What time is it?" "I guess it's about That Time." "What time?" "That time!" We all laugh, except one girl who says that she doesn't get it. So we all try to explain the joke to her; that we don't follow a clock and we go at our own pace and at nature's pace. "Ahh", she says as she begins to understand. There is a rhythm to our day, but no time clock and schedule. This is the first week after their school year has finished - a year crowded with clocks and time commitments. It takes a particular kind of presence to the moment to even begin to attempt to live at nature's pace - a special kind of being that leads to beholding, which further leads us all to a real sense of belonging. There is an initial phase of boredom, a subconscious desire for stimulation from the outside to maintain the kind of sensorial saturation that they are accustomed to. I know that we are getting close to being, beholding and belonging when the first child says, "I'm bored." And I say "Good!" Everyone is beginning to breathe out and to be in tune with new friends, the breeze, the clouds, the resident squirrels, new sounds, new smells, butterflies, little frogs, caterpillars, bird song, spiders and insects of unknown origins.

We have begun to make new friends. And we are naming them. Some of them are familiar friends whom we have seen or met before. Some of them appear to be brand new species on the earth and questions like "What is it?" are as frequent as my usual answer of "I wonder!" There is plenty of time and space for wonder at the Thomas Berry Summer Program for Children. I am continually surprised by how much the children do not know about the tiny kingdoms and common creatures that surround us. For many of the children from our grant-funded public school groups, a simple acorn, a mushroom or fungus, or a half-decayed leaf are mysteries to behold. Pieces of quartz are precious jewels and a box turtle is an exotic species! The children in my summer program come from more affluent families and have had exposure to the natural world in varying degrees. But many of them still do not know the difference between a honeybee and a wasp, or a dragonfly and a butterfly. They have never tasted a drop of honey from a honeysuckle flower or seen a fresh water mussel. They do not know that a harvestman, a daddy long-legs, is not a spider and that all spiders do not bite. So aside from answering their genuine curiosity with the response, "I wonder", I also take the time to behold the subject in question with great attention and interest and then I ask them "What would you name it?"

Croc (eastern fence lizard eating a dragonfly), Slimey (leopard frog), Old White (albino harvestman), Fuzzy Fred (caterpillar of a moth), Teddy (water beetle), Slim (large slug), Stinkey (blue lined skink), Buzzy (wasp), Morning Light (butterfly), Night Shade (moth), Magical Colony of Blip (large ant mound with multiple entries), and Chip (bird) are some of the friends that we met and named this week. There were numerous spiders in rainbow colored webs sparkling in the sunlight, a green snake, millipedes, and an insect that even stumped one of the children who was our resident entomologist this week. Relative of a stinkbug? Perhaps. We were quite surprised when it sprouted wings after about 10 minutes of observation and flew away! It looked a little like an armor-plated dinosaur.

---

A lot of planning goes into designing meaningful activities and contemplative moments that can create an opening for and an experience of Silence during our programs. Through the arts, flute music, waiting to discover your secret pal's name, listening to the sound waves of a chime until it can be heard no more, solo walks, meeting a creek and her inhabitants, and throw in the sheer fascination factor of any given moment of presence and discovery, Silence has a gentle way of entering into what we are doing and suspending time. It enlarges the moment and blends the subjects into one living symphony. Marnie and I were pleasantly surprised on many occasions when the group or an individual fell into a silent space that seemed to last quite a long time. It was a natural silence, a comfortable silence, and a non self-conscious silence. And it punctuated our days together during our first program, frequently and naturally.

The papermaking was a huge success and the pulp was mixed with dried flowers. The act of submerging the screen into the wet paper mash in the large tubs, and bringing it up and down again and again to get the right thickness of paper, took everyone's strict focus and utmost concentration. Doing it outside on the back porch, in the fresh air under a canopy of trees filled with tree frogs, butterflies and birds, brought us closer to the divine presence surrounding us. Bullfrogs, cricket frogs, wood frogs and green frogs serenaded us in intervals. Peace eagles (black vultures) glided in closer to get a better look. Blue lined skinks with reddish heads rested near our papermaking station. Joy permeated the air. The dried paper will become covers for the nature journals that we will string together tomorrow.

After lunch we visited one of my favorite places in the earth sanctuary, the big creek in the deep dark woods on the remote edge of the property. The path leading there had become so overgrown that it had to be weed-whacked and mowed before the children came, just to be able to walk up the hill to where the dark and inviting forest beckons; to where the grassy hillside trail ends and there is not a path anymore. Making our way down the steep hill toward the water, single file, we spot a deer trail that begins at the bottom of the hill alongside the woodland creek; a creek of memories from years past, of tiny silent salamanders and the peace that they bring when you hold them, of crayfish and swimming frogs, submerged box turtles like half-domed submarines, the mingling of light and dark, water and air, child and water. Memories of the deep hole, the place farther up the creek that had been carved out of soft slate into a 3 ½ foot by 3 foot crevice in the dark rocky creek bed bottom. A place to go all the way under the cool water and become one with the creek. A kind of baptism for so many children who had never "gone under" before.



---

It is an art to walk in a creek with thirteen children and not muddy up the clear pools so that we can discover who is living there. This is the place where we become one. This is the place where the remnants of any tension fall away and new friends are easily made. For some it comes through holding the hand of a younger camper, for others it comes from spending long periods of time in one place looking for the elusive salamander and finding worlds in the searching in one spot. For others it comes from the bravery of going first into the unknown. For one child, it became a place where she was confident and steady footed in the rocky and slippery creek bed. It was where I really met her, began to see her subtle sense of humor and sense her deep intuition. Amused by my clumsiness at times while clinging onto my creek walking stick, she became my protector and guide amidst the mud and stones. I think that circle time and creek time are my two favorite times for the same reason. It is a time of a natural and safe intimacy. It is a time when we become one. One new family in the circle of life. One extended family with the heart of each other and with the heart of the earth. Creek time and circle time set the stage for this wonderful opportunity of harmony and intimacy.

Over the last eight years I have lived, through my own experiences in nature, with an ever-deepening personal understanding of Thomas Berry's idea of the three binding principles of the Universe. These three principles, interiority, differentiation and communion, embrace and encircle everything that we do in the Center's children's programs. Circle time is an awakening of interiority. Earth walks are an experience in differentiation, and communion is the unifying capacity that weaves all three together. This year, mostly because of the rain, we had circle time inside the round room of the treehouse. In the center of a round rug is placed a small rustic rectangular table, about knee high. On the table is an assortment of natural treasures that have been placed there over many years and enjoyed by the hundreds of children who come to our programs. A simple candle is surrounded by acorns, moss, a hummingbird's nest, part of an old turtle shell, fresh water mussel shells, a collar bone from a small mammal, a feather and many small stones. The children love to add to this table and are encouraged to do so. We usually have our circle time after the morning contemplative art project and snack. Once we are all settled in around the nature table, in stillness and in silence, there is a feeling of anticipation and a heightened awareness as I light the small candle. After warm words of welcome, I play my cedar flute. It is a song of gratitude for all of creation, a developing and well-nurtured theme that will be fostered during our week together.

The children love and remember the activity of Secret Pals. It is a way to help the children get to know each other's names and something special about each person. Inside an apple gourd bowl I have written each child's name and each counselor's name on a piece of paper. One of the adults sits a distance away from the assembled circle of children with a pen and paper to write down each pair of names as the slips are ceremoniously drawn from the bowl, one by one. This act of recording names is done to help the children remember throughout the day who their secret pal is, since many forget. When it comes time at the end of the day to share each person's secret pal, they offer up something that they noticed about their pal that day, something that makes that person unique; something that makes them THEM. Most of the children's comments are related to friendship, the way that they were helpful and the way that they were kind to others. Humor is a valued quality that comes up frequently. One of our boys is a budding entomologist and knows a lot about insects, and so that was noticed and brought up. Another child loves nature and that was noted. Each person sits patiently and silently while they wait for the next revelation of the secret pal. There is a growing appreciation of the diversity and uniqueness of each person as the days pass. By the end of the week, everyone knows each other's names and the last day of Secret Pals is a kind of group sharing where anyone can chime in. Over the years I have found many ways to make sure that each child is comfortable with this activity.

---

Marnie Weigel, co-creator of the program, is an amazing artist. Everything she makes, she makes with purpose, love and meaning. There is always a story behind each creation. Her nature mandalas are very inspiring and after she speaks to the children about the creation of her mandalas, they are all ready to create their own. This year we made paper that was meant to serve as the front and back cover of a journal. Marnie is a master journal maker. Her journals are one of a kind, beautiful, inspiring, detailed and enchanting. This summer, she made a simpler version to show the children what their journals might look like. Marnie brought all kinds of paper for the pages of these simple journals. She set up at least twelve bowls and containers, many that she had made herself in her pottery studio, filled with beads of all shapes, materials and sizes. The children were invited to select about six of their favorite beads to string onto the thread that bound the journals together. Marnie oversees this whole process with the invaluable help of Cara, and I oversee the coming and going when the children are finished with their part. While all of this is going on, the children sit together on the porch and talk and laugh in a happy relaxed manner.

### **June 12, 2013**

By the third day, the children were getting comfortable enough to test the boundaries a little. Corey and I took a mixed age group to work on the Woodland Home, the creation of which has been a highlight over the years in other summer programs. I was surprised that only a few of the older girls were interested in it at all. The others really just wanted to play. As Corey and I attempted to inspire some interest in putting up a few poles for the walls, one child screamed very loudly. Just for fun. Then another child screamed louder still . . . I thought quickly about how to transform the moment. I told them that if they wanted to scream, I knew the perfect screaming spot. I pointed far off in the woods to a little sunny spot in the midst of the trees. There is the screaming spot. You are welcome to scream there. Much to my surprise, all of the children, seven of them, except for one older girl, left for the spot. The boys and girls began to have screaming contests. It lasted a long time. Corey and I watched with amazement at their homemade fun. There was a winner for the highest scream and one for loudest. The Woodland Home did not get finished during the first summer program. But I really think the screaming contest was important for letting off steam following their first week out of school, letting go of any tensions that might have persisted.

Corey, our program assistant this year, has been in our programs at the Center since he was six-years-old. He was in our “Make New Friends”, “Exploring Secret Places” and “Earth, Air, Fire and Water” summer programs. He was also in our “Children of the Forest” after-school program and our “Families of the Forest” program on weekends. When he was in the fifth grade, Corey won a prize for a story that he wrote. It was a story that was full of imaginary characters who meet at a pond and become friends. Each creature in the story is very different from the other and they seek to find out what it is that they have in common. In Corey’s story, it is nature and the color green that bonds his characters. I asked Corey to read his story, handwritten and illustrated, to the group after lunch. We were comfortably spread out around him in the round room of the treehouse. It is such a kind and interesting story, a testament to the rich inner life of this young man. Corey told me that part of it was inspired by his carefree afternoons in the “Children of the Forest” program years ago. The children absolutely loved it and they all stayed very still and very quiet for the duration of the story.

### **June 13, 2013**

The last day of the program is always a little bit sad. Our new and temporary family is about to disband. We spent some time talking about the rest of their summers, what camps they would be attending and where their families were going for vacations. We finished up art projects and visited the Star Child Pool, the Woodland Home and the Creeping Cedar Trail. On that last day, by the shallow Star Child Pool, one young boy waded in up to his calves and looked over at me, waiting for me to say stop. I could see it in his eyes. I said nothing

---

and smiled at him. A little deeper he ventured, up to his knees, still glancing at me. I kept smiling. And then he went up to his thighs, getting his pants wet! How very happy he looked. It was an important moment, I knew. There was something different about him in that moment, a kind of confidence and joy in nature that I knew would stay with him. He talked to me spontaneously on the way back to the treehouse, really for the first time that week. The little boy who rarely went outside had met a brand new world.

On the last day, I ask each person what some of his or her favorite experiences were at the Thomas Berry Summer Program for Children. I write everything down. My notes, my photographs and time allow the week's experiences to settle inside of me. It helps to have the space and the distance to step back and take a new look, an after look, at the program that we so meticulously planned for. Looking back on our time together, one image comes to my mind: a girl in the creek, the frog handling teacher, trying to balance on the slippery rocks, rather than walk more easily in the water, sand, mud and stones in-between. I told her it would be safer to walk in the creek bed. She told me that she was so afraid that she would step on something that was alive, like a crayfish or a salamander and that she would feel terrible if that were to happen and she were to kill anything. I was so deeply touched by the vigil that she held. I told her that the rocks were slippery and that I did not want her to get hurt, but that I understood why it was hard for her to walk in the creek. She showed a genuine compassion for the communion of subjects and her responsibility amidst it all. I stayed with her for the rest of the creek time, in a small area, where we carefully made our way meeting crayfish and elusive salamanders. I am reminded of an excerpt from Carolyn Toben's small book, *Seeds of the Future: Quotes by Thomas Berry*: "they will come to recognize they are companions with other humans on a universal pilgrimage, but also with companions who burrow in the soils, fly in the skies, swim in the waters. For the earth is a single community who lives or dies together...."

I think that Thomas Berry would have been very pleased with our Thomas Berry Program for Children this summer. The children's programs at the Center have reached a new maturity now that integrates many years of study and practice that have always been overlighted by the life's work of Thomas Berry. Thomas trained our first earth guides, who in turn trained me. I feel like my knowledge of Thomas's work has been mostly through oral transmission and apprenticeship, working with the Center's Founder and Director over the last seven years. It has also come through living into certain passages and ideas in Thomas's writings over long periods of time that have slowly come to life and are reflected in our work with the children.

### **Journal II: Thomas Berry Summer Program for Children (11-13 Years Old) June 17-20, 2013**

#### **June 17, 2013**

There were twelve children attending our second summer program this year, seven of them returning and five who were new to our programs. Sebastian Lucek, who had attended our "Poetry of Nature" program when he was in the 8th grade and our summer programs as a participant and assistant, was our intern. I have known many of the returning children since they were five years old. They have attended our summer programs, "Children of the Forest" and "Families of the Forest" programs in the past.

Our days together had a similar rhythm as the first program. Sebastian set the tone for our contemplative art projects by sitting on the porch floor, legs crossed, playing music on his ornate sitar, guitar, kalimba (thumb piano) or dulcimer. The sitar music that he selected was morning music. He has learned music for all of the

---

different times of day and night. On the first day, all of the children colored mandalas, which came out very beautifully. There was a natural silence that lasted for a very long time (much to Marnie's and my surprise) during the duration of the coloring. I was surprised that no one wanted to take his or her mandala home at the end of the week. Like a Navajo sand painting, they were ready to let it go.

Circle time was a time of introductions and getting to know each other better. It was also the time to hear about their memories of coming to our programs in the past. One girl remembered a dragonfly that landed on her arm by the pond and stayed with her for a long time. She also remembered the white mystery blob, part octopus and part we did not know what, seen three years ago in the small creek floating by. I still wonder what it was! Several other children remembered the fun of the "deep hole," the carved out area far up the big creek where they can go completely under water. Others had fond memories of their times in the Magical Garden. They remembered popsicles and secret pals. Right away I could see that this would be a very cohesive group that would get along well together.

### **July 18, 2013**

This group would take up the construction of the Woodland Home with great enthusiasm. They made walls and fancy windows, hand sewn curtains (and a back up pair) for the windows. They glued little shells on a piece of wood that said Woodland Home. They would come and go freely with Sebastian during down times, free times during our day. A small group spent hours trying to design a pulley system that would ferry a basket from the Woodland Home to the treehouse to transport items of importance. It didn't work, but they gave it their all. They spread flower petals on the floor of the home when it was completed. It will be a joy to behold for all of the school groups that will come out this fall and spring to the earth sanctuary.



Mandalas gave way to papermaking, which then gave way to the making of Universe Flags, which was the central art endeavor of the week. Marnie, Sebastian and I had met 3 1/2 weeks earlier for program planning. It was at that time that Marnie showed us three beautiful flags that she had made and told us what went into her process. Sebastian and I agreed to work on our own flags and bring them the on first day of the program to share with the children after Marnie gave the introduction to the creation of the Universe Flags. Sebastian and I each agreed to make just one, as Marnie is a master artist and her flags are so good that we were concerned that some of the children might think that they could not do one as well as hers. After Marnie, Sebastian and I shared our flags and the symbolism in them, the children were ready to get started on their own.

---

Pinking sheers, batik fabric of all colors, needles and thread, an assortment of beads and nature items were set out on the tables to begin. We brought sticks and bamboo for them to sew their flags onto and encouraged them to find their own if they wanted. Sebastian played guitar, sitar and kalimbas for us while we worked on creating our own flags. It would be a two and a half day process, culminating in displaying them in the round room and then the sharing of them by hearing each child speak of the symbolism behind what they had created.

The act of creation spurred several other projects during our days at camp. One boy sewed two pairs of curtains for the Woodland Home, another boy sewed a quiver for hand sharpened arrows that he whittled, other children created little “medicine bags” inspired by Sebastian’s and my Universe Flags. They were made out of a small three-inch in diameter round batik cloth tied at the top with string and filled with wishes, prayers, feelings and other kinds of intangible substances. Some were filled with tobacco or lavender. Tobacco is a traditional Native American offering symbolizing gratitude to the earth. They were ornately decorated with beads and worn around their necks or tied to their flags.

Unbeknownst to me, one of the girls made a medicine bag for Grandmother’s Sanctuary, a place in the forest that she has tended for many years now. She is the only one who holds the memory of Grandmother in her heart from our former summer programs. She remembers Grandmother’s words of wisdom and where she has gone back into the earth. Grandmother was a simple puppet from years past that all of the children loved. Another girl made a journal, almost identical to one that Marnie made, which took her two days. It turned out to be very beautiful and was embedded with goals of self-development and self-refection in an honest and open way. She was very eager to share it with us all. I felt so privileged to be a part of her process and to get a glimpse into the deeper realms of this child’s thoughts and feelings. Marnie’s soulful way of working sets a beautiful tone for the children as a kind of springboard for their own soul’s imagination and beauty.

### **July 19, 2013**

Group time and circle time can take on a feeling of ritual due in no small part to the kinds of things that we engage in together. It is a much deeper experience of the three binding principles of interiority, differentiation and communion with this age group. The recognition of our differentiation is heightened at this age, as is interest in the interiority of the other. Choosing heart words at circle time (clay hearts with one word etched in them) and exploring their meaning in relation to humans and in nature, a memorial service for an inch worm, a silent solo walk to the outdoor chapel, reading from Carolyn Toben’s book of quotes, and a gratitude circle for each person present formed the content of our ritual times together.

The memorial service was quite spontaneous. One of the boys had a special affinity for inchworms. He would always find them (or they would always find him) and delight in them. One day I spotted him sitting alone, looking somewhat sad. When I asked him what was wrong, he said, “I just buried inchy.” He took me to a little area next to the steps below the treehouse where I saw a 6-inch square in the dirt outlined in bark. “The headstone fell down,” he said as he picked up a small piece of bark and stuck it back in the ground. His compassion was so compelling that I told him that I thought that the other children would like to see the grave and that maybe we could all put a special flower on the gravesite together. He thought that would be nice, so I went up to the treehouse and told groups of children here and there about the plan. We each chose a beautiful dried flower from the large collection of flowers that I had brought for papermaking and walked quietly down the steps to the site. One by one, without a lot of fanfare, but with the utmost respect and seriousness, each child laid a flower on the grave and went back to their business. It sparked conversation later about loved pets that they had buried over the years.

---

Another day at circle time, I brought out *Seeds of the Future: Quotes by Thomas Berry*, a book of quotes compiled by Carolyn Toben, and invited each child to open to a page spontaneously and to read the quote. We all did so, and I really liked the simplicity and the expansiveness of it, all at the same time.

### July 20, 2013

The last two rituals, that of the solo walk and gratitude circle, took place simultaneously on the last day of our program. I had the thought that Sebastian should lead the solo walk this year, as he really enjoyed it in years past. Memories of past silent solo walks with the older children flooded into my mind. I remembered the year that a young man would take a wrong turn on the solo from the outdoor chapel back to the treehouse. He would eventually find his way back to the treehouse alone, a year that his mother battled breast cancer. I remembered the following year when this same young man led a ceremony in the chapel the day after his mom passed away. He requested that each child take a long silent solo walk back to the treehouse, on the same path that he had taken by himself the year before. This was a profound experience for all of us as we grieved with him that day. I also remembered a more recent solo processional following a dedication ceremony that Sebastian and another boy had led during a program two years ago.

It was the last day of the program. A day of low humidity and a light breeze with air temperature about 80 degrees. Taking the Timberlake Trail down to the first bridge, we traipsed together in a loose knit group of fifteen hikers. The results of a very wet spring were evident everywhere by the multitude of green hues and lush plant life. At the bottom of the hill, at the intersection of the Keyhole and Timberlake Trails, Sebastian quietly gathered the group. There was a kind of excitement and anticipation in the air as they waited to hear what he would say. He quietly and succinctly told them that they would be taking a silent solo walk up to the outdoor chapel. While they were walking, they were to be thinking about each other, all of the people in this program, and what made each of them unique, what qualities they appreciated about each other. For some of the children, it was their first time in this part of the earth sanctuary. Grouped together in Silence, we looked up the green mossy carpet covering the trail that we would be taking. It seemed to invite us to come up the hill. Marnie left first. Slowly, as she rounded the bend and went out of sight, Sebastian nodded to the next person to go. No one asked the children to be quiet, but they were.

As each child left toward the unknown, one by one, those of us who were left behind began to notice the beautiful landscape that surrounded us. Lake Mackintosh was on our left, a woodland hill was to the right. It was dotted with heart shaped ginger, baby trees, large trees, decayed trees, dark and light mossy patches, animal holes of varying sizes and brown leaf cover. Under our feet was the brick colored earth embedded with glistening white feldspar and quartz. The trail behind us forked off across the footbridge and wound up and around a steep hill that was flanked by trees of all sizes and shapes. As I watched the children begin their solo journeys, I became aware of a growing presence of silence among us and surrounding us. Our breathing was becoming deeper and more relaxed, sunlight and flickering shadows cast a mysterious glow leaving all of us with a deep sense of peace. There was a palpable sense of presence. It was as if the landscape were coming alive, breathing with us.

Sebastian, sixteen years old, master guide of contemplation, sent me last. Thinking about the wonderful qualities of the young souls entrusted to us this week, I fell silent within, and at that moment a thought came streaming into my awareness. Unbeknownst to me, at that same moment, the same thought burst like a ray of light into Sebastian's awareness: *interiority, differentiation, and communion*. The three binding principles of the universe shared with us through Thomas Berry's deep insight. I knew that I was meant to begin our sharing time in the outdoor chapel with these thoughts. As I approached the chapel, a wooden platform with railings

---

and two wooden chairs, perched at the top of a steep rhododendron covered hillside meeting the calm lake below, the children sat happily waiting. I took a seat in one of the two chairs and waited for Sebastian. The statue of a kneeling Saint Francis was in the middle of the chapel on a wooden table laden with gifts of stone and plants from many pilgrims. Once Sebastian arrived and all were comfortable under a light green ceiling of leaves from an old beech tree, I began to share the three binding principles with the children.

I began with *interiority*, a subject of my own contemplation for many years. I said, “Everything has an inner life. You know that you do in your most private interior thoughts and feelings, in your own inner sanctuary. Everything – a tree, a stone, a butterfly - each has an interiority that is unique to itself.” Sebastian sat stunned and wondrous as I spoke the thoughts that had come streaming into him while waiting for his turn to take his solo. When I had finished sharing my understanding of all three, we moved into the circle of gratitude for each other. I was very moved by the depth, kindness, thoughtfulness and genuine appreciation that gushed forth from and for each individual who gathered there. There was laughter and joy and a safe sense of being seen and of self. I really appreciated some of the things that were said about me. When working with children, I often think of myself as a kind of conductor in a symphony as I shape and go with the flow of each moment, honoring each instrument loud and soft. This was noted. One child said that I loved everyone the same, that I did not have a favorite and was a friend to all. One child said that I was very intuitive. I think that all the individuals in the chapel that day felt strengthened in their own uniqueness and appreciated for being who they are.

That afternoon, after our solo walk to the outdoor chapel, a time was set aside after lunch to display their flags with the idea that they would share their flags with their peers. The universe flags were all hung up in the round room on the wall. On the last day, I asked each child, during a free moment of the day, to tell me about his or her flag. I thought that this would help them remember the symbols that they chose and give them a little help in expressing their thoughts later with the group.

Center Founder, Carolyn Toben, came over after lunch and joined us in the round room. One by one, the children stood up and spoke about the symbols on their flags. It was not easy for them to get up and share their universe flags and as each child bravely stood up, the group clapped for their courage. It was a very solemn occasion. It was very moving to hear what each child’s flag held:



Nathan’s flag honored endangered species. He spoke about their right to live. Another part of his flag symbolized the creek and the salamanders, which he enjoys very much. He drew four pictures: an owl, a bison, a snake and a deer.



Shaena's flag represented many circles coming together, like the Interfaith choir that she is a member of. Other symbols represented facing her fears.



Skye's flag held seed beads, twigs and shells on three circles representing earth, fire and water. Other symbols represented stars in the universe.



Jessica's flag represented the earth and the trees. She brought some lace from home to represent the delicate balance of the earth in relation to the universe.



---

Libby's flag represented a dragonfly that landed on her shoulder the first day of camp. It also represented the oceans, the earth, animals, stars and beehives.



Christopher's symbols represented the earth, salt water and fresh water, air, animals, plants and the way that they come together on the earth. He added a medicine bag with tobacco, a Native American plant that gives thanks for the earth. He chose amethyst for the stars and some sage.



Emily spoke of her symbols representing Christianity, the beach, stars, and an Irish Celtic knot. She wrote three things on paper and put them on her flag. They said *I love the night, I love the day. I love the 4 elements, earth, water, fire and air. I love the earth, I love the stars and the beach. Oh how I love the earth.*



Sophie's flag represented home, the symmetry of nature, bamboo, pussy willows, lemon balm, lavender and sage for nature's smells, stones for the backbone of life and noticing the small things. She wrote two things on her flag. *Notice, nurture and capture the small things. You can choose to hide from the reality of your surroundings, turning away into your own world, or you can embrace it all and try to adjust to others and change your own self.*

Ryan's flag represented the freedom that he feels at the beach. He added a tobacco medicine bag in honor of the lifeways and contributions of the Native American peoples' way of life on the earth before Europeans came to this continent.



Ellie's flag represented laughter, peace and fun!

After all of the flags were shared, Carolyn was deeply touched and she began to speak from her heart to the group. She told them that through their flags they had touched their own souls, and that they had made the time to do this. She spoke of the earth missing the children, that she had heard it very clearly. She told them that their flags represented who they were and that the memory of their flags will live inside them and restore them. She encouraged them to remember what their symbols represented. She went on to speak about how glad she was that we are all part of this amazing life and about how Thomas Berry would have called each one of them a "seed of the future." She said that the love represented in their flags would radiate out to everywhere! Then she said, "Each one of you is unique in the unfolding of the times to come and each one of you has a cosmic assignment. Noticing is like a prayer. Remember to notice." The room was very quiet after the presentation of the flags and Carolyn's response to them. I lit a stick of sage incense and asked Sebastian to play his sitar. Sitting amidst so many expressions of our love for the universe and the experience of hearing Carolyn's words was an awe-inspiring moment for us all. After Carolyn finished, she gave each child a hug and a copy of her book, *Seeds of the Future: Quotes by Thomas Berry*, the same little book we had been reading earlier in the week.

---

# The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World



## *Season of Programs*

### **The Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice A Two-Year Program for Educators**

**Thomas Berry and Dante's *Divine Comedy***  
October 27, November 17, December 8

**Recovering A Sense of the Sacred:  
Conversations with Thomas Berry**  
November 9, January 11, February 8, March 8

**Families of the Forest**  
November 10 and April 6

**Being, Beholding, Belonging:  
Eco-contemplative Practices for  
Children and Young Adults**  
February 22 and March 29

**Toward Wholeness:  
Caring for the Soul of the Child**  
March 1

**Thomas Berry Summer Program  
for Children**  
June 16-19: Ages 8-10  
June 23-26: Ages 11-13

**Ongoing Programs for Schools**  
Awakening to Nature  
The Poetry of Nature  
Special Design Programs for Schools

Please see our website at [www.beholdnature.org](http://www.beholdnature.org)  
for online registration



**Please consider becoming a Friend of the Center** by making a donation today. All Friends of the Center receive two issues of our newsletter, *Chrysalis*, per year. To donate online, go to our website at [www.beholdnature.org](http://www.beholdnature.org) or send your check, payable to CEINW, to:

CEINW  
P. O. Box 41108  
Greensboro, NC 27404

We deeply appreciate your support of our work!

---

Center for Education, Imagination and The Natural World  
P.O. Box 41108  
Greensboro, NC 27404