



Chrysalis

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In speaking about the education of the six-year-old child, (Maria Montessori) notes in her book, *To Educate the Human Potential*, that only when the child is able to identify its own center with the center of the universe does education really begin. For the universe, she says, “is an imposing reality.” It is “an answer to all questions.” “We shall walk together on this path of life, for all things are part of the universe, and are connected with each other to form one whole unity.” This comprehensive context enables “the mind of the child to become centered, to stop wandering in an aimless quest for knowledge.” She observes how this experience of the universe creates in children admiration and wonder, how this enables children to unify their thinking. In this manner, children learn how all things are related and how the relationship of things to one another is so close that “no matter what we touch, an atom, or a cell, we cannot explain it without knowledge of the wide universe.”¹

~ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*

Dear Reader,

Thomas Berry was somewhat amazed when he discovered the work of Maria Montessori, particularly her views on cosmic education. He is said to have called his colleague, mathematical cosmologist Brian Swimme, on the phone with great enthusiasm when he first discovered her work.

Montessori’s vision bears a striking resemblance to Thomas Berry’s vision, particularly to his book *The Universe Story*, written in collaboration with Brian Swimme. In her book, *To Educate the Human Potential*, she writes:

If the idea of the universe be presented to the child in the right way, it will do more for him than just arouse his interest, for it will create in him admiration and wonder, a feeling loftier than any interest and more satisfying...The stars, earth, stones, life of all kinds form a whole relation with each other,

¹ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 16.



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and so close is this relation that we cannot understand a stone without some understanding of the great sun! No matter what we touch, an atom, or a cell, we cannot explain it without knowledge of the wide universe... It becomes doubtful whether even the universe will suffice. How did it come into being, and how will it end? A greater curiosity arises, which can never be satiated; so will last through a lifetime... The child begins to ask: What am I? What is the task of man in this wonderful universe?²

Montessori developed her thoughts on cosmic education while interned in Kodaikanal, India, during World War II. It was there, in the context of the natural world and Eastern wisdom traditions, that she had time to reflect and form her recognitions about the essential unities of humanity, life and universe.³

Montessori, like Berry and Swimme, presented a picture of a universe unfolding in time. She expanded the teaching of history to include the history of the universe and set human history within this great cosmic story. She understood that the question, "Who am I?" can only be meaningfully answered in terms of the child's "cosmic task," or sense of purpose within the larger whole.

Even in 1948, Maria Montessori lamented the child's separation from the natural world: "In the civilized environment of our society, children live far from nature, and have few opportunities of entering into intimate contact with it... Does

² Maria Montessori, *To Educate the Human Potential* (Adyar, Madras, India: Kalakshetra Publications, 1961), 9-10.

³ Michael and D'Neil Duffy, *Children of the Universe: Cosmic Education in the Montessori Elementary Classroom* (Hollidaysburg, PA: Parent Child Press, 2002), 3.

anyone let them run out when it is raining, take off their shoes when they find pools of water, and let them run about with bare feet when the grass of the meadow is damp with dew?⁴

In her book *To Educate the Human Potential*, Montessori quoted Dante, saying “La somma sapienza e il primor amore,” or “the greatest wisdom is first to love.”⁵ Little did she know that Thomas Berry drew deep inspiration from this same source as he conducted a Dante study group for twenty years. In *The Dream of the Earth*, Thomas writes:

We are returning to our native place after a long absence, meeting once again with our kin in the earth community...

The world of life, of spontaneity, the world of dawn and sunset and glittering stars in the dark night heavens, the world of wind and rain, of meadow flowers and flowing streams, of hickory and oak and maple and spruce and pineland forests, the world of desert sand and prairie grasses, and within all this the eagle and the hawk, the mockingbird and the chickadee, the deer and the wolf and the bear, the coyote, the raccoon, the whale and the seal, and the salmon returning upstream to spawn – all this, the wilderness world recently rediscovered with heightened emotional sensitivity, is an experience not far from that of Dante meeting Beatrice at the end of the Purgatorio, where she descends amid a cloud of blossoms. It was a long wait for Dante, so aware of his infidelities, yet struck anew and inwardly ‘pierced,’ as when, hardly out of childhood, he had first seen Beatrice. The ‘ancient flame’ was lit again in the depths of his being. In that meeting, Dante is describing not only a personal experience, but the experience of an entire community at the moment of reconciliation with the divine after the long period of alienation and human wandering away from the true center.⁶

Maria Montessori and Thomas Berry both knew that we were wandering away from the true center – wandering away from source, from a sacred universe story, from a deep bond of intimacy with Earth, our common home.

In the Spring of 2005, The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World invited Montessori educators from throughout the state of North Carolina to an all-day retreat to explore the relationship between the vision of Thomas Berry and Maria Montessori’s cosmic education. Over the past eleven years, we have worked with over 14 Montessori schools to deepen this natural connection.

Now, this interweaving reaches a new fulfillment in the work of Montessori educators Andrea Reed and Heather Koch, “Re-imagining Montessori’s Great Lessons in the Light of Thomas Berry: A Message of Hope,” in this issue of *Chrysalis*. As you will read, Andrea and Heather first encountered the work of the Center at a Montessori conference in the Fall of 2013. Since then, within the context of the Center’s programs for educators, they have immersed themselves in Thomas Berry’s vision and brought new language to a deepening of Montessori’s Great Lessons.

⁴ Maria Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), 51.

⁵ Maria Montessori, *To Educate the Human Potential*, 26.

⁶ Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), 3.

Maria Montessori wrote that “we shall all walk together on this path of life, for all things are part of the universe, and we are connected with each other to form one whole unity. This idea helps the mind of the child to become fixed, to stop wandering in an aimless quest for knowledge. He is satisfied, having found the universal center of himself with all things.”⁷

And Thomas Berry wrote that “fulfillment . . . continues to find expression in our children running through the meadows, wading in the creeks, playing with animals, or simply sitting with utmost satisfaction in a backyard puddle experiencing the cooling delight of such an environment on a summer day. Such is the beginning of education, of aesthetic experience, of physical vigor, of acquaintance with the universe. Ultimately, it is the awakening of the universe to itself.”⁸

We hope you will feel the deep resonance between these two wise souls as you read on.

In Peace,

Peggy Whalen-Levitt

Peggy Whalen-Levitt, Director



⁷ Maria Montessori, *To Educate the Human Potential*, 8.

⁸ Thomas Berry, *Evening Thoughts* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 118.

Re-imagining Montessori's Great Lessons in the Light of Thomas Berry: A Message of Hope

by

Heather Koch and Andrea Reed

In 2009, after years of fundraising, Greenville Montessori School was relocated from a small but much-loved spot inside a housing subdivision in Winterville, NC, to a new campus built on five acres of land nestled between farms, fields of cotton and a stand of pine and maple trees. We, the lower- and upper- elementary teachers, envisioned gardening projects and nature hikes, as well as enhancing our cultural curriculum by taking key lessons outdoors. As time passed, we contemplated how to more intimately connect with the natural world that surrounded us.

In 2013, we were introduced to the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World (CEINW) at the South Carolina Montessori Alliance fall conference entitled Back to Nature where Sandy Bisdee, Director of Children's Programs at CEINW, and Colette Segalla, member of CEINW's Educator Council, gave the opening address. As we listened to the sounds of Sandy Bisdee's Native American flute, we welcomed a refreshing change from the pragmatic nature workshops that focused on such worthy endeavors as gardening with children, worm composting, and conducting soil experiments. At last, we were given a presentation that addressed the spiritual needs of teachers and children. Collette Segalla spoke of CEINW's programs at Timberlake Earth Sanctuary, outside of Greensboro and only a few hours drive from our school in Winterville, NC. Guided by the work of Thomas Berry, they offer opportunities for the children and adults who participate in their programs to explore ways of knowing which tap into our fundamental human capacities for intuition, imagination and contemplation, with the aim of *awakening* rather than educating. According to Thomas Berry, these soul capacities are particularly called for in our time:

Children need to develop within a whole cosmology of the sun, moon, stars; they need to experience mystical moments of dawn and sunset. They need to awaken to the world to relate to as a communion of subjects not to use as a collection of objects.¹

He further suggests that "...children need to see us practice a sympathetic presence to the Earth as a means for being in a mutually enhancing relationship to it."²

As we learned about eco-contemplative practices, we recognized we were not just looking for ways to include simple acts of appreciation for nature, nor to use nature just as a resource, nor as a backdrop for scientific experimentation. By February 2014, we were attending CEINW's new program for educators, "Being, Beholding, Belonging: Eco-contemplative Practices for Children and Young Adults." Our work in this program began the awakening process for us. We learned how the "Earth Guides" worked with children and the natural world at Timberlake Earth Sanctuary through deep noticing, listening, belonging and beholding. As we explored these new ways to engage our students with the natural world, we began to embrace a shift from teaching about nature

¹ Thomas Berry quoted in Carolyn Toben, "A Child Awakens...", In *Only the Sacred: Transforming Education in the Twenty-first Century*, Edited by Peggy Whalen Levitt (The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World, 2011), 18.

² Ibid., 18.

to experiencing it. Our initial attempts to connect our own students more intimately with nature's cycles were inspired by the Native American tale, "Earth on Turtle's Back."³ The students created a turtle calendar for tracking the phases of the moon and then gave each other "full moon" gifts through dance, poetry, or song.

Upper elementary students engaged in beholding work in pairs and responded in nature journals, describing moments of intimacy and careful observation. A nine-year-old wrote: "First I saw the leaves were hairy and with purple edges and some of the hairs had dew. The second time, I saw the way the leaves overlapped." We witnessed loving attention to the natural world in their writing and felt the strength of nature's potential as the ultimate teacher.

By November, we enrolled in "The Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice," a two-year program involving an immersion in Thomas Berry's vision, the cultivation of an intimate connection with the natural world through eco-contemplative work and culminating in the development of a personal practice. Center Founder, Carolyn Toben, in *Recovering a Sense of the Sacred: Conversations with Thomas Berry*, elicits Thomas Berry's thoughts about the natural world profoundly shaping a child's future experience, activating intuitive ways of knowing, and becoming the foundation for their thinking.⁴ In *The Great Work*, Berry traces back his view of life to a single moment in nature when he was eleven-years-old that affected him profoundly. While wandering outside his home, he came upon a meadow across a creek:

A magic moment, this experience gave my life something that seems to explain my thinking at a more profound level than almost any other experience I can remember. It was not only the lilies. It was the singing of crickets and the woodlands in the distance and the clouds in a clear sky...⁵

We began to explore ways to provide our students with special moments in nature. In *Coyote's Guide to Connecting with Nature*, Jon Young explains routines that have deep roots in ancient traditions, such as finding a "sit spot" for practicing intimate presence to nature.⁶ At the beginning of the school year, we read the book *Everyone Needs a Rock* by Byrd Baylor and each student chose a rock for themselves.⁷ Each of us found a sit spot in our garden and held our rocks, to help us stay present in nature. During a sunny day in December, we returned to our sit spots, entering nature with silence as a companion-presence, in the way Robert Sardello suggests in his book *Silence*.⁸ We heard the crickets chirping in the fields around the garden, enjoying the alternating sensations of warm sunlight and cool air. The children settled into silence and suddenly birds came. They flew fast, swooping and diving over our heads, as if we were just another part of the garden. Afterward, back inside the classroom, students shared their observations. We went around the circle, each student describing a sight, sound or feeling with an accompanying gesture. Some of the students mentioned the birds, others the wind, clouds, plants, sky. One six-year-old student said she felt energy flowing up and all around her. Another said he felt like he was on the moon. This reminded us of Sardello's statement that "space has collapsed into the time experience" and we become "Time Beings, not beings in time" when we engage with silence.⁹ Similarly, Sandy Bisdee writes about the children she works with in nature and observes, "A gradual shedding of the everyday world begins to occur as they

³ Michael J. Caduto and Joseph Bruchac, *Keepers of the Earth: Native American Stories and Environmental Activities for Children* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum, Inc., 1988), 25-26.

⁴ Carolyn Toben, *Recovering a Sense of the Sacred: Conversations with Thomas Berry* (Whitsett, NC: Timberlake Earth Sanctuary Press, 2012), 98.

⁵ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York, NY: Bell Tower, 1999), 12.

⁶ Jon Young, Ellen Haas, Evan McGown, *Coyote's Guide to Connecting with Nature* (Shelton, WA: Owl Link Media Corporation, 2010), 35-40.

⁷ Byrd Baylor, *Everyone Needs a Rock* (New York, NY: Aladdin, 1985).

⁸ Robert Sardello, *Silence: The Mystery of Wholeness* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Press, 2008), 7.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

begin to focus their attention on the miracle of life that surrounds them.”¹⁰ We, too, marveled that a brief time in nature seemed to have left such strong impressions. Through these eco-contemplative practices, we began to cultivate within ourselves and our students a stronger sense of awe, wonder and reverence through loving attention to and connection with the natural world; and in the process, we began to notice ways for ourselves and our students to foster both an authentic sense of self as well as an intimate sense of togetherness.

As we ended the first year of our journey of discovery in partnership with Center Director, Peggy Whalen-Levitt, and the Center’s Earth Guides, we did not yet know that we would find something greater than any lesson we had conceived of as Montessori teachers. We would arrive at a deeper understanding of our Montessori “Great Lessons”, whose potential power is emphasized in our Montessori teacher training programs, but can only be fully realized as we further develop our own understanding of them. Maria Montessori emphasized the importance of the teacher’s own inner preparation for the work of educating children.¹¹ In June, the “Inner Life” participants gathered for a two-day retreat that led to the birthing of a practice for our second year in the program. Through our readings of Thomas Berry, we came to see an important message of hope that had been missing in our own presentations of the Great Lessons. We planned to revise them by incorporating his words and vision of a future in which we come to see the world as a “communion of subjects, not a collection of objects.”¹² Maria Montessori also called for children to find their own purpose and reach their unique potential, and discover that all things are connected and have a purpose. As we immersed ourselves deeper into the work of Thomas Berry and CEINW, we heard echoes of Maria Montessori’s cosmic education for elementary age children, through which they come to see that all beings have a unique contribution to make to the whole of the earth. Thomas Berry proposed that in order to do this inner work, we must connect to the larger context provided by the story of the universe, the story of the earth and living beings, and the story of humans.¹³ Maria Montessori believed the elementary child is in a sensitive period for absorbing these stories. She recognized that “...nature has made this a period for the acquisition of culture...,” and that “...at six years of age all items of culture are received enthusiastically, and later these seeds will expand and grow.”¹⁴

These “Great Lessons” remain a vital part of the Montessori cultural curriculum and provide children with impressionistic experiences that stimulate imagination and provide opportunities for discovering an intimate knowledge of self as well as an understanding of one’s place in the world. Thomas Berry conveyed the urgency of understanding our role in nature at this time in human history. He described our present time as a “groping phase” in which we have come to realize our scientific traditions are not the full answer.¹⁵ He recognized that “the children of the twenty-first century will determine the fate of this planet. The twentieth century was a century of death and destruction. The twenty-first must be a century of life.”¹⁶ Through the retelling of these stories, children are called to find their moral compass and take up the task of leading human society into a new era, which Thomas Berry called the Ecozoic Age.¹⁷ Montessori also understood that hope for humanity lies with our children:

¹⁰ Sandy Bisdee, “Silence,” In *Only the Sacred: Transforming Education in the Twenty-first Century*, Edited by Peggy Whalen Levitt, (The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World, 2011), 116.

¹¹ Maria Montessori, *From Childhood to Adolescence* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1976), 36.

¹² Thomas Berry, *Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as Sacred Community* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 2006), 17. See also Peggy Whalen-Levitt, “Thomas Berry’s ‘Communion of Subjects’: Awakening the ‘Heart of the Universe,’” *The Ecozoic*, 2 (2016).

¹³ Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe: Earth, Spirituality, and Religion in the Twenty-first Century* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2009), 79.

¹⁴ Maria Montessori, *To Educate the Human Potential* (Adyar, Madras, India: Kalakshetra Publications, 1961), 3.

¹⁵ Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books, 1988), 47.

¹⁶ Thomas Berry quoted in Peggy Whalen-Levitt, “Dear Reader,” (*Chrysalis*, Spring 2012), 1.

¹⁷ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*, 201.

An education capable of saving humanity is no small undertaking; it involves the spiritual development of man, the enhancement of his value as an individual, and the preparation of young people to understand the times in which they live.¹⁸

Inner Life of the Child in Nature Practice

In the revisions we made to the first great lesson, “The Creation Story,” we introduced the students to Thomas Berry’s own words emphasizing the dichotomous nature of the universe, as a drama of both creation and destruction, and the view of the human as the universe reflecting upon itself. By the second great lesson, “The Coming of Life on Earth,” we discovered the quotation that resonated most with the children: “Only by dealing with the difficulty does the creativity come forth.”¹⁹ It became a refrain throughout the story, repeated after the telling of the oxygen poison crisis, the giant meteor crash, the mass extinctions. We ended with, “Only a sense of the sacred can save us.”²⁰

In order to further deepen our students’ connection to the natural world through imaginal ways of knowing, we partnered with Dr. Patricia Clark, the director of the Theatre for Youth program at East Carolina University. Along with Theatre for Youth interns Alyssa Silva and Jordan Biggers, we prepared our students for a Council of All Beings, which unfolded simultaneously with our timeline of life stories. Guided by John Seed’s *Thinking Like a Mountain*, we met for eight weeks in our new outdoor environment, each time expanding on our relationship with beings that do not have a human voice.²¹ Our work culminated in our students donning masks and speaking for such beings as water and rock, along with beloved animals either misunderstood or threatened. From the students’ own words we created a “bill of rights” for all beings. A ten-year-old spoke for Maple Tree: “Although I do not talk, I still have a voice, one that you do not understand. That voice is my soul.” Another advocated for Lizard: “It doesn’t matter if an animal is big or small, we all count. We are all here for a purpose.” A six-year-old shared what we humans can learn from her being, Water Lily: “I can grow in harsh places. I am a symbol of peace.”

Within the Great Lessons lies the power to awaken deep convictions necessary for living a life in concert with the natural world. With the revision of the third lesson, “The Coming of Humans,” we attempted to convey the power of Thomas Berry’s call to relearn how to connect with the Earth and with the universe as a whole in the full wonder of its being, just as our early human ancestors once did. He reminds us that if humans hope to guide the future of earth effectively we must engage our visionary, intuitive and imaginative ways of knowing and listen to what the earth is telling us, rather than using only our scientific/rational ways of knowing to determine the future of the earth.²² He invites us to reimagine our place in the universe. “Our best procedure might be to consider that we need not a human answer to an earth problem, but an earth answer to an earth problem.”²³ In the face of such harsh realities as war and environmental devastation, children and adults need to know the solution is within reach. The first and most important step on this journey is to recognize that humans are not the pinnacle of creation, with earth and its beings as resources for our use.

¹⁸ Maria Montessori, *Education and Peace*, trans. Helen R. Lane (Chicago, IL: Henry Regnery Company, 1972), 34-35.

¹⁹ Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era: A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers LLC, 1992), 56.

²⁰ Thomas Berry, Foreword in Thomas Merton, *When the Trees Say Nothing*, edited by Kathleen Diegnan (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2003), 18-19.

²¹ John Seed, Joanna Macy, Pat Fleming, and Arne Naess, *Thinking Like a Mountain: Towards a Council of All Beings* (Philadelphia, PA: New Society Publishers, 1988).

²² Thomas Berry, *Evening Thoughts*, 56-57.

²³ Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, 35.

We found further inspiration for our work in *I am You, You Are Me*, by Colette Segalla, in which she explores the relationships between self, spirituality and the natural world in children.²⁴ She suggests that both unstructured time in nature as well as experiences with adults who model respect for and a spiritual connection to the natural world are crucial to the development of the soul capacities of compassion, empathy, gratitude, and a sense of the sacred in children. Using the imaginal approach to research, Segalla delves into the search for an intimate knowledge of the connection between the human spirit and the natural world. She describes “setting the stage” for her work by gathering objects representing the key components of the research and then “sending out invitations”.²⁵ This led us to try to do the same. We pulled out a small wooden stool with a tree painted on it, which had served as a peace table in the classroom. On the stool we placed a feather, a clamshell, a piece of pottery with a lotus design, lapis lazuli and obsidian. We thought about our theme for this school year, “The Web of Life,” inspired by the work of Richard Louv, in which life is described as an intertwining of community, nature, spirit, time, friendship and family.²⁶ We came to see connections between the components of the web and the objects we had chosen.

When we gathered the children around the collection we had made, along with our early humans timeline, we read, “The universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects.”²⁷ We spoke first of the tree as a symbol of communion and read: “Nothing can be itself without everything else. Everything exists in multiple dimensions. A tree is a physical being, a living being, an Earth being, and a universe being.”²⁸ Next, we held up the clamshell as a representation of time and some students spontaneously recalled the role of animals using the calcium carbonate that was choking the early oceans to form shells. Another student spoke of the importance of the clamshell to humans in its use as wampum. We read: “Only within the ever renewing processes of nature is there any future for the human community.”²⁹ We then offered the obsidian to show the human connection to nature, as it was a favorite trade item in prehistoric cultures. The lapis lazuli represented friendship, treasured since antiquity for its intense color. The feather represented spirit. We read: “Without the soaring birds, the great forests, the sounds and colorations of the insects, the free-flowing streams, the flowering fields, the sight of the clouds by day and the stars at night, we become impoverished in all that makes us human.”³⁰ A student commented on another connection between the feather and the human story that had not occurred to us when we chose it—its use as a tool for writing. We focused next on the lotus and asked the children to think about its connection to family. We have a peace flag in the classroom with a lotus on it. Some of them immediately pointed to it and thought of the petals as members of a family. We pointed to the end of the timeline representing present day and asked students to think about what the greatest human discovery will be in the future. Thomas Berry suggested that it will be the discovery of human friendship with and love for all beings that live with us on this planet, whose beauty inspires our paintings and our poetry.³¹ Our stories of the universe, of the coming of life on earth and the coming of humans put us in touch with our beginnings and the origin of all life and pave the way to the understanding that, “The natural world is the larger sacred community to which we belong.”³²

²⁴ Collette Segalla, *I am You, You Are Me* (Greensboro, NC: The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World, 2015).

²⁵ Ibid., 131.

²⁶ Richard Louv, *The Web of Life: Weaving the Values that Sustain Us* (Berkeley, CA: Conari Press, 1996), 2.

²⁷ Thomas Berry, *Evening Thoughts*, 17.

²⁸ Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe*, 113.

²⁹ Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, 74-75.

³⁰ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*, 200.

³¹ Ibid., 149.

³² Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, 81.

We ended the lesson by laying out a compass rose on a mat and placing four words at each cardinal direction, love with south, reverence with north, wonder with west and gratitude with east. Thomas Berry invites us to recover what our early ancestors had, which we have lost...a love of all living things, the wonder of the natural world, reverence for the difficulty that brings forth creativity, and gratitude for the earth and the universe, which give us life.

Conclusion

In her book, *Nurturing the Spirit*, Aline Wolf reminds us that if we hope to affect societal change through our lessons, we must nurture children's spiritual development.³³ Similarly, in *Children of the Universe*, Michael and D'Neil Duffy invite Montessori educators to probe and understand Montessori's Great Lessons, if we hope to realize their potential as a catalyst for peace and environmental change.³⁴ Montessori understood the power of these stories to kindle the child's imagination and sow the seeds for societal change. "We shall walk together on this path of life, for all things are a part of the universe, and are connected with each other to form one whole unity."³⁵ Our cosmic task is to bear witness to and promote unity for all beings and the universe itself. The Duffys remind us that "We are only in the early stages of understanding our relationship to the universe. Perhaps humans may be able to affect the universe itself in ways we do not yet understand."³⁶ They conclude with a call to update Montessori's cosmic curriculum to reflect the contributions of modern science.³⁷ In *The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos*, Brian Swimme agrees that science plays an important role in our understanding of the universe, but instead, views cosmology as a wisdom tradition. He proposes that the power of the universe story lies in its ability to awaken deep convictions and inspire us to live in unity with all creation.³⁸ Thomas Berry, too, recognized the previous century as important to the development of our scientific tradition but invites us to go deeper.

In May 2015, we decided to move our sixth-grade graduation ceremony to Timberlake Earth Sanctuary. In order to meet the needs of each member of our group, Sandy Bisdee designed a special day for our students and their parents. Sandy set the tone for respect, deep noticing and reverence for life and for each other. Then we spoke to the children about this special time in their lives and each child completed a necklace of beads representing their past, present and future. The rhythm of the day included empathetic listening in pairs, listening "with new ears" to nature in silence, and journaling. The day ended with the children taking a solo walk across the Marsh Bridge guided by the sound of Sandy's Native American flute. As they walked across the bridge, they thought about what they were leaving behind, what they were taking with them and what they were hoping for their future.

³³ Aline Wolf, *Nurturing the Spirit in Non-sectarian Classrooms* (Hollidaysburg, PA: Parent Child Press, 1996), 107.

³⁴ Michael and D'Neil Duffy, *Children of the Universe: Cosmic Education in the Montessori Elementary Classroom* (Hollidaysburg, PA: Parent Child Press, 2002), 133.

³⁵ Maria Montessori, *To Educate the Human Potential*, 6.

³⁶ Michael and D'Neil Duffy, *Children of the Universe*, 137.

³⁷ Ibid., 138.

³⁸ Brian Swimme, *The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos: Humanity and the New Story* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 31, 101.



This poem was written by Dana Kohtz, a sixth-grader, during the journaling time spent in solo sit spots at the earth sanctuary. It reflects an awakening to a greater universe, to our earth community and to each other:

Hope

The rain going down.
The sound of love in the air.
The laughter in the background.
Alone but not really alone.
Surrounded by happiness but not really happy.
Loved but not really loved.
Time stops, can't think.
I feel empty but I am not.
No hope, then a Rainbow.
Love, laughter, not alone, happy and loved.
Time starts, can think.
Filled with love and hope.
Hope for a new beginning.

In June, the “Inner Life” participants engaged in the same ceremonial Marsh Bridge crossing. In *The Dream of the Earth*, Thomas Berry states, “We are like a musician who faintly hears a melody deep within the mind, but not clearly enough to play it through.”³⁹ By looking back to the beginning of our partnership with the Center, we are able to weave our own story with the story of the universe. We continue to explore ways to strengthen our own connection to nature through eco-contemplative activities. CEINW has provided us with a supportive

³⁹ Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, 47.

environment in which to reflect on our educational practices and expand them to include often neglected inner capacities, such as gratitude, reverence and wonder, in order to enhance our students' understanding of the mutually beneficial relationship between themselves and the natural world.

Coda

Vision Statement of the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World:

“CEINW offers educators a model of a view of educational practice in which intuitive, imaginal and contemplative ways of knowing, in all their unifying capacities, are seen as central to the development of a mutually enhancing relationship between the human being and the natural world. Such a view, if practiced at all levels of learning, can begin to change our understanding of the role we play within this life-bearing process we know as “nature,”...**leading to practical outcomes affecting the child, the natural world, and the culture at large.**”⁴⁰

Montessori's Vision:

“The secret of good teaching is to regard the child's intelligence as a fertile field in which seeds may be sown, **to grow under the heat of flaming imagination.** Our aim therefore is not merely to make the child understand, and still less to force him to memorize, but so **to touch his imagination as to enthuse him to his inmost core.**”⁴¹

“The secret of success is found to lie in the right **use of imagination in awakening interest,** and the stimulation of seeds of interest already sown by attractive literary and pictorial material, but all correlated to a central idea, of greatly ennobling inspiration – **the Cosmic Plan in which all, consciously or unconsciously, serve the Great Purpose of Life.**”⁴²



⁴⁰ The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World, “Our Vision,” <http://www.beholdnature.org/>

⁴¹ Maria Montessori, *To Educate the Human Potential*, 3.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 11.

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Heather Koch, originally from Madison, Ohio and a graduate of The Ohio State University, is a wife and mother of four sons. She is a seventeen-year teacher at Greenville Montessori School in North Carolina where she works with nine to twelve year olds. Her work with the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World reflects a desire to greater understand, observe and share the beauty of the universe with her students.

Andrea Reed is the lower-elementary teacher at Greenville Montessori School. She is AMS-credentialed (Elementary I and II) and has taught both lower- and upper-elementary for over 13 years. Before teaching in Montessori classrooms, she completed a graduate degree at the University of New Mexico with an emphasis in child development and taught psychology at the university level. She and her husband enjoy time in nature, which they attribute to childhoods spent roaming the outdoors.



Greenville Montessori Graduation at Timberlake Earth Sanctuary:
Dana, William, Eleanor, Emma, Nathaniel, Rany and Benjamin

*We shall all walk together on this path of life, for all things are part of the universe,
and we are connected with each other to form one whole unity.*

~ Maria Montessori

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We wish to express a heartfelt thank you to the following individuals and foundations for their generous support of our work from March 1, 2015 – March 1, 2016

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Programs for Children and Families

To register or reserve dates for our children's programs go to
<http://www.beholdnature.org/programsforchildren.php>

Families of the Forest

April 10, 2016

1:30 pm – 4:30 pm

Place: Timberlake Earth Sanctuary

1501 Rock Creek Dairy Road, Whitsett, NC

Group size: maximum 24

Cost: \$15 per person

The ever-accelerating pace of change is leading families to a hurried existence that separates them from their connection to the Earth. Join us for this family day at the earth sanctuary where we will gather around the fire circle, go on a guided earth walk and share our experiences from the day.

Awakening to Nature

9:30 am – 1:30 pm

Place: Timberlake Earth Sanctuary

1501 Rock Creek Dairy Road, Whitsett, NC

Grades K-5, maximum 24 children

Cost: \$250 per class (bring a bag lunch)

The Center's "Awakening to Nature" programs are intended to foster reverence for the natural world, develop the inner capacity to attend to the world around you, and create a deep, personal connection with nature. The programs bring the inner lives of children into a new relationship with the beauty, wonder and intimacy of the natural world.

"Awakening to Nature" programs begin in a circle where children are invited to slow down and make themselves at home in nature. Guided earth walks follow, led by experienced Earth Guides, with groups of 8 children. The small size of the group and the "beholding" practices of the Center enable the children to enter into a living and loving relationship with the natural world. Throughout the changing seasons, children are invited to enter into silence and experience the fullness of each moment – to take in the sounds, the smells, the feel of the air, the colors and movements of the world around them.

Children then return to the circle where they enjoy a bag lunch together. The day ends with a heartwarming circle of reflection. The rhythm of the day enables the children to assimilate their experiences and to enter into community together as they share what touched them about the day.

We are happy to adapt this program to the differing developmental needs of children in grades Kindergarten-5.

We especially like to work with schools year after year so that the children can have sustained and meaningful connections with the natural world over time. From the returning children who have experienced our program over the course of several years, we have learned how one day spent in our program has lived in their memories and in their hearts for a whole year in between visits. They remember the peaceful sounds of the Native American Flute, the relationships with various creatures that they have encountered, the beauty of nature, and our practices, especially our Behold practice. We have also learned how much the children appreciate being in an atmosphere of peace and quiet.

Empathetic Listening

9:30 am – 1:30 pm

Place: Timberlake Earth Sanctuary

1501 Rock Creek Dairy Road, Whitsett, NC

Grades 4-8 (maximum 24 children)

Cost: \$250 per class (bring a bag lunch)

Our children live in a fast-paced, competitive and high-tech world, in a culture where continuous partial attention and multi-tasking are becoming the norm. Are we losing our ability to truly listen to each other? Do we carry an attitude of respect that allows us to listen to the meaning and feeling that come through another's words?

The "Empathetic Listening" program engages children in a practice of deep listening to each other and to the natural world. The program begins with an introduction to empathetic listening, a way of listening that creates mutual understanding, trust and respect. Can we learn to listen without judgement? Can we listen without interrupting? Can we reflect back what we think we have heard? Can we sense the feelings behind the words? These are some of the practices that children have an opportunity to explore together in pre-selected pairs.

During the second half of the program, the children are invited to listen deeply to the natural world during a solo writing time in their own special sit spot within a beautiful earth sanctuary. They are invited to become still, to deeply notice the place where they are sitting. What makes this particular landscape special and unique? What are you hearing in your special place? What might nature reveal to you? In the rare experience of silence, a voice begins to emerge, their own, inspired by the wonders of nature.

Our highly experienced staff members carry an attitude of deep respect for all life. We seek always to embody new ways of listening to nature and to each other, ways that are respectful, reverential and relational.

The Poetry of Nature

9:30 am – 1:30 pm

Place: Timberlake Earth Sanctuary

1501 Rock Creek Dairy Road, Whitsett, NC

Grades 6 – 12 (maximum 24 children)

Cost: \$250 per class (bring a bag lunch)

"Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, the world offers itself to your imagination, calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting – over and over announcing your place in the family of things."

~ Mary Oliver

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.

Thomas Berry Summer Programs for Children

June 13-16, 2016: Ages 8-10

June 20-23, 2016: Ages 10-13

9:30 am – 3:00 pm

Place: Timberlake Earth Sanctuary

1501 Rock Creek Dairy Road, Whitsett, NC

Group size: 12

Cost: \$250 per child

Inspired by the vision of Thomas Berry, our summer programs for children provide a unique opportunity for a small group of 12 children to make a deep personal connection to the natural world within the meadows, creeks, gardens and forests of a 165-acre earth sanctuary. Earth walks and creek walking are daily sources of joy and inspiration. Within the peace and beauty of Timberlake Earth Sanctuary, new eyes and ears awaken as the children create expressions out of their experiences with the earth. Clay, papermaking, nature journaling and Native American flute are some of the eco-contemplative arts that enliven the rhythm of our days.



"We are touched by what we touch, shaped by what we shape,
enhanced by what we enhance."

~Thomas Berry

Led by:

Director of Children's Programs, **Sandy Bisdee**, completed her Association Montessori International (AMI) Teaching Certificate in 1979. A born naturalist and Native American flute player, Sandy has developed the Center's eco-contemplative practices for children since 2005. She completed her certification in the North Carolina Environmental Education Certification Program in 2009. Sandy brings to her work a lifetime of loving children and of loving the earth and of finding ways to bring the two together!

Marnie Weigel is an eco-contemplative artist who enjoys knitting, making pottery, journals, and jewelry. Her creations are inspired by her reflections in silence and beholding in the natural world. She received a BA in Environmental Studies from Warren Wilson College in the beautiful Swannanoa Valley in Western, North Carolina in 1995 and an AAS in Professional Crafts: Clay from Haywood Community College in 2000. Marnie taught 7th grade for six years in the public schools before graduating from the Center's Inner Life of the Child in Nature program in 2010.

Programs for Adults

Presence to Living Earth

“We still have little understanding of the spiritual dimension within the natural world, or how our individual soul relates to the larger dimension of the world soul (what the ancients called the *anima mundi*)... Instead we are caught within a contemporary consciousness that focuses on the individual self, no longer even aware of our deep bond to the sacred within creation.”¹

~ Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee

Please join us for a contemplative experience of the cycle of the year through a series of seasonal retreats that offer an opportunity to step beyond the confinement of the contemporary individual self into an awareness of our deep bond to the sacred within creation.

Each of our retreats creates an opening to the inner quality of what we see and hear in the temporal rhythms of the year. Through contemplative participation in the yearly cycle, an awareness of the inner reality of the seasons arises within us and can be brought to expression through the eco-contemplative arts.

Presence to Living Earth in Spring

With Andrew Levitt

Date: Sunday, April 24, 2016

Time: 2:00 pm – 5:00 pm

Place: The Treehouse, Timberlake Earth Sanctuary

1501 Rock Creek Dairy Rd.

Whitsett, NC 27377

Cost: \$50

“My worship is a blue sky and ten thousand crickets in the deep wet hay of the field.

My vow is the silence under their song.”

~Thomas Merton

After the inbreathing of the earth in Winter, our souls expand with the outbreathing of the earth in Spring. Eco-contemplative experiences can open us to the inner qualities of this season of outbreath and awakening.

We invite you to join us for an eco-contemplative experience of earth in Spring. Our day will open with a poetry reading and then move into solo time on Timberlake trails – time for beholding, time for coming into attunement with the inner qualities of Spring, time to write our own poetry of nature. A poem can be a prayer, a song, a meditation, a question, a description, a laugh, a cry, a rant, a sigh. It is always a gesture to and of the world. We invite you to stay awake in your senses and be as present as you can be until the words enter from a deeper way of listening. At day's end, we'll return to the Treehouse for light refreshments and sharing our poems around the circle.

Andrew Levitt is a nature poet, performance artist and author of *All the Scattered Leaves of the Universe: Journey and Vision in Dante's Divine Comedy and the Work of Thomas Berry*.

To register for Presence to Living Earth, go to <http://www.beholdnature.org/livingearth.php>

¹ Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee, *Spiritual Ecology: The Cry of the Earth* (Point Reyes, CA: The Golden Sufi Center, 2013), 143.

The Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice

“The destiny of the children and the planet is going to depend on us
to respond to their deeper mode of being.”

~ Thomas Berry



photo by Lissa Gotwals

The Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice program, class of 2016-2018

A two-year co-research program for educators, therapists, parents, naturalists, health care providers
and others with children and young adults in their care.

From 2000-2009, The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World worked closely with eco-theologian Thomas Berry to re-imagine the child's relationship with the natural world, guided by his deep wisdom and understanding that “only a sense of the sacred will save us.”

The Inner Life of the Child in Nature program unfolds over the course of two years. In the first year, we focus on “Presence” – on the cultivation of inner capacities in children, young adults and ourselves that bring us into a bond of intimacy with the natural world. In the second year, we focus on “Practice” – on new ways of being and working in the world.

We create a meaningful context for our programs by paying close attention to the rhythm of the day. Retreats begin with a moment of silence intended to quiet the mind and create a field of receptivity for the group. Every retreat includes solo time in the natural world, time for reflection and sharing, the fellowship of shared meals at lunch, and presentations related to the theme at hand.

The program calls for deep inner work on the part of participants as well as a commitment to attend every retreat during the first year of the program. Between retreats, participants engage in a weekly practice of presence to the natural world and reflective engagement with selected readings.

Dates: Day Retreats will be held from 9:00 am – 4:00 pm on Saturday, November 12, 2016, February 4, 2017 and April 1, 2017 and on Tuesday/Wednesday, June 27-28, 2017. The second year includes informal gatherings on Sunday afternoons, October 15, 2017 and February 25, 2018 and a graduation retreat on Sunday, June 24, 2018 from 2:00 – 8:00 pm.

Cost: \$750 for the two-year program (includes materials, lunch and individual consultations).

Place: Timberlake Earth Sanctuary, 1501 Rock Creek Dairy Rd, Whitsett, NC.

Faculty

Director, **Peggy Whalen-Levitt**, has been with the Center since its beginnings in 2000. Working closely with Center Founder Carolyn Toben and cultural historian Thomas Berry, Peggy has been deeply engaged in the formation of a work for adults and children, based in intuitive, imaginal and contemplative ways of knowing, that recovers the inner vision of a society in harmony with nature. She holds a Ph.D. in Language in Education from the University of Pennsylvania, where she co-created a graduate Course of Study in Childhood Imagination. She has written widely on aesthetic communication in childhood and is the editor of *Chrysalis*, the Center journal, and *Only the Sacred: Transforming Education in the Twenty-first Century*, a *Chrysalis* reader. Peggy coordinates the “The Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice program.”

Director of Children’s Programs, **Sandy Bisdee**, completed her Association Montessori International (AMI) Teaching Certificate in 1979. A born naturalist and Native American flute player, Sandy has developed the Center’s eco-contemplative practices for children since 2005. She completed her certification in the North Carolina Environmental Education Certification Program in 2009. Sandy brings to her work a lifetime of loving children and of loving the earth and of finding ways to bring the two together!

Andrew Levitt holds a BA in English from Yale University and a PhD in Folklore from the University of Pennsylvania. He trained as a mime with Marcel Marceau and with Paul J. Curtis at The American Mime Theatre. Andrew performed and taught mime professionally for over thirty years and then helped found the high school at the Emerson Waldorf School in Chapel Hill, NC where he taught Humanities and directed theater for seven years. Andrew co-created a performance piece, “The Meadow Across the Creek: Words from Thomas Berry” for the Thomas Berry Centennial in 2014 and is the author of *All the Scattered Leaves of the Universe: Journey and Vision in Dante’s Divine Comedy and the Work of Thomas Berry*, published by the Center in the Fall of 2015. As Dr. Merryandrew, he currently works as a clown doctor in the Pediatric unit at Moses Cone Memorial Hospital in Greensboro, NC.

Colette Segalla holds a Ph.D. in clinical psychology from Pacifica Graduate Institute in California and is a practicing therapist in Raleigh, NC. Before returning to graduate school, Colette was an AMI certified Montessori teacher in a lower elementary classroom of six-to-nine year old children. The work of Steiner and Montessori has contributed to her current Jungian-based exploration of children’s spirituality and how a relationship with the natural world contributes to the child’s spiritual development. Colette is the author of *I am You, You are Me: The Interrelatedness of Self, Spirituality, and the Natural World in Childhood*, published by the Center in the Fall of 2015.

To read more about the program and download an application go to <http://www.beholdnature.org/ilcn.php>

Applications are reviewed on a rolling admissions basis



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 or send your check, payable to CEINW, to:

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