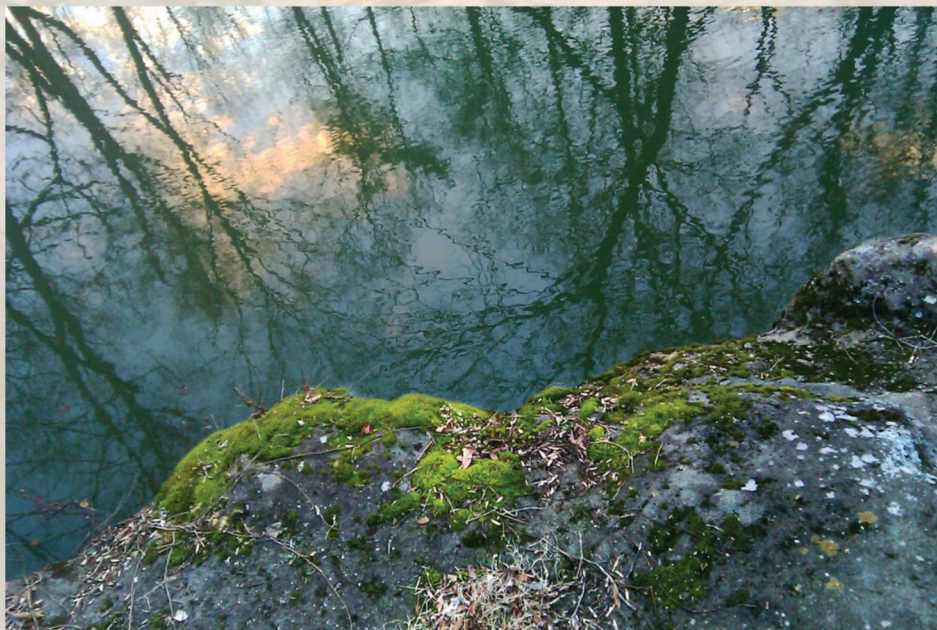


ONLY THE SACRED



TRANSFORMING EDUCATION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

A *CHRYSALIS* READER

EDITED AND INTRODUCED BY PEGGY WHALEN-LEVITT

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Transforming Education in the
Twenty-First Century

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The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World

2011

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In Loving Memory of Thomas Berry

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Gratitudes

The collaborative endeavor of this book would not have been possible without the vision and support of Carolyn Toben, who provided a home for the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural world at Timberlake Farm Earth Sanctuary in Whitsett, NC from 2000-2012. As Founder of the work, dear friend and soul teacher, Carolyn has brought deep inspiration and wisdom to the shaping of new social forms that create a vessel for this work.

The work was blessed by the gracious presence of Thomas Berry during the last nine years of his life and is shaped by his vision of a sacred universe at every turn.

My gratitude goes to the Kalliopeia Foundation for its sacred mission and support of the Center's national program for educators, "The Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice." Most of the articles collected here were birthed within this program.

My heart warms with gratitude for all the children of the forest, of the meadow, of the creek and garden who allowed us to share their home for a time and taught us how to listen and go deeper. And, to all the human children and teachers who walked in Silence on earth sanctuary trails in communion with all around them. Gratitude also to Sandy Bisdée and the Center's earth guides who brought the children to the universe and the universe to the children. Through you, this work was formed.

Finally, deep gratitude to all those friends of the Center who recognized in this work a transformative way forward and offered their support. Your devotion to the work resounds through every page.

Introduction

by Peggy Whalen-Levitt

We find ourselves at a moment in time when the earth shifts beneath our feet as we enter what Thomas Berry has referred to as “the groping phase.” “We are,” he says, “like a musician who faintly hears a melody deep within the mind, but not clearly enough to play it through.”¹ A worldview born of a materialist philosophy that has shaped every aspect of life in Western civilization for the past four hundred years begins to crack and break open like an egg birthing new life. With this cracking, the contours of what had been transparent before begin to be brought into conscious awareness. We have reached a point in time when, as Thomas Berry recognized, there is a certain futility in all our well-intentioned efforts to fix and solve the problems that surround us—a point in time when “only our sense of the sacred with save us.”²

There is a certain hubris in our trust in human progress and our belief in knowledge as power. We’ve come to see ourselves in control, for better or worse. There is a kind of noble egotism in the way we go about taking care of things. We measure, analyze, run numbers and projections, calculate, create plans and programs—all without reference to a source of being. We have forgotten who we are.

To better understand our present condition, we need to take a look at the broad sweep of time. Humans once experienced themselves as living in an intimate and sacred universe—a form of consciousness that philosopher Owen Barfield referred to as original participation with the

¹ Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), 47.

² Merton, Thomas, *When the Trees Say Nothing*, edited by Kathleen Diegnan with a Foreword by Thomas Berry, (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2003), 18-19.

world. This was a world imbued with spirit, experienced through myth and ritual, a world of immersion of human beings in their surroundings.

At the time of the Renaissance, we entered a new phase of earthly evolution where the development of the intellect became available to the human on a new level. In order for that to happen, a separation between the human and the natural world had to take place. We stepped back from our immersion in the world and began to see with new eyes—spectator eyes that focused on the material world in a self-conscious awakening. Thomas Berry refers to this transition as “Earth awakening to an intellectual understanding of itself.”³

A materialist view of reality began to emerge through a model of the universe as a machine that was articulated initially by Descartes. It was further advanced by Francis Bacon who saw in science not only a way of understanding the universe, but also a way to control and transform the natural world for human use and comfort. And it was furthered by Galileo who advanced the idea that only the quantitative aspects of matter could reveal true knowledge. Finally, it found expression through Isaac Newton who developed an understanding of the universe as a system of mechanisms.

This materialist worldview has since permeated all aspects of life on earth. Whether we look to social structures, education, the economic realm or the academic disciplines, it is a guiding principle. We have only to look at the field of medicine, for example, to read about the body as machine, the heart as a pump, food as fuel. When people gather to learn, they engage in “workshops” and the entire economic realm has been commodified in terms of profit and loss and bottom lines. In the institution of education, testing and grades determine the fate of students and the merit of teachers, all in service of competing in the global economy. Everything is reduced to the material level and exploitation of the Earth surrounds us at every turn.

Now, we enter a new moment of transformation where we sense that there is a more profound world within this material world we have come to know so well. Now, as a gift of our scientific consciousness, we have a story of the history of the cosmos, and within that of the Earth with all its plants and creatures, and within that, of the human. We can see ourselves as descendants of the stars with conscious self-awareness. We see the possibility of a new moral imagination that emanates from these

³Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 72.

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awakenings and perceive the role of the human with heightened awareness.

Those of us who see ourselves as educators now have to reckon with a question that can no longer be ignored: Can we, in good conscience, continue to educate our children from within the materialist worldview or are we being asked now, really required, to crack the egg and allow the new life of a more profound world to penetrate the consciousness of our schooling?

What, indeed, would this new form of schooling look like? We can begin to feel the transitions that will need to take place: a psychic shift from an I—It relationship with the world toward an I—Thou relationship with the world; a movement from quantity toward quality, from critical thinking toward receptivity, from analysis toward resonance, from exteriority toward interiority, from matter toward spirit; not a replacement, but a transformation that interweaves our fine-tuned intellect with more subtle realms that are now available to us. As Owen Barfield so eloquently reminds us, “the relationship between the mind and heart of man is indeed a close and delicate one and any substantial cleft between the two is unhealthy and cannot long endure.”⁴

This is the journey we embarked on in the year 2000 at the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World. Not with a plan, not with a program, not with a curriculum, because all of that is part of the old form. No, we started with *presence*: presence of the natural world, presence of educators, presence of children and co-presence of all. We started with teachers as co-researchers and co-creators—teachers working in public schools, religious schools, independent schools—schools in cities, in suburbs and in the country. New practices grew organically out of each of these situations as we formed a community to explore how the shift might be made.

Over the years, this journey was recorded through offerings in *Chrysalis*, the Center’s newsletter. After eleven years of endeavor, the thought came to bring all of this together into one book so that the full collaboration could be experienced and revealed in new ways.

Looking back over all the issues of *Chrysalis* published between 2004 and 2011, the articles fell gracefully into place in three parts. Part One, “Living the Questions,” includes pieces that reveal the fundamental

⁴ Owen Barfield, *Saving the Appearances: A Study of Idolatry*, (New York: Harvest/HB Book), 164.

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questions of our time as we move from a materialist philosophy toward a more holistic perspective. Part Two, “A Path of Inner Schooling,” explores the schooling of interiority that must now become part of the professional development of the educator. Part Three, “Sacred Presence,” brings us into the realm of practice where we see this new understanding of a more-than-material world actualized in diverse educational settings, arranged developmentally from pre-school to college.

We now know that consciousness itself evolves and that human consciousness evolves as part of a world creative process. There is a subtle difference here between the history of ideas and the evolution of consciousness. The history of ideas takes the human realm as the context for historical change. The evolution of consciousness imagines a sacred universe as the true evolutionary context for the human.

In a miraculous unfolding, the human being has evolved to a place where our very sensibility, if it can be deepened, becomes the still center within which a sacred universe reflects upon itself. The depth and fullness of the universe, from the stars in the heavens to the dirt beneath our feet, cannot be known by the intellect alone. Only a sense of the sacred, developed deep within the human soul, will reveal the whole.

Part I

Living the Questions

At present . . . we are in that phase of transition that must be described as the groping phase. We are like a musician who faintly hears a melody deep within the mind, but not clearly enough to play it through.

~ Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*

Chapter 1

Our First Conversation

by Richard Lewis

It's been a long, cold winter along the East Coast this winter. In New York City, where I live and teach, there have been days when the severity of the cold weather has dramatically slowed the pace of the city—humbling traffic and people to take special notice of the invisible air holding us captive.

From my apartment window one morning I saw a small child waiting with his mother for his bus to school. It had snowed the night before - and of course this waiting time was a time to play in the snow. When he finally got on the bus I wondered what school would be like for him today. Would he talk about the wind he heard in the middle of the night—or the birds he saw from his bedroom window watching the snow? Would he ask whether this is the same snow that fell a million years ago?

I wondered whether there would be enough time for all his questions? And after his questions—those of his classmates, and if time permitted, those of his teacher. Was it possible to spend a whole day like this - asking, dreaming, and imagining with the snow?

Probably not. Probably a good part of the day would be spent working through the daily routine of math problems, reading and writing skills, getting ready for some future test that weighs heavily on so many of our schools. The snow—and its marvels—would have been put aside, and this fragile moment of natural history, sequestered to another realm of childhood.

This particular dilemma of education, in which the very essence of a child's experience with the natural world has been ignored, is not simply about an educational deficiency. It begs the larger question of how, as a

society, we understand the role of this kind of elemental experience in relation to the well-being of ourselves.

All of us, at one time or another, have marveled at the mystery of rain and snow, the changing dynamics of light and darkness, the growth, decay and rebirth that comes with the seasons. As children our playing brought us closer to these elements simply by our desire to touch what was there in front of us—and through our playing to imagine what it would be like to be a flower, a bird, a passing cloud, or the sweeping wind. It was only as we grew older—that our playing, if not censored as a waste of time, was overcome by the demands of our schooling and the practicalities of everyday living.

By forfeiting our playing and our imagining - perhaps we gave up what instinctively allowed us a sense of connectiveness to these natural worlds. Perhaps we allowed our cognitive minds to replace the vast information of our subjective thoughts and feelings with a factual reality that knew only a right or wrong answer. And the price paid for this exchange of capacities was enormous—as demonstrated in the restlessness, disillusionment and destructiveness that have become so much a part of the culture of our daily lives.

Yet, is there something we can do to bring us back to our biologically given instinct for being a part of—rather than an occupier and adversary of the natural world? Is there something that will allow us to rekindle our earliest childhood conversations with the extraordinary phenomena that make up our living universe? Can we establish a new form of dialogue between ourselves and the life forms we share with the earth? Might we be able to initiate a language of the imaginative that speaks in balance with our scientific knowledge—and the equally important body of understanding, we so marvelously express through the wellsprings of our poetic and mythic artistry?

It was these urgent questions which prompted the first of a series of conversations which took place at Timberlake Farm in the Fall of 2000 in a series of two workshops entitled, *The Biological Imperative: Nature, Education and Imagination* in which Carolyn Toben, Chris Myers, Thomas Berry and myself spoke and shared our concerns with a group of like-minded participants. What emerged from these workshops was the overriding need to continue, in even more depth and possibility, the conversation we had begun with each other.

It became clear that it was only through such a long-term commitment to these discussions that any viable programs could be implemented that would impact teachers, parents and children. And with this in mind, Carolyn Toben and Peggy Whalen-Levitt decided to bring

Our First Conversation

into being 'The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World at Timberlake Farm.

Such a Center has the potential to become a national and international resource—a remarkable gestating environment for reflection and thinking that can lead us to practical outcomes affecting the overall lives of teachers and children alike. In addition, the Center can become a leading advocate and model, through its programs for teachers and children, of a view of educational practice in which the imagination, in all its expressive and unifying capacities, is seen as central to our relationship with the natural world. And that 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".

In the Fall of 2004, The Touchstone Center for Children, which I direct in New York City, is planning, as part of its 35th Anniversary, to collaborate with The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World by bringing together a group of persons representing a wide spectrum of the arts, sciences and education to engage in "A First Conversation". As the basis of our conversation we will address our mutual concern for the alarming division between the imagination - and its relationship to the natural world - and current educational practice. We will in turn, as we refine and clarify our thoughts, reach out to the future by envisioning workable solutions that can be used within a variety of educational communities.

And importantly so, as we speak among ourselves, we will try not to forget that quality of knowing we also experienced when each of us first played in the snow, or heard the delicate sounds of melting ice, or the watched how the wind moved through spring grass. We will continually remind ourselves of that sustained moment, when, by our own imagining, we became the snow, the wind and the grass—and realized that we were, and still are, learners in a wider spectrum of knowledge. A knowledge that prompted the poet William Blake to exclaim: "Nature is Imagination itself"—and a few years ago an eleven-year-old student, Desiree, to write: "My thought is pure creation. In it I have earth, land, water and mountains."

With such remembering, it is our hope that this 'first conversation' at Timberlake Farm will illicit other conversations—bringing a new awareness, as enlivened conversations often do, of what we know—and what is truly possible.

Chapter 2

Conversations with Thomas Berry

by Jessica Towle

By the time I was seventeen and graduated from high school, I realized that humans had unintentionally split the world apart. I saw that the sacred had been taken out of the Earth, and the Earth had been taken out of the sacred. It was as if, for a period of time, my vision completely changed and all I could see was the pain of this reality. I liked to call it the great divorce, because I saw all splitting apart as coming from this source.

My intense need to reunite in myself that which was split apart led me to Genesis Farm, a Learning Center for Re-Inhabiting the Earth in Blairstown, New Jersey, not far from my home. What I encountered there was reconciliation - people working towards the union that I was desperately searching for. The more time I spent there, the more I heard the name "Thomas Berry." I became curious about him because everyone there held him in such high regard and could easily quote clarifying things that he said in response to my questions. I was given a copy of his book *The Dream of the Earth* and, after making my way through it, I declared to myself that I would meet Thomas one day.

Two years later I found myself at a tree house watching an old man drive up in a beat up Honda. I walked over, unsure who it was. He got out of the car and we looked at each other for the first time. We both started laughing right away, and then we hugged. I knew that it must be Thomas, and I knew at that moment that I had better do the listening instead of the talking. From the first moment I saw him I adored him. He had this graceful sparkle in his eyes, and his white hair was sticking up in the back of his head, like Einstein's did.

The day I met him was an Earth Guides training at Timberlake Farm in Whitsett, NC, not far from where Thomas grew up. There I was, a transplant from New Jersey, newly arrived in North Carolina at the invitation of Carolyn Toben, founder of Timberlake Farm. I had no idea that being at Timberlake Farm would actually mean entering a new life.

The Earth Guides training was the beginning of a new way of seeing things for me. When Thomas started speaking I became transfixed. I had never heard anyone talk like he did before. I was entranced by his use of the English language, astonished at his clear thinking, and captured by the ease and grace through which he spoke his message. He was like a brilliant poet who had been given the task of elucidating a cosmological and historical understanding of reality.

Throughout my first year at Timberlake Farm I spent a lot of time with Thomas. He inspired me in a way that I had never known before. He inspired in me the love of learning and with that came the desire to think critically, to educate myself, to look at history very carefully in order to see how the Earth came to be as it is, and more importantly, how we came to think the way we do. For the first time in my life I felt curious about history, and I no longer had to ask “Why is this important?” or “How does this fit into the larger picture of things?” Throughout all my previous schooling, I constantly asked these questions of my teachers who, for whatever reason, never had an answer for me. Being with Thomas was like discovering a secret treasure over and over again. His interpretations of things allowed me to start to see the world I inhabited in the depth of its meaning. The unfolding of his thought was the first true sharing of relevant intelligence that I had ever experienced.

In between our visits, Thomas would send me packages of books in the mail with enchanting little notes signed “Hermit of the Hills,” or “Hermit of the Wilderness.” He became more and more delightful to me every time I met with him, and as time went on I actually began to understand what he was saying. Each visit became its own breakthrough in my mind.

I’m not sure how the idea of writing a book with him came up originally. At first it was to be a biography and that idea eventually evolved into the notion of writing an intergenerational question and answer dialogue with him. Of course, I was convinced that I did not have the skills or the ability to do this, so my plan was to sit with this whole idea for a while and hope that divine inspiration would come running in and help me write something beautiful about this man whom I adored so much. After a year in North Carolina it became apparent to me that I wanted a College education, and so I journeyed to Prescott, Arizona where I enrolled in Prescott College. My conversations with Thomas would be long distance for a time and the idea of writing an intergenerational dialogue would be put on hold.

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After two years of study and growing at Prescott, I knew it was time to return to North Carolina for an independent study semester at The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World at Timberlake Farm. In my absence, poor health had forced Thomas to leave his hermitage in the woods and move to an assisted living residence in a retirement community where his sister Margaret lived. When I returned, the time seemed right to take up my intergenerational dialogue with Thomas where we'd left off. I still didn't feel that I knew enough, but Thomas said, "If you wait until you're ready - one is never necessarily ready- you'll be waiting for a long time." With this encouragement, Thomas and I agreed to have weekly conversations.

What follows is an account of one of our conversations. In this ongoing exchange between my questions and Thomas' reflections, the world has come back together again. My adolescent quest for a reuniting of the sacred and the Earth is fulfilled in a language of union and reconciliation offered to me by a wise and beloved elder.

* * * * *

Today is Friday, April 9, 2004 - Good Friday. I picked up Thomas from his new residence at Wellspring Assisted Living Center. Wellspring is a well-kept center that is probably a delightful place for most folks. Thomas says he doesn't mind it all that much. There are birds in big fish tanks and beautiful plants guarding each door. I have never heard him complain about it. I have never heard him complain about a thing in the four years that I have known him.

Before I knock at his door, I stand there and wonder what it will be like today with him. Sometimes he is tired. He has given a lot in this life. I knock and hear him call out for me to let myself in. When I open the door, he is walking towards me with his arms wide open, a smile on his face. "Well, it's good to see you," he says. He looks tired today - really, really tired. He says "I'm afraid I am a bit of a bore today."

It makes me laugh when he calls himself a bore. He is the most magnanimous person I know, yet I know he is serious when he says this. He looks at me as I am hysterically laughing, and he starts to laugh deeply and freely. I can see that this is turning into a wonderful moment as he suddenly declares, "Well, let's go to our place." He disappears into another room and I look around while waiting for him. I see a lone copy of an early book written by Thomas called *Befriending the Earth*. Thomas comes back into the room while I am carefully inspecting it. He tells me

that I should take it. I point out that it is his last and only copy, not to mention that it is one of the only things in this room that is reminiscent of his life at the hermitage. He doesn't seem to care and tells me to take it anyway. We start heading out to the Green Valley Grill, which has become the setting of our conversations.

When we walk in to "our place," the hostess immediately ushers us to our usual booth and comments on the fact that she doesn't see a tape recorder today. I don't really like to record him any more. Although I always wish I had recordings later, my attention seems to drift to making sure the recorder is copying well, and so forth. I would much rather be fully present to the experience of being with him without any distractions.

We sit down in the big, comfy booth. The waitress knows to give us some time to chat before we order. I stare at Thomas from across the table. I become fixated on his eyes. He is speaking to me about something Aristotle said: "Beauty is an aspect of everything," he says, his words floating effortlessly, reaching my ears, registering in my brain. I still can't look away from his eyes. He is looking at me too, intently looking, as he continues by saying, "Aristotle says there are three aspects to everything in the universe: One, True and Beautiful. Absolutely every living thing has this and knows this. Every tree has this identity, every river, every mouse. Each of us articulates something unique in the universe. The challenge of the evolution of consciousness is to locate ways of thinking about the universe and also to locate distinctive ways of thinking of oneself. Self-reflective consciousness is the awareness of our own unique reality, as well as of the common reality that we share through the beauty of inner attractions."

There is something precise about the tone and manner in which he speaks. There is thoughtfulness in how he pauses between words, remembering centuries of stories of people from every nation on the planet. He is someone who knows the stories of diverse peoples, how they came to be who they are. He not only knows their stories, but he can reflect the meaning of those stories within the larger picture. Thomas also knows the story of the universe and how it came to be, and how we came to be within it. He is someone who reveals so much with his careful articulation. He has put so much into the words he chooses to speak, and the silence that he speaks from.

After awhile, our waitress brings us our usual soups and salads. Thomas starts to pick at his lettuce plate with his fingers. We both like to eat salad with our hands. There is something very natural about eating leaves that way. I say to him, in between heaping mouthfuls, "Thomas, it might take me a lifetime to live in the world that you live in." He laughs. I then ask him, "Why do you think humans have evolved to have these

capacities that we have?” He considers my question momentarily before replying, “We can narrate the changes of development from earlier forms, and the sequence of events, but we can’t say why. Our knowledge of the why is expressed through myths. Myths can explain why in terms of non-literal language. Children no longer get myths because they are considered unreal, but if they do not receive myths, they are missing the whole world of reality. Mythic reality can tell of wonderful and useful things. Science discounts myths because they cannot be proved or demonstrated.

Our waitress eyes us up closely as she walks past. She has learned to sense when to disrupt the conversation. Thomas continues by saying, “The sacred and the profound are best expressed through analogous language. Language creates reality. The idea is that we know more than we can explain. A mother cannot rationally explain her love for her child. Their mutual fulfillment lies in their capacity for intimacy with each other; there is no scientific explanation for this. The relationship is self-authenticated and self-explanatory. There is the science of it, but that is not what a mother is feeling or talking about.”

I understand what he means, as I imagine a mother’s love for her child. Our waitress brings us more coffee, and we both pause. I imagine him briefly, watching for almost a century, the effects of the rational-mechanistic worldview making its way into our relationship to the Earth, the economy, our ideas of love, and actually every other human venture. I imagine him watching so much of this go on in his own lifetime. I always wonder what makes a person stay awake internally. How did he do it? Why did he not get swept up in the reality of the time? Usually, when I talk with him, my own thoughts disappear and every word he says creates an image in my mind.

I go on to tell him that he lives in a different world than most, a bigger world, a world I can only imagine through the stories he tells. He replies, “Young people need this kind of world. If they get into a computer world too soon, they are deprived of the world they should be experiencing. We are not going to recover our ecology until we understand this.”

“Are you saying that our relationship to the Earth is directly connected to how we think?” I ask. He replies, “If we continue to build our world as scientific analysis and neglect the knowledge of imagination, art and the humanities, we will tend to see the purpose of life explained in scientific ideas of analysis and control. We need to keep myth because it is the only thing that makes life livable. Our children are learning to become mechanistic constructions, they are being taught to manipulate the area of human mechanical design and control. The children are saturated with

mechanics, but end up with no poetry, no imagination, or depth of understanding.”

He pauses and looks at me and says, “Next week for homework write about how this is evident in society, and how thoughtful people are responding to it. Pay attention to what children are bombarded with, and pay attention to how they respond to places like the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World at Timberlake Farm. How is the need in children being met?”

I start to imagine a few of the millions of ways that a child’s relationship to the Earth is marginalized. He continues by saying, “Humanity has undertaken three major shifts in thinking in terms of basic and primary referent. In the first age, the divine was the primary referent; in the second age, the human; in the third age, the Earth. Our fulfillment as human beings requires a threefold fulfillment.”

The integration of this threefold fulfillment is something he has been talking about a lot lately. He seems insistent that I get that idea, that I have a sense of what he means, but it’s not entirely clear to me yet. I make a note to ask him about this more carefully next time. I get the feeling it is important.

Our earnest and kind waitress returns to the table and sets out crème brûlée with two spoons. This has become a tradition with Thomas and me and most wait staff at the Green Valley Grill are wonderful to remember this. It always makes us feel special because they do. He removes the cookie and puts it on the side of the plate. He picks up his spoon and removes the cooked sugar off the top, dipping right into the crème. He looks at me with regard and says, “I have watched the last century, you will watch this one. What I saw begin, you will see end. Create a century, Jessie.”

Chapter 3

Our Children: Their Future

by Thomas Berry

Our children will live, not in our world but in their world, a future world that is rapidly taking on its distinctive contours. Our exploitative industrial world, despite all our scientific discoveries, technological skills, commercial abundance and stock market advance, is in a state of decline. The long-term survival of our children will depend on a new relationship between the human and the natural worlds. A change is taking place from exploitative relationships to one of mutual enhancement between the natural and the human worlds. The type of prosperity known through the industrial process of the twentieth century will never again be available.

A new creative period, however, will be available. Our children must activate these new forms of delight in existence in the great variety of human activities. Indeed we ourselves have begun this process. Already we are aware of the following conditions the children need if they are to attain the fulfillment for which they are destined.

Health and Environment

Our children need a healthy earth on which to live. A sickened planet is not conducive to healthy children physically, or to emotional or psychic security. They need pure air and water and sunlight and fruitful soil and all those living forms that provide the context in which human existence can be properly nurtured. Only if we provide this context will we fulfill our obligations to our children.

The Great Community

Our children need to become members not only of a local or even of the human community. They need to become conscious members of that wonderful community of all the living and non-living beings of the world about them. Human community as such is an abstraction. The only real community is the integral community of the entire continent, the entire planet or even the entire universe. We are awkward at this manner of

thinking because our religions as well as our humanist traditions carry a certain antagonism toward the natural world. But now the refusal of human beings to become intimate members of the community of the earth is leading to devastation of the entire planet. The next generation can survive only as functional members of this larger community. Our children are instinctively aware of this. We need only foster this awareness.

Literacy

Our children need to learn not only how to read books composed by human genius but also how to read the Great Book of the World. Again, reading this Great Book is natural to children. Alienation from this primary educational experience has been, in our generation, the source of unmeasured disaster to every aspect of human existence. The New Prosperity requires a new language, a language of nature that presently begins to be understood by those involved in solar energy, by the new architects, the new educators, the environmentalists. This new language is primarily the language of the earth, a language of living relationships that extend throughout the universe.

We have here on the North American continent a superb natural setting in which our children can become literate, capable of understanding what their world is telling them. Above all this natural world is telling them about a new prosperity, a new richness of life, new energies that are available, new experiences to enjoy.

Energy

Our children must understand how to function with the energy of the sun and the wind and the water rather than with the energies of fossil fuels or of nuclear processes. Our inability to use these other energies properly has led to a situation in which the planet earth is covered with grime that is not only harmful to all forms of life but which is eating away with its acids the very stones and structures of all the great cities of the world. The understanding of more benign energy forms and the skills to interact with them effectively, these are absolute necessities for the survival of our children in a sustainable life context.

Food

Our children need to learn gardening. The reasons for this reach deep into their mental and emotional as well as in their physical survival. Gardening is an active participation in the deepest mysteries of the universe. By gardening our children learn that they constitute with all growing things a single community of life. They learn to nurture and be nurtured in a universe that is always precarious but ultimately benign.

They learn profound reasons for the seasonal rituals of the great religious traditions.

More immediately, however, is the question of physical survival. With the every-increasing loss of soil on which food-growing depends, with the rising inflation in the economic situation, with the need for food grown in an organic context, and with the crowded situation in our urban centers, the capacity of local communities to grow a significant amount of tier own food on very limited areas of earth will become an increasing urgency. Community-supported agriculture projects are already developed throughout the North American continent.

Elementary education especially might very well begin and be developed in a gardening context. How much the children could learn! A language related to life! Emotional responses to blossoming and fruitful plants, social cooperation, death as a source of life. They could learn geology and biology and astronomy. They could learn the sources of poetry and literature and the arts. They might even be saved from the sterile and ephemeral world of electronic games.

The Managerial Role

Our children need to be prepared for their role in the fruitful functioning of the Great Earth itself, the first and greatest of all corporations. They need to learn that the managerial role in all human cooperative enterprises is to enhance the functioning and meaning and value of this primary corporation of the planet on which we live. If the Earth becomes bankrupt there is no future for anything that lives on the earth. The remarkable achievement of the earth in its natural state is its ability to renew itself and all its living forms. There is a minimum of entropy in the earth system. Energies are cycled and recycled indefinitely. The infrastructure renews itself. No human process can do this. Neither automobiles nor roadways, nor subway systems, nor fossil fuels, nor railways, nor power plants, nor nuclear stations renew themselves. They last a few years and then rust away and the resources of the planet are no longer sufficient to renew them.

A completely new managerial role begins to identify itself. It will function in a different fashion and with different ideals from the manner in which management functions at present. This new mode of management begins to manifest itself in development of new courses and programs of Ecological Economics.

Revelatory Experience

Our children need to understand the meaning and grandeur and sacredness of the earth as revelatory of the deep mysteries and meaning of

the world. Rather than teaching them to disdain the natural world as unworthy of their concern, it would be most helpful if our religious traditions would move toward a stronger emphasis on the glorious phenomena of the universe about us as modes of divine communication.

In a special manner our children need to observe and esteem the spontaneities of nature in the various bioregions of North America. These spontaneities give expression to genetic diversity which is the most precious endowment of the living world. Without the marvelous variety of living forms that swim in the sea and live and move upon the earth and fly through the air, our own human understanding, our emotional life, our imaginative powers, our sense of the divine, our capacity for verbal expression; these would all be terribly diminished. If we lived on the moon our sense of the divine would reflect the lunar landscape; our emotions, sensitivities and imagination would all in a similar manner be limited to a lunar mode of expression. So with our children, they are what they are and have such remarkable expansion of life because they share in the natural world that they have here on the North American continent. The radiance of their surroundings is even now reflected in the radiance of our children's countenances.

A Sense of History

Our children need a sense of their unique historical role in creating this new ecological age. This future world is something that has never existed before. We are involved in an irreversible sequence of planetary developments. For the first time an integral form of the planet earth with all its geological contours, its living forms and its human presence has become possible as a vital, functioning reality expressing itself in its unbroken sequence of splendors in movement and song and an infinite variety of color in the sky and throughout the five continents.

There is a certain truth in the expression: "The Dream drives the Action". Among the greatest contributions we can make to our children is to assist them in their dreams of a world of pure air and water and sunlight and soil, where the company of living beings would flourish as this has not happened in recent centuries.

America

As this country has often been the leader in the great industrial-technological experiment that has been taking place in these past two centuries and as this country has suffered severely from the devastation consequent on the petrochemical period through which we are passing, so now we might well become the leaders in guiding the children of the world toward this more splendid future that is presently in the making. If we see the aurora, they, hopefully, will see the dawn.

Chapter 4

“A Child Awakens . . .”

by Carolyn Toben

A talk given at the “Legacy of Thomas Berry” program sponsored by the Center for Ecozoic Studies, February 27, 2010, Chapel Hill, NC.

Thomas Berry had a deep love for children, all children; they were always “closest to his heart,” as he put it.

In his compassionate dedication to *The Great Work* he wrote:

To the children,

To all the children:

To the children who swim beneath

The waves of the sea, to those who live in

The soils of the Earth, to the children of the flowers

In the meadows, and the trees and the forest, to

All those children who roam over the land

And the winged ones who fly with the winds

To the human children too, that all the children

May go together into the future . . .¹

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

“A Child Awakens...”

One winter I went to see Thomas at his Hermitage, which was a small apartment over a former stable in Greensboro. I wanted to talk to him about the work going on for children and teachers at our Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World. He had given us guidance at every juncture, and I wanted to give him an update on our progress.

I had had the joy of being with those who had not lost their spiritual vision and who participated freely in a real communion of subjects . . . with trees, plants, animals and all living things of the earth. These visitors at the Earth Sanctuary who kept giving us courage to keep on were between the ages of three and eight years old.

At our Center, we watch for those special magical moments that bring children into a direct personal connection with the natural world and I had some of those to share with Thomas. He settled himself into his favorite chair to listen with full presence as I told him about . . .

~ A small group of seven-year-olds suddenly stopping on their trail walk one windy fall day to carefully observe a tiny spider web tossing back and forth, and then watching for minutes in silent amazement at the miraculous movements of the spider to repair it . . .

~ Three five-year-olds sitting in rapt attention, watching the movement of tiny golden frogs at the creek on the Creeping Cedar Trail, which he had loved so much . . .

~ A group of seven to ten-year-olds at our summer dance camp thoughtfully absorbing shapes and rhythms of the earth and then creating dance and movement patterns in collaboration with one another among the trees . . .

~ An incredible moment of intimacy between a gray fox and a group of eight-year-olds with teachers and parents on Timberlake Trail when in absolute silence there was an encounter of deep communion . . .

~ Four-year-olds counting “sun sparkles” dancing at the lakeside with their Earth Guide . . .

Only the Sacred

~ A six-year-old girl who, when asked to listen deeply to the sounds of the woods, reported: “I even heard the beat of my own heart” . . .

Thomas smiled in deep delight and then began to speak very seriously as I took careful notes:

“The present child is growing up in a geo-biological moment that has never before happened in 65 million years. The child,” he went on, with great eloquence, “has always been organized for a real abiding world of beauty, wonder and the intimacy of living processes . . . the wind, frogs, butterflies, not for a manufactured electronic world of virtual reality. The child has a natural bond of intimacy with the natural world, a remarkable sense of identification with all living things. Children need the personal connection with the natural world first in their early years, for the natural world activates the spirit in their minds . . . what they see in water, the rocks, the movement of insects.”

“Thomas,” I remember saying to him, “We’re finding that the children seem to know about global warming and climate change, but they often don’t know the sound of a bullfrog or the smell of spring rain.”

He responded by saying:

“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 a world to *relate* to as a communion of subjects not to *use* as a collection of objects. Relationships are the primary context of existence, and children need to see us practice a *sympathetic presence* to the Earth as a means for being in a mutually enhancing relationship to it. Parents need to say to the child: let’s go out into the sunset, let’s wade in a creek, let’s go meet the trees. Children need to breathe, to inhale with the whole Earth.”

I told him of the programs we had initiated for the schools: Awakening to Nature, the Poetry of Nature, Native American Journeys

and our after school program called Children of the Forest. I told him about our development of a national educators program called the Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice, that allowed teachers from schools, churches, synagogues, therapeutic practices to find ways to bring the work with children and the Earth into their own settings.

Thomas replied:

“You are doing foundational work, which is imperative for laying down enduring value of beauty, wonder and intimacy. A sense of the sacred begins here. All that you are doing for children gives them a sense of belonging, a self-orientation, a sense of imagination and meaning. Out of these experiences they come to know something of the world, which becomes the basis for their thinking. They need the magical idea of creation their whole life long, as they have to create and invent the 21st century. The most basic issue is how we bond with the Earth.”

I went on and described to him the earth walks we took children on at the Earth Sanctuary, our practices of using silence, deepening the senses, creating “Magical Moments,” and “Beholding.” “These practices have developed out of your understanding Thomas,” I told him. To which he replied, “Oh my.”

I told him how we were drawing parallels between the way the plants and trees and creatures grew and changed and the way the children did. I told him how we gave children an opportunity to express their experiences through art or writing as a means of bringing images of the natural world into the child’s awareness.

I told him how each of us on our staff practiced noticing the natural world every day . . . the flight of a cardinal, the sound of a Barred owl, patterns of bark on the trees, the rhythm of a day and how this practice of noticing had become part of our teachers’ programs.

Finally I told him how, in our organization, the understanding of differences has made all the difference as our small staff struggled to bring forth our own best capacities to birth a new social form in the world.

Thomas listened intently and then disappeared into his office returning with several green bookmarks with a poem on them, which he had written and proceeded to read it with great feeling.

Only the Sacred

A child awakens to a universe
The mind of a child to a world of wonder
Imagination to a world of beauty
Emotions to a world of intimacy
It takes a universe to make a child
Both in outer form and inner spirit
It takes a universe to educate a child
It takes a universe to fulfill a child
And the first obligation of each generation
Is to bring these two together
So that the child is fulfilled in the universe
And the universe is fulfilled in the child
While the stars ring out in the heavens!

I thanked him, hugged him and left with utter gratitude for the continuing sense of the sacred that he inspired.

Chapter 5

Children of the Mystery: Why We Need A Pedagogy of the Sacred

by John Shackelton

The historical mission of our times is to reinvent the human—at the species level, with critical reflection, within the community of life systems, in a time-developmental context, by means of story and shared dream experience.¹

~ Thomas Berry

When I was ten, Pittsburgh was blessed with a major snowstorm. My neighborhood in the city was covered in two feet of wonderful white stillness. The trolley tracks were buried, no traffic moved, no engines roared, no one pumped gasoline in the Mobil station across the street. When I stepped outside, I felt I was in some other world—a tiny, frozen, and strangely quiet planet. Nature saturated the air. I could taste the sacred.

Behind the Mobil station was a vacant lot, and behind that acres of woods where I loved to play. Suited up like an Antarctic explorer, I made my way very slowly across the snow-covered road to the snow-covered vacant lot, leaving behind the deep grooves of my passing. There were no other marks in the snow, and I felt the wonder of being alone with the elemental white and the cold, crisp air. Eventually, I reached the woods and entered a place such as I had never seen. The trees were covered with

¹ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 159.

Only the Sacred

time ice and snow; the paths were white; the woods were alive with magic, and I half expected to see Tumnus appear from behind a tree.

Somewhere in the middle of those woods, I stopped, or perhaps I was halted by the Presence I sensed but could not name. It was the quality of the silence that stilled me, that touched something ancient within me. I felt, but could not articulate, that the quiet was not just the absence of sound; it was a Presence, the echo in time of the Big Silence, and it conjured within me an expectation. I remained still, waiting for whatever was coming. What came was a hushed reverence I had never experienced in church. I felt very small, but that felt very right, and I felt embraced, loved, *seen*.

I felt a stirring inside for which I had no words then. I was experiencing the revealing of my true self, the me that school and home had layered over with a socially-constructed identity. For a few minutes in the eleventh year of my life, I felt the wonder of my authentic self, the freedom of me. I was being searched out, seen, *known*. Something was revealing me to me. My eyes watered up. No Christmas gift had ever been so welcome. I sat in the snow and stared at the blurring trees and felt my breath mingle with the white world “outside” and wanted nothing more than to be rocked in the arms of that vast, compassionate Silence.

It would be nearly forty years before the Silence got through to me again.

~

The reason it took so long (as will shortly be seen) has everything to do with the global need for Thomas Berry’s proposed mission. To carry out such a mission will certainly require a different way of educating our young. Educators will have to abandon their perennial quest for yet more effective methods of doing what they’ve always done. We will have to change our approach to schooling; we will need what the late John O’Donohue, in his last interview in America, called a “pedagogy of interiority.”

Part I

A Culture of Control

The difficulty is that with the rise of modern science we began to think of the universe as a collection of objects rather than as a communion of subjects.²

~ Thomas Berry

Pedagogy as Pressure

When I was a boy, kindergarten was about play of all types. We sang and marched in circles; we listened to stories and acted them out; we colored and cut and pasted and made “things” out of whatever materials were at hand; we dressed up as adults and dramatized our perceptions of grown-ups; we painted pictures and formed clay into shapes from our imaginations and painted the clay; our teacher told us fairy tales and read us myths; and we took a lot of time outside playing imaginatively and running like colts as though there were no better way to celebrate life.

If we look around now, we can still find kindergartens like that here and there, but they are becoming fewer. The new trend is for kindergartens with desks aligned in rows like grade-school classrooms. Day after day, five-year-olds sit completing worksheets so they can form their letters earlier and read and write well before entering first grade. Outside time is often seen as a reward for hard work at those desks instead of an integral part of the curriculum and one of the developmental needs of kindergarteners. Not far from where I live is a kindergarten with a three-word name, the last two words of which are *Preparatory Academy*. Kindergartens are often designed to give the very young a “competitive edge” by placing upon their small shoulders the success anxieties of a zero-sum culture. The early years of schooling are no longer about the wonder of the vast world or about the joy of discovery; they are about starting the journey to Harvard.

But what lies behind that approach is something that has been with us for a long time, and I will claim that it is a terrible mistake that we must correct if we are to survive.

² Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way Into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower 1999), 16.

Knowledge as Power

My high school physics teacher had his personal motto engraved on a brass plate mounted on his desk. It read, “Knowledge is Power.” Even as a teenager, I felt curiously uncomfortable with that statement as a human value.

In contrast to this, my father used to tell me from time to time, through wispy clouds of pipe smoke, that *a little knowledge is a dangerous thing*. He meant, of course, that if one jumps into a situation with less knowledge than is needed, the results are likely to be disheartening if not disastrous.

As I grew older, I began to see that the word *little* as my father used it is actually a relative term. For example, compared to the multiple trillions of gigabytes of knowledge held by the human race today, our predecessors who produced the Enlightenment had *little* knowledge—perhaps it could all have fit on one new, high-tech personal computer. Yet it looked very large to them, and upon what now appears as relatively little knowledge, they erected a superstructure of conclusions, of governmental, societal, and scientific programs that literally shoved Western civilization in a definite direction.

Knowledge did, indeed, facilitate a kind of power. It brought certain understandings of the mechanisms of the universe, and these are good to have and can be helpful, and who of us would want to return to Dark Age ignorance? In addition, the scientific revolution brought medical advancements and saved many lives, gains we would not want to be without and for which we are thankful. Yet this explosion of knowledge also brought fierce wars with previously unthinkable weapons and levels of destruction and death that exceeded medicine’s list of the saved. The new knowledge made life more comfortable for many people, but less comfortable for many others, and brought our species and our planet to the brink of final destruction.

Similarly, one can easily argue that when compared with all the knowledge not yet ours (in the depths of the Earth and the depths of our humanness and in the vast reaches of the universe and of ultimate truth), the knowledge we hold today, multiple trillions of gigabytes though it may be, is still *little*. Unlike the Enlightenment’s little knowledge, will our somewhat bigger little knowledge become a benign power in our hands, or will it once again prove to be a dangerous thing? So far, not so good.

Going back to my youth, I now reflect that the words that floated in smoke seem to have passed the test of history better than those that were stamped on brass. We are where we are, historically and ecologically, because we have treated knowledge as a commodity—the same way we

treat the Natural World—as a major resource to serve our human projects. We have not approached knowledge respectfully or revered its sacred nature; we have probed for it as a means of controlling our destiny; we have treated knowledge as servant to our purposes, and now we are in a dangerous place.

~

Knowledge as power has been accompanied by a shadow companion, a form of ignorance we tend not to notice. The following will illustrate:

Cave paintings were first discovered in Spain in 1879, but because they did not fit the “hard” data that defined early Paleolithic humans as *homo faber* (tool user) rather than symbolist, anthropologists insisted the paintings must be a hoax. We now understand from those who have lived among 19th- and 20th century indigenous peoples that “primitive” humans were much more aware of their embodied knowing and their participation in the animate Earth than we are, and they expressed their understanding in dance, ritual, song, story, and picture (languages kindergarteners easily appreciate). The dances, the rituals, the masks, the songs and stories held no concrete, long-survival quality of the kind science looks for, such as an arrowhead or axe would have. Hand tools survived thousands of years and thereby became grist for the data mills of analysis, but the rich expressive culture of body-knowing and intimacy with Earth remained invisible to such probing.

This phenomenon of *methodological invisibility* is illustrated in the following example from Morris Berman in *Coming to Our Senses*.³ A researcher in Medieval sainthood approached his project with a very modern research tool—the computer database. He listed a number of well-known saints and collected data about them such as country of origin, social class, if they had a spiritual ecstatic experience and age at the time of it, whether they were credited with miracles and the classification of those, etc., etc. The researcher entered his data, crunched the numbers, and, *ipso facto*, he had a picture of the typical Medieval saint with which to enlighten the understanding of other scholars. Dr. Berman knew this researcher and assures us that he had no trouble attracting grant money.

³ Morris Berman, *Coming to Our Senses: Body and Spirit in the Hidden History of the West* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), 114.

Let's consider a different approach to the same topic. A young researcher goes to a convent and isolates herself in a monastic cell for three months. She prays; she fasts; she goes outside just before sunset each evening and meditates alone in the garden under a great oak and watches the cosmic drama of the sun surrendering the day. At night, she prays and sits in silence for hours. When she sleeps, dreams come to her with secret insights to which she could not have reasoned her way.

Of the two researchers, which one will come closer to truly *knowing* Medieval sainthood? What, then, does *to know* mean? Really. Truly. Ontologically.

~

The work of Benjamin Whorf in the early 20th century and the later work of Russia's Vygotsky (*Thought and Language*, 1962) shed light on how determinate culture can be in forming our understanding of almost anything. They both argued that even our thought processes are extensively influenced by the conceptual categories communicated through the *language* of our culture. The very vocabulary we learn as members of modern society directly affects how we think because it encodes how earlier members of our culture thought and conclusions they came to about some very crucial aspects of human life. This means that the Enlightenment affected our thinking about knowledge not only through the scientific revolution but also by embedding beliefs into our culture linguistically. It is almost impossible to think without these beliefs directly affecting our thinking. The instance of the database formulation of sainthood reveals a perception of knowledge deeply rooted in this dual effect. If Whorf and Vygotsky are correct, we have a responsibility (given what our Western view of knowledge and its use has done to our world) to revisit what we accept as a given, i.e., how to think about knowledge.

So I pose this question: Is the knowledge gained from objectification and analysis really knowledge? Is it ontologically real—knowledge that *is*—or is it merely called knowledge because it works, which means we find it useful to our purposes.

We often hear a distinction made between knowledge and wisdom as though the legitimacy of the one should not be questioned in the absence of the other. However, can “knowledge” that leaves us foolish be properly called *knowledge*? Perhaps it would be more accurate (and even useful?) to say that what we've been calling knowledge—no matter how sophisticated, empirical, or abstractly conceptualized—is really more like

information. I suggest that this thought brings us closer to the truth. The database on sainthood was information, accurate as far as it went; one might even argue that the facts in it were not merely culturally based but actual. Nevertheless, the interpretation of the data and its use for such a purpose was deeply culturally based. I suggest that the kind of “knowledge” that does not bring wisdom requires quotation marks because only one species operates as though this kind of “knowledge,” and it alone, is really knowledge. Our doing so has not made us superior, only more dangerous.

Returning to Whorf and Vygotsky (one could add Gregory Bateson, C.A. Bowers and others), when we define what is taught in classrooms and pursued in laboratories as what we mean by knowledge, we forget that we make that judgment from the confines of human purpose. Our academic, scientific, technological voices do not speak for the planet, let alone the cosmos, let alone the Mystery. And this humanly-derived and humanly-controlled “knowledge” has so empowered our Narcissism as a species that we no longer sense the Mystery or hear the Voices of Earth. Small wonder that we are ignorant of the Other ways of knowing.

So then, what kind of knowledge would not need quotation marks?

Part II

A Communion of Learning

*For it is likely that the inner world of our Western psychological experience . . . originates in the loss of our ancestral reciprocity with the animate earth.*⁴

~ David Abram

How does David Abram know this? How large is his database? Was he around when our forebears enjoyed reciprocity with the living Earth? It appears you must read his statement and . . . well, I’m going to offer you the word *recognize*, and let’s see a bit later where it takes us. In preparation for that, let’s review a remarkable story that will help us understand the phrase *reciprocity with the animate earth*.

⁴ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Random House, 1997), 10.

A Story from Modern Science (with a bit of embellishment)

Of all the wonderful gifts science has brought us, perhaps the greatest one and the closest to a knowledge that offers wisdom is the story of Evolution. I retell it in brief here and with a prologue that peeks behind the Big Bang (the point where science begins).

Before the Big Bang was the Big Silence.

The fecund Full-ness of *What-could-be*—dark, unfathomable
womb of all that was to unfold, pregnant with Possibility—
began to turn inward toward a singular focus of the Possible,
toward a *Mysterious Realization*: Mystery, First Emanation of the Silence.

Then the *Realization of What Could Be* exploded,
Second Emanation of the Silence,
filling the Void with sound and motion, matter and energy
hurling in all directions, the beginning of all Becoming,
all forms from no form, all things from no thing.
The beginning of space, the beginning of time, the Beginning

After Age upon Age, in the outstretched arm of a spiral galaxy,
far, far from the Center of the Universe where the Big Banged,
in the planetary system of a long-settled star,
A small planet writhed in upheavals of gases and molten rock and
Eons of fire and thunderbolts, until its chaos became form,

And a Great Diversity of forms appeared; land masses rose
With spewing mountains upon them, oceans and land separated and
After Age upon Age, hills and plains and mountains came to be
And lakes and rivers as the Planet settled
And saw Herself—Who she was becoming.
Her Long Learning she etched in the layers of her land,
The primitive mechanics of energies and forces
that made form and Beauty. And it was Good.

Children of the Mystery

Ages upon Ages passed again, haphazardly,
like the mechanical forces of chaos finding their way to Form,
and she learned a New Kind of Form, crown of all Others:

New molecules appeared from older ones, heirs of Silence and Rest,
Chaos and form, fire and water.

They bonded in the water's warmth in fecund embrace
Increasing in complexity of form until a mass of them became One
And began to feed
And divide
And multiply.

The Big Unfolding followed as Earth learned wondrous things from
the Mystery
And the Living Forms spread throughout her climates and
topographies
And responded to other forms to learn diversity
And increased in complexity and grandeur
Until Earth breathed the rhythms of life forms learning
and knew the wonders of her Living Self
In a Complexity of Patterns and Patterns of Patterns
That knew each other and themselves as One.

Age upon Age passed with deep Learnings
And Celebration of Life
Covering the Planet until . . .

Out of the African jungle, stepping uncertainly into new territory,
A small number of hominids moved onto the savannah
And, eventually, after a very long series of chancy adaptations
(learning)
Experienced a Mysterious Realization
that no living being before them had known.

Only the Sacred

Like their Mother, they, alone among all her offspring,
Became Self Aware.
They became Beings-of-Story and danced the Long Learning of Earth
Resident in their bodies
And revered the Mystery of their knowing.

So it came to be
that learning filled the Earth
as the waters cover the sea.

Clearly, I am asking you to think of Earth's long history as a story of learning, of movement from chaos and primal mechanical forces to order and form and, eventually, life. Earth was "here" for all of it, experienced all of it, became aware through the processes of it. This movement from elemental material to self-aware complexity was a Cosmic Learning, a *coming-to-know*.

We moderns stand proudly upon our learning as evidenced in such things as our success in eliminating diseases like polio, crossing the vast ocean in a mere few hours, sending messages around the globe in fractions of seconds, placing steel-clad feet on the moon, and taking practice shots at the human genome. Yet, in the face of the grand Epoch of Cosmic Learning, we are as an oil lamp proclaiming its brilliance to the sun.

Nevertheless, the science of biology and the understandings we have gained from evolution have given us this wonderful story, a modern myth that allows us to hold onto the analytical blessing of science, which we must respect as a legitimate *part* of our knowing, while we are also blessed by myth, an ancient way of seeing truth that is transcendent of objective fact.

Lessons from the Learning Earth

The myth of Cosmic Learning stands as both the exemplar of, and the invitation to experience, ontological knowing—knowledge without quotation marks.

The story of Earth's learning holds certain implications and wisdoms for us now. For example: Earth's learning has been communally cumulative, that is, it generates new life forms within the communion of Life. This is the essence of evolutionary biology and the story of shared DNA. There are branches in that tree of learning, but each branch unfolds from and embodies what came before. So all life forms hold within them the learning (in essence if not detail) of earlier life forms. We have within us the learning—or essential echoes of it—of the tuber and the oak, of the worm and the gazelle, of the serpent and the hawk. Thus, in a very real and mysterious sense, we are connected to all life, have some of all life embodied in us. Each of us may truly say, *I am the fish; I am the turtle; I am the bison; I am the lily and the rose; I am the clouds and the rain; I am the breath of every living being.*

Our bodies are heirs to Earth's learning; they hold the wordless languages of our Mother's knowing. The human body speaks these languages, and their ways of knowing are incarnate in it, the primal and essential message-bearing dynamics of the living Earth. As a result, the human soul, our embodied self, does indeed know a great deal; we know as a gift of the Mystery, our connection to all that is. Our forebears knew this in their bodies, and in their bodies they danced it and sang it and storied it and painted it. Compared to that, arrowheads were a minor matter. But we moderns have forgotten. We have allowed the clouds of a limited "knowing" to block out the Gift of the Mystery, the Long Knowing to which we are heirs, which opens the gates of wisdom. We have lost the sacred communion of Life.

Part III

A Sacred Mirror

*If human identity . . . is so heavily shaped by the phenomenon of mirroring, it becomes obvious how different a culture that has a non-human mirror available is going to be from one that does not.*⁵

~ Morris Berman

The dominant culture holds up to every one of us a mirror in which we see ourselves falling short in comparison to what it tells us we should

⁵ Morris Berman, *Coming to Our Senses: Body and Spirit in the Hidden History of the West* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), 66.

be—slim, smart, stylish, in control, and having lots of money. What most people see in that mirror makes them anxious, fretful, insecure (Is this the real “invisible hand” of the market?). Our culture sets our children up for this, focuses on them even more intensely in their teen years, and finishes its work in fearful and compliant adults who then pass on to their children . . .

But the Mystery offers the mirror of the Natural World, the reciprocity with Earth that opens to us our authentic self and embraces us in communion with the Other. Young children—like fresh air, clean water, and opening flowers—are naturally accessible to the Sacred Mirror until we teach them not to be. And we do that in school.

Children of the Market

After the big snow experience, I lingered in the snowy woods for a long time. Eventually, I had to return home. Eventually, also, the snow melted, and I returned to school. But my teachers apparently knew nothing of the Sacred Mirror; they held out for me only the mirror of human “knowledge.” I was a good student of that “knowledge,” but none of it knew me, reached out to touch that resonating chord within my true self. After a while, the feeling of that encounter with the Mystery melted away like the snow. The most important learning I had ever experienced lay dormant for decades. Why?

In school, we teach our children to turn away from their natural connection to the Other. But we do so without noticing because it’s not written in any curriculum. *The student will learn to deny the sacred, view knowledge as a commodity, and pursue a life of personal control and material gain.* No curriculum would dare articulate such a thing, but this is a huge life-lesson that nearly every child who does well in school learns thoroughly, and most children who don’t do so well in school also learn (hopefully, not as thoroughly). In graduate schools of education, students discuss the existence of a “hidden” curriculum but are not encouraged to do anything about such unanticipated, unlisted learnings, and perhaps especially (on an unconscious level) not this one.

If the above is true, then how did we get here? Thomas Berry says we’ve lost communion with creation. David Abram suggests our pathologies are rooted in loss of reciprocity with the living Earth. Morris Berman helps us see that we’re looking in the wrong mirror. They are all quite right, and no matter how we word the thing, it all comes down to this: we’ve wanted to be in control, so we chose a way of knowing that we thought would serve that desire, and we cut off both our natural

connections and inner Witness to the Other ways of knowing that won't serve our purposes.

However, just getting “back to nature” will not reverse the trend. If we *use* nature merely as therapy, as a place to escape and recharge our consumer batteries so that we can go on making life decisions as before (only more respectful of the ozone layer, more consistent in recycling, and committed to a life without Styrofoam), we have been touched only by the cultural co-opting of undeniable ecological facts, and not yet by the sacred. “Back to nature” in this sense, and political expressions of ecology are both examples of how we have been educated to “know” in a way that actually hides from us the knowledge we need. The relationship between true knowing and the sacred is so intimate as to be almost congruent.

Children of the Mystery

The humans closest to Earth's Knowing are young children. They have a low center of gravity in more ways than one. They are “in their bodies” rather than their heads, i.e., they are naturally in touch with that biological inner repository of the Long Learning and, therefore, the Ancient Ways of Knowing. Like their ancestral parents in all the forms of Evolution-as-Learning, they know by intimacy, by what might be termed empathetic knowing, connecting to the Other from that within them which is *like* the Other. It is, in essence, a *recognition* which rises from instructions in their bodies, their evolutionarily-embodied learning. True knowing is graced by this element of recognition, what some spiritual teachers call *remembering*. No need for databases.

Young children approach the new without psychic distance, so for them, a *participation* with the Other is the essence of knowing. They perceive from a place of wonder (not usefulness), which is a particular kind of relationship between the child and her surroundings that gives easy access to the Sacred Mirror. The Mystery lies transparent before such wonder, so the young child perceives the utter particularity of whatever he focuses on as a *thou*, not an it. The young child can easily be present to an “object” in a way that adults rarely can. For young children, an encounter is a meeting—an I/*thou*, not an I/it. The *thou* and the *I* are non-intellectually known. The child experiences the *thou* as both known and unknown and, as Robert Sardello maintains, thinks *within* the thing itself.⁶ So a second characteristic of true knowing is *intimacy*, the work of the Sacred Mirror: the communion of knowing as one is known. When I met

⁶ Robert Sardello, *Facing the World with Soul: The Reimagination of Modern Life* (Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne Books, 1991), 38-39.

the Mystery in the snowstorm, it came through the Silence to show me myself.

The Road Not Yet Taken

A crucial point here is that in true knowing, “we” are not the only active agency. I believe we come to know something external only as it, or the Mystery through it, comes to know us, reveals something of our self to our self. In this way, we can grow in both outer and inner knowledge, but ultimately these are one, and all efforts to separate them carry costly consequences. This unity seems to lie behind many of the ancient myths about hubris. Hubris, human pride of power and control, insists on knowing without being known. But this possibility is more imaginary than any fairy tale. Violation of the wisdom of knowing-as-being-known has resulted in our inability to foresee the dire consequences of our uses of “knowledge” so that only long after our foolish actions do we see that we have been destroying the planet and calling it progress. Our culture is sick for lack of the communion of *knowledge-as-intimacy*. And now, because we have been trying so long to control everything through our “knowledge,” the planet is also sick.

If we continue to educate as we are, our children will not gain knowledge, but only “knowledge,” so the sickness will continue until everything dies. The wonder of cosmic history to which we are all heir and which should be revered and celebrated, this we dismiss from our schools, from the very place where children should be learning. As Thomas Berry said, we reject the *communion of subjects* for a *collection of objects* and thereby reduce the Great Learning to the capabilities of the human head, and then only the left side of that head. We teach our children to turn away from what science calls (not being able to wrap its head around such a thing) their instincts, from all that makes them living heirs of their Mother and ontological knowing. We do this because such knowledge is foreign to most adults (and teachers in schools), and to many others it is a gray recollection like the dim feeling left from a forgotten dream or the buried wonder of a white forest of silence. Our dominant culture has separated knowledge from wisdom, so its “knowledge” keeps us foolish.

But must things continue that way?

What if curriculum writers were to spend weeks facing the Sacred Mirror before they wrote what children must learn and how they must learn it?

Children of the Mystery

Then, what if children did not learn in school that knowledge is a commodity, but experienced knowing as inseparable from being known? What if children in show-and-tell shared not just their latest material acquisition but that Visitation in the snow, and teachers were encouraged to recognize such experiences and celebrate them? What if the formal education of children valued the Natural World, revered Earth, and engaged the body's ancient knowing so that when children swayed in the breeze with the daffodils or communed with the dryad of a weeping willow or danced with the falling October leaves, these communions would count as learning?

To reinvent ourselves on the species level will require great wisdom, widely dispersed. I see no way toward that condition without first reinventing the education of our young. If we were to pass on to our children that what we know is very *little* and is not as much a basis for our existence as what we don't know, if we based education not on the pursuit of "knowledge" but on the ontological presence of Mystery, then we would have the basis for a pedagogy of the Sacred and very likely our first and greatest step toward a healthy world, toward a "communion of subjects."

Chapter 6

A Sense of the Sacred In Education

by Jessica Towle

Jessica Towle began an apprenticeship at the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World in the Fall of 2000 at an Earth Guides Retreat led by Thomas Berry. Over the following six years, Jessica continued her relationship with the Center through work and study. Through an arrangement with Prescott College, Thomas Berry and Center Co-Directors Carolyn Toben and Peggy Whalen-Levitt served as mentors for Jessica's coursework toward a BA degree. The following article is Jessica's culminating research paper for Prescott, written under the mentorship of Center Director, Peggy Whalen-Levitt.

The Great Divorce

By the time I was seventeen and graduated from high school, I realized that humans had unintentionally split the world apart. I saw that the sacred had been taken out of the Earth and the Earth had been taken out of the sacred. It was as if, for a period of time, my vision completely changed and all I could see was the pain of this reality. I liked to call it the great divorce, because I saw all splitting apart as coming from this source. My intense need to reunite in myself that which was split apart led me to Genesis Farm and, eventually, to cultural historian Thomas Berry. In Thomas Berry, I found someone who understood what had been missing from my education. In an article entitled "Our Children: Their Future," Thomas writes, "Our children need to understand the meaning and grandeur and sacredness of the earth as revelatory of

the deep mysteries and meaning of the world."¹ Thomas elaborates on this theme throughout his work, perhaps nowhere more eloquently than in his introduction to a collection of writings by Thomas Merton, *When Trees Say Nothing*. There, Thomas makes it clear that the development of a sense of the sacred is the fundamental, essential change needed in our time:

¹ Berry, Thomas. "Our Children, Their Future," *Chrysalis* (Spring 2004), 8.

“There is a certain futility in the efforts being made - truly sincere, dedicated, and intelligent efforts – to remedy our environmental devastation simply by activating renewable sources of energy and by reducing the deleterious impact of the industrial world. The difficulty is that the natural world is seen primarily for human use, not as a mode of sacred presence primarily to be communed with in wonder, beauty and intimacy. In our present attitude the natural world remains a commodity to be bought and sold, not a sacred reality to be venerated. The deep psychic shift needed to withdraw us from the fascination of the industrial world and the deceptive gifts that it gives us is too difficult for simply the avoidance of its difficulties or the attractions of its benefits. Eventually, only our sense of the sacred will save us.”²

In this research paper, I will explore the following thesis: In order to reveal the depth of how to participate in this psychic shift, the institution of education needs to offer children a way of experiencing the sacred aspect of the Earth. The question I would like to offer for this research paper is: Is it possible to give a child a sense of this inherent “meaning, grandeur and sacredness of the earth as revelatory of the deep mysteries and meaning of the world” within the institution of education; are there forms of schooling that are conveying this somehow? I will address this question by looking at three forms of schooling that my preliminary research has led me to consider: Montessori, Waldorf, and the new Ridge and Valley Charter School in Warren County, New Jersey. I will attempt to describe the way in which the sacred is taken up in each of these approaches, to offer a comparative analysis, and to conclude with my own imagination for the future. First, however, let me consider some of the obstacles to introducing a sense of the sacred in education.

The nation is currently engaged in a public debate over Darwinian evolution vs. Intelligent Design. Proponents of Intelligent Design want to make sure that students learn that evolution via the Darwinian approach is just a theory that should be examined critically and conscientiously like any other theory and not regarded as fact. They believe that Darwinian evolutionists are missing an important aspect of evolution: the Intelligent Designer. They believe that this universe is too complex to be random.³ At the other end of the spectrum, there are scientists who believe that the

² Berry, Thomas. Foreword, *When Trees Say Nothing* by Thomas Merton, edited by Kathleen Diegnan, Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 18-19.

³ Raffaele, Martha, “Divided by Design,” *Greensboro News & Record*, November 2, 2005, A2.

insertion of the concept of Intelligent Design next to the theory of evolution in science books undermines the status of science in this culture and also brings ideas that are not credible to science into the scientific domain, therefore weakening the practice of science itself.⁴ This type of dualistic thinking makes it challenging to present the idea of the sacred aspect of the earth for fear of entering into the complex dilemma of the separation of church and state.

In this paper I will not expand on this issue, but rather recognize that as a culture we often view science and religion as being irreconcilable. As a result of this, we often fail to see beyond the dualism of reverential thinking and rational thinking as being diametrically opposed. This creates a climate in which a sense of the Earth as sacred is a taboo subject in schools. In an effort to move beyond this impasse, I will look at three different educational institutions that have maintained integrity and awareness around this complex issue of science and religion, thereby creating a context in which the child can experience the grandeur and sacredness of the earth. Although there are other schools that might have been considered, I have chosen to limit the focus of this paper to two established forms of schooling, Montessori and Waldorf, and one new charter school, The Ridge and Valley Charter School in Warren County, New Jersey. As I consider these forms of schooling, I will not attempt to be comprehensive, but rather will focus on those aspects of each philosophy of education that seem to shed the most light on how children are brought into a sense of the Earth as sacred.

Montessori's Cosmic Education

A distinguishing characteristic of Montessori schools, for example, is the concept of Cosmic Education. Maria Montessori, the first female doctor in Italy and the founder of Montessori schools, was invited by the Theosophical Society to lecture in India. While traveling and lecturing there, Maria and her son Mario (an advocate of her teachings, and also her translator) were interned from 1939 to 1946 by orders of the British government because of their status as citizens of fascist Italy. During this seven year period, Maria, then 70, came in contact with several religions outside of her own Roman Catholic upbringing. While maintaining her own religious beliefs, Maria was open to the wisdom found in each religion. She and Mario spent time with many people, especially children who were exposed to cosmologies other than their own that contained a

⁴ Nichols, Peter, "Creative License: A Biologist and a Philosopher Dissect a Pseudoscience," *Penn Arts and Sciences*, Fall 2005, 14-17.

deep sensitivity to the profound sacredness of the universe. During this time, they traversed a very rural, mountainous part of India where they had prolonged exposure and contact with the natural world. This, along with the growing relationship to the Theosophical Society, seems to have influenced the development of the concept of "Cosmic Education" which was birthed in those years.⁵

Cosmic Education seeks to give a child the largest educational context available, the universe. After first discovering the universe in its totality, then moving through the diversity of life forms, including the galaxies and planets, the earth and waters, the elements, creatures, plants, and microbes, etc. the child is more aware of his or her place in the universe. Michael and D'Neil Duffy, authors of *Children of the Universe: Cosmic Education in the Montessori Elementary Classroom*, state that "Cosmic Education is intended to help each of us search for our cosmic task as a species and as individuals. To do this, we must understand ourselves in context. It is only against the background of our place in the universe, our relationship to other living organisms, and our understanding of human unity within cultural diversity, that we can attempt to answer the question *who am I?*"⁶ It is with this question that education begins. Montessori believed that this was not only an appropriate question for education to consider, but that it should be the central question. She believed that the only way to explore this question properly was from the largest contextual reality available, the Universe.

Montessori saw the universe as a harmonious and ordered creation, with each being having cosmic significance within the whole. She believed in a cosmic plan that served the "great Purpose of Life,"⁷ and thought it more significant to show a child awe and wonder through evolutionary dynamism, rather than facts about evolution itself. Montessori saw the universe as revealing a sacred dimension in its unfolding. This mystical interpretation gives a child the sense that the world he or she dwells in is inherently revelatory of the sacred dimension of the universe. By putting a child in front of the immensity and intimacy of the universe, there is a sense that the child is participating in a deep cosmic unfolding. With the idea of the cosmic task, not only does the

⁵ Duffy, Michael and D'Neil, *Children of the Universe: Cosmic Education in The Montessori Elementary School Classroom*, Hollidaysburg, PA: Parent Child Press, 2002, 3-4.

⁶ Ibid, 6.

⁷ Wolf, Aline D. *Nurturing the Spirit in Non-Sectarian Classrooms*, Hollidaysburg, PA: Parent Child Press, 1996, 90.

child feel like he or she is partaking in a venerated event, but that the human has a very distinct and important role, and so does that child. There is meaning everywhere, purpose is imbedded into matter itself, there are no mistakes. This is how the child can answer the question *who am I*;⁸ this is how the child finds an identity.

Maria Montessori seems to have understood the very thing that mathematical cosmologist Brian Swimme is trying to convey today. In an interview by Joy Turner in *Montessori Life*, he says, "I'm convinced that if we begin to have a sense of our planetary and even cosmic significance, then we'll see that it's absolutely necessary for us to teach children a sense of the whole and of the universe, because they're never going to get any sense of our true role here unless we do."⁹ When asked about how he came across the Montessori theory of education, Swimme points back to cultural historian Thomas Berry, with whom he wrote the book *The Universe Story*. In the same interview, Swimme recalls a moment when Berry calls him on the phone, very excitedly and said "Brian you have got to go out and get *To Educate the Human Potential* by Maria Montessori (1948). It's our book, but she wrote it 50 years before we began! It's a good thing we didn't know about her, because it would have taken away our enthusiasm for the project!"¹⁰ Montessori, Swimme and Berry see the universe as being the central cosmology for the child. Reflecting upon Brian Swimme's book *The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos*, Montessori educator Joy Turner observes "that today's children do get initiated into the universe, but sitting around the fire listening to stories has been replaced by sitting in the TV room and being inundated by commercial advertising."¹¹ Swimme suggests that the antidote to this technological enculturation is to "inspire awe for the beauty of the universe, in children and parent alike."¹² It is with this insight that Maria Montessori developed Cosmic Education.

⁸ Duffy, 6.

⁹ Turner, Joy, "The Universe Story: A Conversation with Brian Swimme," *Montessori Life*, Spring 1999, 28.

¹⁰ Ibid., 28.

¹¹ Ibid., 29

¹² Ibid., 29.

Steiner's Phenomenology

While Montessori developed her views on Cosmic Education in the mid-twentieth century, the Austrian philosopher Rudolph Steiner initiated Waldorf Education in 1919 when he was asked to create a school for the children of the Waldorf cigarette factory in Stuttgart, Germany. In order to fully appreciate the ways in which Waldorf Education brings children into a sense of the Earth as sacred, it is helpful to consider the experiences that shaped Steiner's own relationship to nature.

As a young student, Steiner befriended an herb gatherer named Felix Koguzki who had a profound influence on his thinking about the natural world. Steiner describes Felix as "a simple man of the people" in whom "it was possible to speak about the spiritual world as with someone of experience."¹³ Felix was uneducated in the usual sense of the word, however Steiner perceived in Felix a man who was deeply connected to the spiritual dimension of the natural world. Steiner says about Felix:

"One soon realized that he read books only because he was seeking in others what he already knew. What he read did not satisfy him. He gave the impression of being simply the mouthpiece for a spiritual content seeking utterance from hidden worlds. When with him, one could enter deeply into nature's secrets. On his back he carried the bundle of healing herbs; in his heart he carried the results of what he had won from nature's spirituality while gathering them."¹⁴

It was in these early encounters with Felix that Steiner seems to have developed a sense of the more profound aspect of the Earth. Felix became a doorway through which Steiner was able to see into the sacred dimension of the natural world. This led Steiner to pay closer attention to his own study of philosophy. In his words, "It was of deep concern to me that none of the philosophies I studied could be developed into spiritual insight."¹⁵

Later, between the ages of 21 and 35, Steiner took on the project of editing the scientific writings of Johann Wolfgang Van Goethe. This experience had a deep effect on Steiner, who had already become

¹³ Steiner, Rudolf. *Rudolf Steiner: An Autobiography*, Blauvelt, NY: Steinerbooks, 1977, 60.

¹⁴ Ibid., 60

¹⁵ Ibid., 62

discontent with the reductionist tendencies of natural science. In his introduction to Steiner's book, *Nature's Open Secret: Introductions to Goethe's Scientific Writings*, John Barnes suggests that Steiner's study of Goethe led him to a whole new way of knowing the natural world that includes, rather than excludes, a spiritual dimension:

“Through his study of Goethe's science, Steiner laid the foundations for a scientific worldview that opens itself to the rich qualities of the sense-perceptible world and comes to see them as expressions of creative spiritual principles.”¹⁶

Based on his Goethean studies, Steiner concluded that a new approach to knowing the world was called for in our time; a qualitative and participatory approach in which the human being would come to know the natural world as an “expression of creative spiritual principles.”

If the sensory world is an expression of spiritual principles, how might the human being come to know it? Steiner believed that it was in the realm of the soul, through the cultivation of inner capacities, that children could truly enter into knowing the natural world. He says:

“At first glance, it is not easy to believe that feelings of reverence and respect are in any way connected with knowledge. This is because we tend to see cognition as an isolated faculty that has no connection whatsoever with anything else going on in our souls. Thus we forget that it is the soul that cognizes.”¹⁷

The Waldorf approach to schooling is based on this idea that “it is the soul that cognizes.” Therefore, Waldorf education was created in such a way that it directs children to their own inner capacities in order to know the world. As Steiner says, “the Waldorf school does not want to educate, but to awaken.”¹⁸

To invite the soul into the process of cognition and to remind the children that their lives are embedded in a sacred cosmos, Waldorf schools begin the day with what is known as “The Morning Verse.” The Morning Verse is recited by the children in unison at the beginning of each day in order to set a reverential tone. The same verse is recited daily

¹⁶ Barnes, John. “Introduction” in Rudolf Steiner, *Nature's Open Secret: Introductions to Goethe's Scientific Writings*, Great Barrington, Anthroposophic Press, 2000, xi.

¹⁷ Steiner, Rudolf. *How to Know Higher Worlds*, Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1994, 22.

¹⁸ quoted in M.C. Richards, *Toward Wholeness: Rudolf Steiner Education in America*, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1980, 63.

throughout the lower grades, while a different one is recited with the upper grade students. The verse encourages a feeling of reverence toward the natural world which opens the door to a sense of the sacred in the child for the day. According to Waldorf educator Martyn Rawson, the morning verse is a practice “in which humanity’s spiritual connection to the kingdoms of nature is stressed.”¹⁹ Through this daily practice, children are brought into a loving relation to the cosmos.

Morning Verse for the Four Lower Classes

The sun with loving light
Makes bright for me each day;
The soul with spirit power
Gives strength unto my limbs;
In sunlight shining clear
I reverence, O God,
The strength of humankind,
That thou so graciously
Hast planted in my soul,
That I with all my might
May love to work and learn.
From Thee come light and strength,
To Thee rise love and thanks.

Morning Verse for Higher Classes

I look into the world;
In which the sun shines,
In which the stars sparkle,

¹⁹ Martyn Rawson, “The Human Being is the Archetype of All Creation,” in *Waldorf Education: Exhibition Catalogue of the 44th Session of the International Conference on Education* (Stuttgart, Freunde der Erziehungskunst, 1994), 21.

Only the Sacred

In which the stones lie,
The living plants are growing,
The animals are feeling,
In which the human soul
Gives dwelling for the spirit;
I look into the soul
Which lives within myself.
God's spirit weaves in light
Of sun and human soul,
In world of space, without,
In depths of soul, within.
God's spirit, 'tis to Thee
I turn myself in prayer,
That strength and blessing grow
In me, to learn and work.²⁰

Similarly, the Waldorf day ends with a verse at the closing bell. In this way, the Waldorf day is framed by a sense of the sacred of the human within the cosmos:

Prayer at the Evening Bell

To wonder at Beauty,
To watch over Truth
To esteem what is noble,
To resolve on the Good:
It leads human beings
To Aims in their life,
To Right in their action,

²⁰ Steiner, Rudolf, *Prayers for Parents and Children* (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1995, 45-47.

To Peace in their feeling,
To Light in their thinking;
And teaches them trust
In the working of God
In all that exists:
In cosmic worlds,
In depths of soul.²¹

One way of connecting the depth of soul with cosmic worlds in Waldorf schools is to bring children into relationship with animals and plants through the imagination. A foundational belief of Waldorf education is, as Teilhard de Jardin says: “In the consciousness of each one of us, evolution has a perception of itself.”²² Steiner believed that in the human lives the archetype for all creation. In the creativity of every human lives a particular expression of the entire cosmos. Every human essentially has the capacity to perform the functions that are represented among the creatures of the earth. By bringing children into a living imagination of the gesture of each animal, “children experience through strong identification a deep connection to the animal kingdom, a relationship which later can transform into a profound sense of responsibility and stewardship.”²³

Similarly, Waldorf education nurtures in children an experience of indwelling in the plant world. In her book, *Toward Wholeness: Rudolf Steiner Education in America*, M. C. Richards describes the Waldorf approach as follows:

“Like other artists, educators rediscover spirit through turning to the physical world . . . Steiner directs our attention outward, to every flower, every animal every person. We are to look upon the plant not merely externally, but to participate in all its processes, so that our thinking joins in the life of the external world. We are to sink into the plant to feel how gravity goes down the root into

²¹ Ibid, p. 49.

²² Rawson, p. 20.

²³ Rawson, 21.

the earth, how formative forces unfold above ground; we are to feel from the inside the blooming and fruiting.”²⁴

By virtue of joining the plant on its own journey, the child is developing new capacities of perception and a way of knowing the plant as an expression of creative spiritual principles.

Waldorf education is based on a radically different epistemology than most American education for children. According to Walter Hiller, “a phenomenological approach to natural sciences and the humanities plays a major role in Waldorf education.”²⁵ This means that knowledge and understanding are rooted in perception and experience at the soul level. At the heart of this phenomenological approach is the question “how do children experience the world?”²⁶ The role of the teacher in guiding the child’s developing reciprocity with the world is central. According to Hiller, “the meaningful experiences the world has to offer will be discovered if those working with children realize their task of being temporary windows through which the child can look out into the world and find questions rising within.”²⁷ In small children, the emphasis in Waldorf education is on developing the senses. As they grow older, the children reflect on what they have perceived. Waldorf schools, therefore, attempt to create an atmosphere where both perception and reflection can be nurtured – where head, heart and hand are interwoven and where the “world of space, without” and the “depths of soul, within” are reunited in an unbroken whole.

The Ridge and Valley Charter’s School’s Earth Literacy

While Montessori and Waldorf schooling are forms of independent education, there are new initiatives in the public sector that show promise of bridging the divide between the sacred and the Earth. In rural New Jersey, for example, a group of dedicated parents and community board members have worked diligently for the past six years to create a school for children that reflects the deeper consciousness that they believe is necessary for moving into the future in a “mutually enhancing” way. The

²⁴ Richards, 79.

²⁵ Walter Hiller, “Learning to Love and to Know the World as it is,” *Waldorf Education: Exhibition Catalogue on the Occasion of the 44th Session of the International Conference on Education of UNESCO in Geneva* (Stuttgart: Freunde der Erziehungskunst, 1994), 26.

²⁶ Ibid., 27.

²⁷ Ibid., 27

publicly funded Ridge and Valley Charter School, named after the bioregion it dwells in, opened its doors in 2004 to the first group of K-8 students. Ridge and Valley has been greatly influenced by the work of Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme, as well as Genesis Farm, a center for Earth Literacy, which many of the parents and board members have been connected to and inspired by.

The charter school was developed with Earth Literacy as its core value. Earth Literacy, as described by Miriam McGillis, founder of Genesis Farm and former board member of the charter school, is the idea of "enabling an education that helps people understand that they are imbedded within and dependant on the whole evolving universe in its inner spiritual capacity, as well as its outer physical process."²⁸ She goes on to explain that "you can have wonderful environmental education where new awareness and skills are gained, but that is not Earth Literacy."²⁹ Earth Literacy marks not only the physical evolution of the universe, but the psychic evolution as well. I asked Miriam how the term 'Earth Literacy' came into being. She told me the story of how, in the late 1980s, Genesis Farm hosted a group of parents who wanted to start a charter school. Even back then the idea lived to have a charter school that could teach children through a similar context in which adults were educated at Genesis Farm. At that time, Thomas Berry was a regular presence at Genesis Farm. He came often to give talks to the community on various subjects. On this particular occasion, he was talking with this group of parents about their charter school idea, when he commented, "children are no longer earth literate. They don't know who they are. They don't know where they are in the universe."³⁰ Miriam remembers that moment well. The thought of Earth Literacy struck a chord with her and she called the next course she taught at the farm "Earth Literacy." It is this idea of perpetuating Earth Literacy that helped create the inception of the charter school and is the primary context out of which the children begin to understand the world they live in.

In a letter to parents, David Wylie, Academic Coordinator of Ridge and Valley, articulated the school's Mission as follows:

"Children are born with an immense potential. Their innate curiosity and fascination with the world around them is the fundamental basis of their human search for meaning, purpose,

²⁸ Conversation with Miriam McGillis at the Hermitage, Greensboro, NC, 2/23/06.

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ *ibid.*

love, satisfaction and community. Ridge and Valley Charter School believes that it is committed to developing this immense potential. By encouraging our children 's relationships to home, family, school, town, region, nature, Earth, and universe, all life becomes the context for their learning. Our school will encourage children to wonder, to think, to discover, and to question. They will be cherished and respected, and learn to do the same with the world around them. Ridge and Valley Charter School believes that it is possible to create a more ecologically sustainable future and that our children have a right to a planet of pure air, clean water, a vibrant natural world, and a more just and equitable human community. This vision is not only a right, but a possibility. We believe it is the purpose of a democratic society to lay the foundation of such a future. The result of a Ridge and Valley Charter School education will be children who grow into adults who love the earth, and who are passionate about its ability not only to survive, but to thrive.”

Most of my research on the charter school is collected from personal interviews and conversations with the teachers, known at the school as 'Guides,' as well as with the administration and the board members. I also had the great fortune of observing a classroom on a few occasions. I found this to be the most direct way to retrieve information on my particular question given that this school is still in its infancy. In my interviews, I proposed the Question, "Does the Ridge and Valley Charter School point toward the Earth as having a sacred dimension? If so, how is this conveyed?

Since Ridge and Valley is a public school, I felt right away from the staff that one has to be very careful about how one conveys the depth of what is happening there. Academic Coordinator and Guide of Guides, David Wylie, suggests that even though they are "not teaching a spiritual approach, everything they do every day is moving toward that direction" of Earth Literacy, which does inherently honor the sacred aspect of Earth. When I asked him if he feels limited by being a charter school, he responded by saying that "I don't find it limiting that we are a public school. We are a model, and we are teaching sustainability through that prism of Earth Literacy. The kids are going to be a bridge between deep time and real time. Sustainability is the first step, and that can lead to cosmology . . . the great emergence. There's all kind of intelligence in

children . . . its just making them shine, that's the challenge. We are evolving. We have to be palpable to the masses."³¹

While the "Guides" themselves may come up with some incredible ideas of how to integrate the cosmology of Earth literacy into the daily lives of the children, such as reflecting on "How am I the Universe?" and "Is nature a part of me?"³² they still have to comply with state issued curriculum standards. Reflecting on their relationship to state standards, Board member Evonne Reiersen says, "The main intent at this time is to create a living curriculum through experiential events. The state standards can be creatively expressed through the children's own experiences. Teachers given degrees in traditional universities are not exposed to the Universe, in Thomas Berry's words. The attempt to be one of the first schools to focus on the unfolding universe as its core is a formidable and exciting frontier."³³

The efforts to bring to consciousness the sacred aspect of the Earth are expressed in various ways. School principal Nancy Divorsky states that, "The main thing we are trying to capture is the awe and wonder of the world. Without using the word sacred, the children know that, and feel that inherently. In most schools, they are removed from this. So, at this school we let them find the awe and they discover the sacredness on their own."³⁴ A lot of what the Guides seem to offer in this way is contained in the essence of how they approach the day, and the tone they set individually. Nancy Divorsy goes on to explain this by saying, "In the morning we have music. This helps them to know it's time to settle in. Most guides light a candle in the center of their circles when they gather as a group. People need to learn to come together with attention - to evoke the feeling that this is something important, serious. Every guide is learning and modeling how to do this. Everyone is aware that a child's relationship with the Earth is central."³⁵

³¹ Conversation with David Wylie, Ridge & Valley Charter School, Warren County, NJ, December 2005.

³² Conversation with Guide Mike, Ridge & Valley Charter School, Warren County, NJ, December 2005.

³³ Conversation with Evonne Reiersen, Ridge & Valley Charter School, Warren County, NJ, December 2005.

³⁴ Conversation with Nancy Divorsky, Ridge & Valley Charter School, Warren County, NJ, December 2005.

³⁵ *ibid.*

When I observed Guide Mike's classroom, one of the things that stood out most for me was the ability of the children to move into silence. From that place of silence, the children were able to move into deeper places inwardly and were able to communicate and reflect with a deeper attention and sense of reverence. I found these times of open communication through respected silence to reveal the amazing depths to which children are able to go.

1st and 2nd grade Guide, Dena, reflects on how the sense of the sacred aspect of the Earth lives in her classroom. "It really depends on the guide specifically to understand how this aspect is conveyed. For me it is subtle. I just carry it in myself. I do talk about it; it comes up all the time just in what we do naturally. It comes up when we are talking about Henry David Thoreau, talking about how he valued the natural world. It is in the little things." She goes on to give an example, "When I teach the children about herbs, I do it from the approach of the Cherokee. The Cherokee give thanks to the plants when they take them for food or medicine. At first I wasn't sure about doing this with them. Then it just became natural, and uncomfortable not to. If we are to gather the plants, we are to honor them."³⁶ This seems to be a theme for the Guides. Their approach to creating a learning community is this combination of what they are teaching, along with how they teach it and the energy they bring.

Board member Evonne Reiersen says, "The sacred is manifesting itself when we allow ourselves to believe we are as sacred as the Earth, a divine being as miraculous as any other creature, rock, or plant. Awe and wonder are fostered here. We do exercises that help us feel connected to living systems and help us witness our interdependence. As this school is only in its second year of education, the manifestations are appearing in each and every movement toward the deeper awareness of what education truly is - a transformation of the human through the experience of the sacredness of the Universe/Earth."³⁷

Reason for Hope

I began this research paper with the question "Is it possible to give a child a sense of the 'meaning, grandeur and sacredness of the earth as

³⁶ Conversation with Guide Dena, Ridge & Valley Charter School, Warren County, NJ, December 2005.

³⁷ Conversation with Evonne Reiersen, Ridge & Valley Charter School, Warren County, NJ, December 2005.

revelatory of the deep mysteries and meaning of the world' within the institution of education?" Through my research, I discovered that Montessori education, Waldorf schooling, and the Ridge and Valley Charter School each offer a different pathway for bringing the earth and the sacred back together again for children.

In Montessori education, an attempt is made to frame the education of the child within the context of the history of the universe. It was Maria Montessori's hope that the child could awaken to this universe story through awe and wonder, rather than simply through learning facts. Inspired by the story of the universe itself, the child is encouraged to see himself/herself as part of this revelatory event. Therefore, a central question for the child in Montessori education is "What is my cosmic task?"

Waldorf education is essentially concerned with how to know the world in its spiritual depths. Rudolf Steiner believed that the sense world was the expression of creative spiritual principles. Consequently, he felt that our scientific ways of knowing the natural world were inadequate to knowing the world in its fullness. For Steiner, it is not just the mind, but rather the soul, that cognizes. Waldorf schools, therefore, bring children into a relationship with the sacred depths of reality by developing soul capacities for a new form of cognition. A central question in Waldorf education is "How do children experience the world?"

The Ridge and Valley Charter School is working with understanding the universe in its physical as well as psychic dimension, in order to more fully understand the role of the human. Since the Ridge and Valley School is a public charter school, its affirmation of the sacred aspect of the Earth must be covert. The Ridge and Valley School finds itself on the frontier of bringing questions about the sacred dimension of the earth into the public domain. One of the ways they do this is to create a context within which children can be led to their own experiences of the sacred. Another way is for the teachers to carry this sensibility within themselves. When I visited the school in December 2005, I saw happy children who were thinking out of a new paradigm.

Thomas Berry has said that the deep psychic shift needed in our time is a shift toward seeing the natural world as a "mode of divine presence." Each of these forms of schooling goes a long way to enabling this shift to take place in the lives of children. Knowing that children are being educated in these ways throughout the country is reason for hope. These schools are at the cusp of a radical transformation of consciousness in our time.

Chapter 7

The Valley School in Bangalore, India: An Interview with Neetu Singh

by Peggy Whalen-Levitt

Neetu Singh is a Teacher and Program Coordinator at the Study Centre of the Valley School, a school established in 1978 based on the teachings of the eminent philosopher and thinker, Jiddu Krishnamurti. The school is located in South India near Bangalore in a picturesque valley with undulating hills and farms with a reserve forest on the fringe. It has 110 acres of dense vegetation, with a lake on one side and a running stream. The school, Art Village and the Study Centre are located on the same campus. Peggy Whalen-Levitt Interviewed Neetu on May 4, 2005

PWL: I understand that there was a yearlong search for the land where the school now resides. Krishnamurti knew that the land should be about 100 acres. When he walked through the wilderness site that included streams, a lake, woodland and meadows, he knew the school had found its home. What is it about this site that supports the vision of the Valley School?

NS: One of the things that perhaps attracted Krishnamurti to this land was the giant Banyan tree and he had some special attraction towards that tree. In fact, the other schools in India have a huge banyan tree. And this one happens to have a fairly old banyan tree, perhaps a hundred years old. That's my guess. But I think it was more on the feeling level. From what I understand, he walked the land and when he came out he said, "This is the right land, the right place to start the school."

PWL: As I learn more about The Valley School, I am struck by the ways in which the school nurtures sensitivity to place. In creating a walk to the

Art Village, for example, an attempt has been made to create a natural ambience of bamboo grove, stream, tall trees and pond. How did the school's founders go about creating this environment?

NS: When the original educators started the school, it was just a barren land. There were two or three trees like the banyan tree and the tamarind tree, and you could actually see the whole expanse. But now the whole area has been regenerated into a forest. So, they had to figure everything out from the beginning. What would we like the school to be? Twenty-seven years ago this place was very far away from the city. When they sat down to decide how to make a school, how to organize 110 acres of land, they put the structures at the borders. So that when the children walk from the school to the Art Village, or from the school to the Study Centre, they have to walk through the forest. They don't really have to make a deliberate effort or time to go into the forest. They have to do it, it's part of being there.

PWL: The school art director has said that "The (Art) Village offers a silent space for the creative minds to meet in the midst of trees, the rushing stream and the call of birds. All of these keep changing each moment to celebrate life in its silence and serenity. And in this silence may sprout a movement, which is the chant of Nature, within and around. Here, the child and the adult may free his mind from its limitation and awaken to the ageless mind that is beyond space, beyond time." This is a very different view of art from the Western notion of self-expression. Would you say that art is experienced as a form of participation with the natural world?

NS: I would say, quite a bit of it, because when the children go to the Art Village, the structure is simple. There's a water pond, there's a huge banyan tree where the children have classes under the tree, and there's a bamboo grove, and the children spend a lot of time outdoors beside the pond, where they will do some drawing and painting. And the representation of the natural world in paintings or drawings is very beautiful. It's extremely touching. And also there's a music room, so you can listen to the music. The sound of music spreads everywhere. So when the children go there, it creates a very nice atmosphere.

PWL: I understand that it was a series of talks that Krishnamurti gave in Bangalore in 1971 that laid the foundation for the opening of The Valley

School in 1978. During those talks, Krishnamurti gave a wonderful example of looking at a bougainvillea as follows: “There is not only the sensory perception with the eye: you see this bougainvillea Then as you observe that colour, you make an image, you have already an image; you have a name for it. You like it or dislike it, you have preferences. So through the images that you have about that flower, you see. You don’t actually see, but your mind sees it more than the eye So you are looking, observing with the images, conclusions that you have formed. And, therefore, you are not actually looking at life So in order to look at your life as it is, there must be freedom of observation.” Can you help us understand this “freedom of observation” that seems to be the impulse for the Valley School?

NS: Many years ago when I started reading the writings of J. Krishnamurti he posed the question – Have you ever looked at the tree? As I examined this question I realized that I had never really looked. I was not really paying attention to what was around me. Because in the kind of societies that we live in, everything is perceived to be for use. So I think in this quote, what is interesting to realize is that Krishnamurti uses the metaphor of looking at a tree to also pose that question, “Have you looked at your own images?” Whether it is the images between a boyfriend and a girlfriend or a husband and a wife, we take those images for granted. We assume that those images are helpful in knowing the other person. What Krishnamurti is asking is, “When you look at that image, what do you see? Is that image helpful or is it actually preventing you from having a direct relationship with the other person?” Then, he has a very famous quote where he says that if you don’t have a relationship with the Earth, with a tree, with the flowers, you don’t have a relationship with other human beings, because the same principle is involved. When we are looking at the natural world, when we are looking at a tree, are we looking only through our images that it gives us pleasure, it gives us a soothing effect, or can we just look at the way it is? Because if we look at the way it is, it tells a different story. When I look at a tree, for example today on a rainy day, it will change. In the morning, the same tree will seem to wake up, there will be hardly any light on it, and when the sunlight comes, the whole structure and the nature of the tree changes. In the evening, the tree has a somber look. So when I look at it, it is giving a different story. Am I in touch with something? Similarly, in relationship, am I really in touch with the other person? Or am I only approaching the person with the image I have of yesterday, which includes all the hurts and pleasures I’ve accumulated about the other person? Am I really in touch with that person, because every human

being is changing, is evolving, is growing. They are not the same. And they don't like to be treated the same as they were yesterday. Even I don't like to be treated the way I was six months ago. So, that is the main question. Can we really examine the images?

PWL: In the same talk, Krishnamurti spoke the following words. "Look at the sky, look at that tree, look at the beauty of the light, look at the clouds with their curves, with their delicacy. If you look at them without any image, you have understood your own life . . . And so the question is: What is this observer, the observer who has separated himself from the observed? At the moment of experiencing anything, there is no observer. When you look at that sunset - and that sunset is something immense - when you look at it, at that moment there is no observer who says, "I am seeing the sunset." A second later comes the observer. So how does the observer come into being? When you look at this flower, at the moment you observe it closely, there is no observer, there is only a looking. Then you begin to name that flower. Then you say, "I wish I had it in my garden or in my house." Then you have already begun to build an image about that flower. So the image-maker is the observer . . . So when you observe, the observer looks at that flower with the eyes of the past. And you don't know how to look without the observer." Would you say that the Valley School is a learning community where teachers and children alike are learning "to look without the observer?"

NS: That is a good question. There is a distinction between the program that is at the school and the Study Centre. We have a children's program at the Study Centre and the school addresses mostly the academic issues. How the teachers address this really depends on the skill of the teachers and their understanding of what Krishnamurti is saying and their own work with nature.

Now, what we do at the Study Centre is somewhat different. When children come to us at the Study Centre, we are mainly interested in, "Can the child be silent?" Because we feel that in silence there is this possibility of observation. If the mind is constantly chattering and involved in some activity, then the capacity to look is somewhat diminished. When the children come to the Study Centre, our whole idea of creating an activity or a program is "Has that activity led to an observation, or to a state of silence first and then to an observation?" So, there is an activity, the movement into silence, and then observation. For example, when the children come to the Study Centre, one of the first things that we do is

ask them to sit quietly and just listen to the sounds of birds. We ask them to sit in a proper posture where they can breathe easily and observe their breath. And then we have various activities when they come for a three-hour session. Sitting quietly is only one part of that session, perhaps for fifteen or twenty minutes. And then sometimes we have them listen to a piece of music, for example, music of the rivers, or music of the wind. So, when they listen to it, we ask them to construct a story which comes to their mind, or images which come to their mind. And each child is given some time to explore that and share with others what they felt when they were listening to the music. Sometimes we just sit quietly, we don't listen to music. Later, when we ask them of all the activities they did at the Study Centre for three hours which includes sitting quietly, perhaps having a discussion and going for a nature walk, we ask them to write what they felt about the program at the Centre. One of the key things that they come to is that "I could sit in silence, I didn't know that I could sit in silence for such a long time." I think we assume, as adults, that children are not able to sit quietly, that they are quite mischievous and cannot sit quietly. And we try to downplay that activity. But we find that when children leave, that is one of the key activities which they really enjoy. It's something that they go back with, "When I sat quietly, this is what happened to me: I could listen to the birds, I could just watch my thoughts." We tell them, "Just observe your thoughts and feelings." So, they have that capacity, as they have the capacity to do other things.

PWL: How often do they come to you?

NS: They come twice in a term. Four times a year.

PWL: And they would do that all the way through their schooling?

NS: Yes. They start when they are in class one and continue until class twelve. Right now we have children who have been coming for twelve years.

PWL: Can you tell me more about how you nurture the art of listening and looking at the Study Centre?

NS: When the children come to the Study Centre we sit in silence for a while. And then we spend some time in the natural world: going for a walk, drawing, sketching, writing, collecting, and so on. And then we do some activity to develop a relationship with the body. For example, learning very basic movements - yoga movements - to relax the body, to learn how to calm the mind and body together. So, we engage children in various activities to bring the children close to themselves, rather than just being in the intellect. So the first hour is spent relating the child to the senses in some way. And then we have a break where they can wander around the Study Centre and socialize with each other. During this time some children go around the tree and sing songs to the Peepal tree.

And then, the key program of the Study Centre is engaging the children in a dialogue, to be able to sit and have an intelligent discussion with others on various issues that relate to their daily life. Some issues are how they relate with their parents, their teachers, with other children, with the world. And we look at social phenomena, for example, environmental degradation. Before the children come to the Study Centre, I go to the different classes and I ask the children to write down their concerns, what they would like to discuss when they come to the Study Centre. And that allows them to open up and be part of the program, rather than the program coming from outside. And then we try to categorize the questions into society, the self, the environment, relationships and so on. When they come to the Study Centre, we may read some questions that they have written and we divide the class into small groups of seven to eight children. In those groups, we try to elicit responses from them to the questions. By engaging their mind by asking questions and encouraging them to express themselves in small groups, they open up and relate what is being discussed to what they are going through. And quite often they come up with wonderful insights into the various issues.

PWL: The Valley School makes a distinction between the cultivation of intelligence and that of intellect, of memory and its skills. Can you help us better understand this distinction between intelligence and intellect?

NS: Intellect is the capacity of the brain to understand something verbally and express something and think logically and rationally. Intellect is independent of emotion and feeling. In schools and colleges, this cultivation of intellect is given the highest importance. And even the whole issue of creativity is looked at in the field of intellect, which is to be

able to come up with new ideas and to find out new ways of doing things. All that is in the field of intellect. And intellect, as we know, is based on knowledge and memory. In fact, if we look at the advancement of modern civilization, it is all based on intellect. Usually, in our society, whether it is East or West, we often confuse intelligence with intellect. We assume that if a person is intellectually quite capable, then he must be intelligent, which is not always true if we really look at life. There are some highly capable people who would admit that they don't have complete intelligence, because intelligence is a much vaster area than intellect. Intelligence would demand that all the capacities of the human being would be paid attention to, which is our capacity to look, to listen, to question, and to learn. Intelligence is the capacity to feel as well as to reason. And I think, to a degree, these things are being recognized now. Even with the work of Howard Gardner, I think, there are listed ten or eleven areas of intelligence, and the list keeps growing.

PWL: At the Valley School, how do you create an environment where intelligence is nurtured?

NS: There are certain areas that can be addressed. One is that we approach learning as heuristic in nature, aimed at self learning and self discovery. So we try to create materials and the learning process in such a way that children are taking responsibility for their learning. They are learning at their own pace. They are learning through their own interests. The second area that we are interested in is to create an atmosphere that is free from authority. So that means that the teacher is not there to instruct the children in what they should think or how they should act, rather, the teacher is also learning, he is in the mode of learning, always learning along with the child. The third area which is addressed is without reward and punishment, because we understand that reward and punishment brings about fear, hurt, and self-protective reaction. The fourth area where we can address intelligence is through learning without comparison and competition as they generate envy and antagonism between one human being and another human being. So, you have to see the connection between comparison and fear. And when we see that we are in fear, then can we love? We also go into this question of what is freedom and what is responsibility? Giving freedom without discussing what freedom means, what order means, how they are connected, how responsibility is connected with freedom - just to give freedom is not enough. So, we have to constantly discuss these things among teachers, among children. And then, we are concerned with self-knowledge, which is to understand how we learn, what is our learning pattern, why do we

get angry so easily, why do we get irritated, why are we snobbish? All these things are learning about oneself, a constant need for security, not only now but also in the future. So, when we look at all these six areas, those are the kind of learning processes that are necessary to create an atmosphere where intelligence can come about.

PWL: Krishnamurti has said that “if you pass on through the meadows with their thousand flowers of every color imaginable, from bright red to yellow and purple, and their bright green grass washed clean by last night’s rain, rich and verdant - again without a single movement of the machinery of thought - then you will know what love is.” Would you say that, ultimately, education at the Valley School is an education in service of the possibility of love?

NS: Yes, if we understand the world love correctly. Krishnamurti did explore the word “love” quite often in his talks. His approach to love generally has been to discover what is not love. And actually, putting those factors or those conditions aside, then we discover what is love. For example, attachment is not love. One has to discover what is involved in attachment. What are the implications of attachment?

Krishnamurti summarized the aims of education as (1) a concern for the whole over and above the part and a non-sectarian approach free from prejudice, (2) concern for man and the environment - ending of conflict between human beings and a nondestructive relationship with nature, as humanity and nature are one indivisible process, and (3) religious spirit and the scientific mind working together.

The purpose of education is the cultivation of the whole human being. Krishnamurti had a vision of looking at life without separation and without breaking things down because the human mind, which is based in thought mostly, breaks things down on the basis of nationalities and religion. Then there is a feeling of separation at a personal level that each human being experiences. So, he pointed out the factors that divide people at various levels and urged people to go beyond that. And then we have this fundamental concern for man and the environment and the relationship between the two. The state of the earth, as we see it, is deteriorating rapidly as the forests disappear and the planet is dying off. There’s a worldwide degradation and the tragedy is that most people are not aware of the consequences of their actions. The intention of

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education at the Valley School is to raise awareness of the child to what is happening and how their actions are connected to what is going on in the world and to have love with nature and natural phenomena. By religious spirit, Krishnamurti meant a quality of innocence and communion with all things, which means natural things, physical things, human beings. A religious mind seeks to go beyond the materialistic world, to discover something immeasurable, something sacred. And by scientific mind, he meant an uncompromising commitment to the observation and understanding of facts. For Krishnamurti, it was this religious quality of wholeness that alone could bring about a new culture in which the knowledge of science would find its right place.

References

All quotes come from *The Valley School: Silver Jubilee 1978-2003*, a commemorative publication celebrating the first 25 years of The Valley School.

Chapter 8

Grounding Higher Education: Reflections on Openings and Obstacles to Earth-Centered Pedagogy

By Lisa Marie Peloquin

Part One: The Letter

I held the envelope in hand—with my name carefully hand-written on “happy” paper, this postal anomaly was decidedly different, protruding from the lifeless reams of advertisements upon advertisements that used to be trees, destined straight for my recycling bin. Unlike the usual bombardment of bills into my mailbox or the familiar inundation of overt and veiled solicitations of what more I could give to Your this, My that or the Other—this time, I experienced a genuine pause, opened the letter and received my germinal impressions of the “Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice” program at Timberlake Farm Earth Sanctuary.

My eyeful fingers leafed through the printed pages of natural tones and graceful fonts. I remember feeling the surge of hopeful excitement that accompanies meaningful opportunity . . . as well as anxiety—her existential mirror. Designed for educators, the “Inner Life” would gather a diversity of teachers to co-creatively think, write and speak to the presence and absence of nature within the learning process. The two-year program would include a series of seminars, experiential workshops and focused dialogues designed to cultivate human connection with the natural world. From my perspective, this experience would allow me to question the many bifurcated comfort zones crafted by our culture: minds kept separate from bodies, the imaginary private realm shielded from the collective, the cerebral divorced from the sensate. As an academic situated within a system of “higher education” that legitimates

certain forms of knowledge and normalizes particular modes of learning, I immediately felt drawn to this revolution encoded in soy-ink.

Part II: Out of the Concrete Box: Students, Teachers, Classrooms

Ways of seeing the world may become as concretized as the asphalt beneath our (synthetic) rubber-soled feet. As a sociologist, I remain captivated by the ways in which an individual's location in time, place and circumstance renders specific expectations of the real, true and valuable. More specifically, my experience with the "Inner Life" program consistently prompted me to behold, reflect and remodel the teaching and learning process and to expand the limits of higher education beyond orthodox processes and contexts.

The United States, as a decidedly age-stratified society, channels teachers and learners into distinct educational trajectories and environments deemed appropriate for specific stages within the life course. Considered progressive and cumulative, students are assumed to move through stages of cognitive and emotional development that establish the building blocks of identity and social roles. My efforts to complete the application materials for the "Inner Life" brought awareness to my internalized assumptions about the most rightful educators and students to participate. My attention focused on the language of the program description –my fascination with diction was at once a sociological reflex to consider the forces of history and a testimony to my sincere need for belonging.

The application materials presented the "Inner Life" as centered on the *child* in nature. As a university professor that recognizes our culturally specific imaginations of age, I was concerned about my candidacy . . . Did I work with *children*? What qualities of being are idealized by contemporary understandings of childhood? Do I consider *childhood* a state of openness to nature? If so, were my students already "lost causes," their consciousness sutured by formal education—immunized from empathetic bonds with the natural world? How do assumptions about the openness or "innocence" of childhood reflect levels of material affluence within a society? Are exploited child farm-workers benefiting more from their direct connection with nature than an "incarceration" within classrooms for the mastery of reading, writing and arithmetic?

Ultimately, my perception of undergraduate students as a vulnerable, if not endangered, population catalyzed my decision to reject conventional definitions and expand the umbrella of "childhood" to include twenty

some-things. In *Last Child in the Woods* (2005), Richard Louv diagnoses a “nature deficit disorder” of epidemic proportions within Western societies. With progressive industrialization and urbanization, youth lose opportunities for direct exposure to nature and consequently suffer from increasing rates of obesity, depression and anxiety. Undergraduate students, comprising what recent social historians have termed “the Net generation,” exist within social worlds more inhabited by virtual representations than grounded, lived relationships.

Of particular salience to my work as an educator, the overwhelmingly suburban and socio-economically privileged backgrounds of private liberal arts students added further complexity to these conditions of detachment from the natural world. Most often, students’ first reception of the wonders of nature were the byproducts of mass media disseminated commercial interests. In effect, the ethos of desire at the core of consumer economies actively meshes and distorts the experience of the body in nature with those of the pleasure of purchase. As an educator, I recognized my duty not only to promote consciousness among young people about human separation from the natural world but also to make problematic the personal pleasures of high priced hiking boots, outdoor clothing and tourism.

Teachers, “Professors,” Knowledge

My participation within the “Inner Life of the Child” did not merely prompt me to question the reigning definitions of childhood. Part and parcel of the regular meaningful exchange I shared with educators from all walks of life further inspired me to question the kinds of knowledge that benefit students as well as my own limited vision of performing the role of university “professor.” Social institutions, such as education, represent an accepted and persistent constellation of statuses, roles and values that address the needs of complex societies. Simultaneously organizational and normative, social institutions structure human action, tempering the flux of social life into scripted social interactions and exchange relationships.

Teachers and learners expect certain performances of one another—behaviors (teachers stand, students sit) and beliefs (A’s are excellent, exams are accurate measures of learning) that are consistent with our institutional contexts. Any student that has been “excused” from a seminar for “disruptive behavior” will testify that deviance from these scripts is met with discomfort, mistrust and outright negative sanction. Any professor whose emotions have been judged as “un-professional” or

lectures as “meaningless digressions” will testify that these role expectations are interlocking and mutually restrictive.

Education, like all social institutions, adapts and responds to changing historical and economic contexts. As a university professor, I am located within what my society recognizes as a realm of “higher education.” Consistent with this clearly hierarchical arrangement, a university professor confronts the cultural imperatives to teach particular skills and specialized information to students. At present, the demands of “effective participation” within a capitalist society promote curricula that prepare individuals to “get a job.” Quite simply, money is required to feed, clothe and shelter the body as well as to pay for a university education. Professors are expected to perform the role of the expert and transmit their knowledge in exchange for substantial tuition payments that pay their salaries. Within the minds of students, parents, and educators alike lies the impending reality of “getting what you pay for” in the quest to survive within an increasingly competitive paid, wage labor force.

Despite my deeply held personal convictions that each human being is intimately connected with the natural world, I inherit a civilization that prioritizes speed, efficiency and technology over the most contemplative and transcendental walks in the forest. As participants within institutions of higher education, teachers and learners typically emphasize an education with immediate use-value and technical application in the “real world.” The most basic comparison of the distribution of funding and university majors within the “arts” as opposed to the sciences will evidence the priorities of rational, scientific and de-natured interfaces with the environment.

Sharing the “Inner Life” allowed me to critically reflect on the ways in which my conformity with the orthodox content of collegiate education in fact serves to reproduce the very beliefs and practices that subjugate nature. Given that the sacred cows of objectivity and efficiency serve to legitimate human control of the natural world, the reconnection of children with nature requires teaching that expands bases of knowledge and understanding beyond the rational to include the subjective, non-rational, and immeasurable. To invite my students to re-connect with nature would challenge the increasing medicalization of ever more numerous alternative states of mind and the social construction of time measured in dollars and seconds.

Nature as Teacher/Teachers in Nature

The practice of teaching/learning is framed by specific norms of the body within physical space. Universities provide controlled, sanitary, and

rationally organized environments for the pursuit of education. The spatial and normative dynamics of universities testify to the enduring hierarchy of the mind over matter and the separation of bodies from nature. In contrast to the “Inner Life’s” intention to reunite children with the natural world, the architecture and landscaping on most college campuses clearly attest to pronounced pressures in the opposite direction.

Wild spaces are replaced with Kodak colored lawns that remain mercilessly manicured...networks of concrete footpaths swiftly direct busy bees past fertilized flowers from one air conditioned building into the next. Hermetically sealed classrooms minimize movement of bodies and air. Appetites for food, drink, rest and movement are tightly regulated. Seating is arranged with reference to chalkboards, media projectors and screens. Windows are closed and shades are drawn to maximize artificial light and visual teaching aids. Despite the prevalence of musculoskeletal disorders (lower back pain, headaches), contemporary students are expected to remain seated and motionless in chairs (with six legs on the floor). Prolonged standing and diligent pacing (surveillance) of the student body represent anticipated practices that communicate the status, professionalism and authority of the instructor.

In stark contrast to the contemplative and monastic existence of bygone days, contemporary scholars contend with a hyper-stimulation of the nervous system characteristic of the Information Age. The most “well-prepared” students must become technologically savvy and learn to navigate the avalanche of diverse and often contradictory ideas that emerge from the social and scientific worlds. Universities often showboat high-tech innovations within the college classroom as the keys to the kingdom of effective teaching and learning. Labeled as “smart classrooms,” the most coveted teaching spaces are not equipped with clay tablets and stylus or clay anything, but with personal computer workstations for each participant.

Likewise, the ruling technologies of a society change the patterns of social interaction between teachers and learners. Rapid-fire emails, Blackboard, texting, and IM increasingly substitute for office hours, phone calls, and impromptu outdoor strolls. Universities devote considerable resources to create elaborate networks of electronic communication. In addition to the gender, age, and occupational status inequalities that separate teachers and students, pop-ups and shock waves enter the competition for mindful co-presence and even basic eye-contact among humans. In contrast to the dinosaur pace and complexion of face to face teacher and student relationships, meaningful “connections” are now measured at high speed, preferably air brushed and downloaded in Dolby surround sound.

Traditional teaching and learning environments distance teachers and students from one another and the natural world. Although teachers routinely interpret fidgeting bodies, eyes at half-mast and snacking as signs of disrespect and disinterest among students, the uprooting and planting of living beings within sterile regimes of institutional space inhibit the creativity and energy of the mental, physical and emotional bodies. The “Inner Life” invited me to expand boundaries of teaching and learning to locations within nature and to witness the natural world as a living classroom and as a learned teacher.

Part III: Opening Self and Society with the Natural World

While academics certainly relish floating within the realm of ideas, the ultimate duty of a teacher is to cultivate awareness and affect meaningful change among students. From my perspective, educators exert a potentially decisive impact on the emergent sensibilities and identities of young people. Nurtured through my involvement with the “Inner Life,” my teaching actively explores pedagogies that transcend the limits of institutional space, embrace rational and non-rational ways of knowing and pursue intimate connection with the natural world. Timberlake Farm’s earth sanctuary has welcomed the voyage of my undergraduate students’ bodies and minds to encounters with nature that challenge conventional boundaries of higher learning and community.

My “Self and Society” upper-level seminar involves thirty students in a fifteen-week study of sociological social psychology. From a disciplinary perspective, the course is designed to engage students in a sustained reflection on the ways in which social forces impact our sense of self and relationship with others. The primary subject matter of the social sciences, such as sociology, evidence the anthropocentrism and androcentrism of western thought in general. Relegating “nature” to the terrain of physical science, most sociologists restrict their attentions to the thoughts and activities of men. Standard courses on the self and society define the social as separate from the web of life we call “nature” and proceed to place models of personal agency and human organization within a two-legged cultural vacuum.

A more empirically accurate approach to social interaction would recognize that human beings make sense of life through the use of multiple sense organs within a living and breathing environment. I explain to students that they should anticipate readings and activities that are “touch-y-feel-y,” not in a therapeutic sense but in an empirically measurable, individually palpable form. My course adopts an alternative

model of human knowledge/understanding that requires a conscious relationship not only to what we see but also to what we touch/feel, hear, taste and smell. By framing the curriculum in terms of the five senses, I strive to de-center the parameters of existence and identity from a purely human, rational and disembodied lens.

On the first day of class, I begin to prepare students for the range of ideas and experiences they will encounter, emphasizing course participants must be willing to look upon the “self,” “society” and even “reality” not as the truth but as the consequence of temporary, shared beliefs. A primary analytical goal of a “Self and Society” class is to present personal autonomy, individual identity, and even human consciousness as inextricably linked to the values of an ever-changing, impermanent collective. Given the peripheral, if not “invisible,” status of nature within the study of the human, reconnecting students with the natural world in fact provides an auspicious window into perceiving the limits of “normal” awareness and behavior.

The significant duration of students’ socialization into formal systems of education dictates that I frame the interface between my students and the natural world in pre-meditated ways. For better or for worse, norms of what higher education looks, sounds and feels like are so profoundly internalized that even their brief absence often translates into “nothingness” within the eyes of my collegiate consumers. In a nutshell, no Powerpoints, no texts messages, no emails, no video mean “no point.” For example, the 165-acre earth sanctuary at Timberlake Farm comprises a massive, wild green-space compared to a classroom that serves to “enliven” the scholarly critique of the influence of “total institutions” on human creativity and movement. While the class session at the sanctuary clearly fulfills a course objective from the professor’s standpoint, students consistently offer a resounding, dismissive refrain, “Oh! You mean we are going to that *hippie* place?!”

Despite legitimate intellectual intentions, this professor must manage her presentation of self and other to navigate a context of potent, negative projections. To a sociologist, stereotypes represent the ways in which reigning paradigms of thought and shared cultural beliefs cast humans into narrowly defined images. Individuals cling to stereotypes when they continue to describe a world in limited ways despite empirical evidence to the contrary. Clearly, the last time I had looked at my birth certificate, I had entered this material world during an historical era of profound *backlash* to the hippie movement. Furthermore, I had never witnessed a psychedelic light show or “love-in” occurring anywhere close to Whitsett, North Carolina. The corporate cooptation of countercultural social movements bolstered by mass media representations serves to divorce the

hippies from their environmental ethos and to reduce them to unemployed, anti-intellectual hedonists. This synthesis of the *hippie* and *nature-lover* with culturally held stereotypes of the “useless” was evident within written reflections after class. Essays were replete with blatant, if not unrepentant, confessions that prior to the actual experience, students expected the class would be “stupid,” a “waste of time” and to “irrelevant compared to real work.”

Human beings are distinctive in their abilities to reflect on the past and to anticipate the reactions of others. When integrating earth-centered pedagogies into the university curriculum, I am careful to mobilize accepted educational protocols to help neutralize the negative stereotypes of the “nature-attuned” subcultures characteristic to the U.S. Prior to departure and consistent with professorial role expectations, class-readings (downloaded from Blackboard), and class lectures (presented in Powerpoint) create space among students for critical discussion of the nature-culture divide. As familiar touchstones for their experiences at the sanctuary, students receive an “education” in the sociology of the environment, technology and knowledge. While at Timberlake Farm, students may then choose to expand their toolbox of learning and encounter nature as a teacher with a distinctive knowledge base and set of resources.

Closeness with the natural world often stimulates a fundamental reversal of the relationship with the senses required for “normalcy” within school. Our perception is influenced by both the efficiency of our sense organs (which differ from individual to individual) and by our mental preconceptions (individual training, cultural conditioning). The natural world provides students with a context of learning that contrasts with the environmental realities of their everyday lives. The “lesson” for my class in particular requires that students remove watches, remain silent, and leave cell phones and computers within institutional walls. This alternative location of learning stimulates the awareness of the senses as both physical sensations and cognitive processes shaped by particular cultural location.

Within nature, students may explore the ways in which their sense of sight is intimately connected to the experience of the self and society. For many of my students, their most intense “exposure” to nature is the daily viewing of a screensaver on a computer desktop, not a focused vision of the forest floor. Contemporary college students are immersed within a culture that is hyper-mediated and inundated by the “unreal,” if not “unnatural.” As women’s and men’s bodies are routinely “enhanced” and re-created by cosmetic surgeries, even their images of the landscape are not untouched –but photo-shopped to remove those unsightly shadows

and bulges. Timberlake Farm presents students with a space relatively unmediated by human technologies, thus opening the eyes of their bodies to the distorted gaze of their culture and to the enduring eyes of the world.

In addition, the sanctuary temporarily distances students from their normal soundscape. During their silent meditation with nature, unfamiliar sights are amplified by unrecognized sounds. To navigate this life-world, students come to appreciate that the *definition* of space with sound differs significantly from the *domination* of space with sound more characteristic of western cultures. With the bells, whistles and mp3s on mute, students enter an animated world that is abundant in non-verbal, symbolic communication. The removal of the visual and audio cues provided by their digital watches likewise underscores that even time may be measured in multiple ways within the context of nature.

Reconnecting the child with nature re-orientes students to the sense of touch as well as its more intimate sensory mode, taste. Our distance and closeness with all facets of the environment is more than mere juxtaposition. While at Timberlake, students may experiment with the norms of contact between a person and the world. Students are asked to remain attentive to what they “touch” and why they “touch.” This connection involves a range of feelings that are emotional and sensational. While logistical difficulties and institutional impediments certainly limit touch for thirty undergraduate students outside university walls, students also describe a host of emotional barriers to the Timberlake Farm excursion. Fear of the “elements” often manifests as many students hovering close to the tree house. In their essays, students speak to their discomfort and fascination with one hundred minutes outside of the pace and perceived order of the classroom. As the rich smellscape triggers their memories, student travels also become multidimensional in personal space as well as life history. The natural world expands qualities of being in the world, involving action and presence from within and without, conditioning and agency among infinite life forms.

Part IV: Continued Reflections

As a participant in the “Inner Life of the Child,” I was blessed with a co-creative community dedicated to the development, transformation and strengthening of life-giving principles. The conversations, meditations and process of the “Inner Life” allowed me to deeply question the ways in which connection with nature may serve to catalyze and support valuable teaching and learning. From my perspective, the quality of education

Only the Sacred

ultimately remains measured by the ways in which “knowledge” serves to ameliorate the suffering of all living beings. My work with Timberlake Farm allowed both myself as a teacher and my students to perceive learning beyond the dominant models and contexts of higher education. Through these direct, lived experiences, I have come to embrace a more diverse community of teachers in the form of a living and breathing ecosystem. I have witnessed my students come to a place where they might see the “unseen,” listen to the “silent,” touch/feel the “intangible” and creatively integrate and embody scholarly ideas. With a self conscious commitment towards gentle, reflective education connected to the natural world, my teaching will continue to explore earth-centered pedagogies and invite students to become aware within an environment of birth and death, abundance and lack, action and intention.

Chapter 9

Research: Mother Nature Has Some Ideas About This, Too

by Colette Segalla

After ten years as an educator both in public schools and in a private Montessori school, I found myself wanting to deepen my work with people and children. I had an interest in the spiritual development of the child and how this plays into the overall picture of human development that people go through throughout the process of a lifetime. To this end, I began to make a transition to the field of depth psychology.

My first step in this transition was to find a graduate program that integrated spirituality as an aspect of the study of psychology. I explored the options and eventually found a program that suited me. Just as I was about to begin the program I received a phone call from someone I had recently met through a mutual friend. This person, Carolyn Toben, explained to me that her organization, The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World (CEINW) had recently been awarded a grant to conduct a program for educators called, “The Inner Life of the Child in Nature.” She encouraged me to apply for a place in the program. Although I explained to her that I was just about to begin my graduate studies, she assured me that I would be able to participate in this program simultaneously.

My initial meeting with Carolyn had been a chance meeting through a mutual friend but we had connected immediately. At the time, I didn’t even know anything about CEINW, but when she told me over the phone about this program for educators I felt honored to be invited to apply for it. The Inner Life of the Child in Nature program fit in extremely well with my interest in children’s spirituality and spiritual development, which I had hoped to explore more deeply in graduate school. After I began my graduate coursework I found that the work with CEINW was like a bridge connecting my work as a Montessori teacher of young children and my studies in psychology. Before long, I found myself

involved in a co-research process with the Center that could not have been more relevant to my work in graduate school. Thus, my practice as a participant in the Inner Life of the Child program has been the integration of the work of CEINW with my work in graduate school.

The co-research process at CEINW enabled me to engage with my work, both there and in graduate school, on a soul-level. This was not strictly academic research with purely intellectual outcomes. This research embodied the principle of *reciprocity* that is key to so many aspects of the work of the Center. Not only did we give ourselves to the research process through readings, discussions, experiences and journaling, putting our time and energy into it and thereby moving it forward, but the research process itself also gave back to us through its direct impact on our own personal and professional lives. There has been a spiritual evolution through this process that does not necessarily occur when research is seen and approached as an objective process with informational outcomes.

At CEINW, the co-research process gave us, as participants, opportunities to experience ourselves in communion with the natural world. This is qualitatively and substantively different from being outdoors, not in communion with nature but as human beings “outside” of our usual place indoors. When one communes, one is a *part* of nature, whereas when one “goes outside” one is *separate* from nature, one is visiting a place not usual to our daily lives. The opportunities to experience ourselves in communion with nature contributed to the dynamic of reciprocity between the researcher and the research. Opportunities for both collective and solitary silence also contributed to this reciprocity, as did the time that was given to reflection, to creative discussion, and to creative expression. The format of our gatherings, which followed the “rhythm of the day” as opposed to an agenda, and an open space for comments rather than a linear progression from one person to the next, grew out of the intention for these gatherings to be more like creative play than “workshops.” In play, not only is there potential for creative outcomes, there is also potential for enrichment and enjoyment of the players. All of these, in addition to the reading, writing, listening to and communing with knowledgeable people, contributed to a research process that gave back (and continues to give back) to the co-researchers through its direct impact on our own personal and professional lives. I’ve found that I’ve experienced my own spiritual evolution through this process. Such growth does not necessarily occur when research is seen and approached as an objective process with informational outcomes.

This orientation to this co-research at CEINW, which includes use of the less measurable of human faculties such as intuition and co-creation, grows (from my observations) organically out of an awareness of the nature of our relationship to the natural world. We are not separate from the natural world but an integral part of it; in the co-research process at CEINW likewise, the participants are not separate from the research, but an integral part of it. The outcome of research such as this is not one-dimensional, statistical data or information, but is various and multi-dimensional since it resides within each one of the participants as potential, like seeds sown in fertile ground. These seeds may then develop into a multitude of outcomes, in the form of, for example, productive relationships, informed new or revised curricula, published texts, perhaps new Centers formed and certainly the possibility for many other outcomes. The most important outcome however is probably the internal inspiration in the heart of each individual that would give birth to all of these potentials and more.

For myself, being a participant in the Inner Life of the Child in Nature program while also being a graduate student in psychology allowed me to interweave the teachings from each into the other. Before long, I had opportunities to do research in graduate school that made use not only of the readings from the Inner Life program, but that was also aided by a clarification of questions and observations from my participation in the program. For one of my classes I had an opportunity to do a qualitative research paper on the spiritual life of the child. What I soon found out was that this was an area that was in need of further research not only in the field of education, but also in the field of psychology.

Qualitative Research

I began this research project because I wanted to explore the ways in which children's spirituality and the spiritual development of children are addressed within education and psychology. I was interested in conceptualizing educational and therapeutic processes in a way that is mindful of the spiritual nature of children and actually engenders spiritual growth in children, rather than impedes it. But the point was not to develop a new form of religious or spiritual education. The point was to find ways to expand our notion of the nature and developmental process of children such that nurturance of the child's spiritual evolution would be a natural part of the educational and/or therapeutic process. This of course is not possible within a traditional, industrial educational model, which concerns itself not with the nature of the child so much as with the child's preparation for engagement in an industrialized society.

Given that humanity faces the most dire of consequences in human history for our behavior toward and relationship with the planet in which we live, it is clear that this is the time to break out of ineffective or destructive ingrained habits and practices of contemporary society, and adapt ourselves to a new way of being amongst one another and with the living organism of planet Earth (Berry, 1988). This will require nothing less than a transformation of industrialized society toward an “ecologized” society, or one that recognizes and cares for the interdependencies and interrelationships amongst not only people but animals, plants and all inanimate but critical elements in the planet (Berry, 1988). To this end, my aim is to contribute to the necessary shift in consciousness already underway by dedicating myself to discovering better ways to conceptualize and initiate human beings into the experience of life as part of a matrix of interdependent participants. Education is one of the most important aspects of this long initiation process and offers beautiful opportunities for the genesis of a more fully aware collective humanity.

The current status of education reflects the same symptoms of our misaligned notion of ourselves in relationship to one another and the planet as the environmental catastrophes now upon us. A key to both of these is, in my view, a deepening of consciousness such that the spiritual nature of the human being and the sacred nature of our environment become as much a part of our understanding and experience as our understanding and experience that the earth is round and not flat (Berry, 1988). These were the conceptual underpinnings of my exploration of the current literature on the spirituality of children and their spiritual development.

For this project, although there is (happily) a vast and increasing amount of literature on the topic, I limited my investigation to a sampling of journal articles and books from the fields of education, psychology, theology and nursing. I compared these sources with a focus on extracting a clear definition of the spiritual aspect of being human. Since, in education and the social sciences, there is not a comprehensive and universally accepted definition of the term beyond religious context, I looked for concepts that could be categorized into a multi-faceted or multi-dimensional definition of spirituality. Again the purpose was to expand the notion of being human to include the spiritual dimension without the usual conjoined religious connotation. I found that spirituality could be defined in terms of:

- ~ capacities
- ~ experiences or states of being
- ~ qualities or ways of being

I also found that the literature addressing this topic could be categorized based on its purpose as follows:

- ~ to conceptualize the spiritual nature of the child
- ~ to identify methods or approaches that foster the spiritual development of the child
- ~ to identify the qualities necessary for the adult to have in order to work with the child on a spiritual level

The significance of this categorization of the literature is that it points to a critical component of the investigation of this topic, which is the relational nature of spirituality; when considering the spiritual development of children, the spiritual preparation of the adult is an integral part of the equation (Hyde 2005, Montessori 1912, Smith & McSherry 2003, Steiner 1922).

Although some of the concepts identified as part of the definition of spirituality are clearly already understood as aspects of human nature, the combination of these concepts and their identification as spiritual is where a change in perspective or understanding may occur. For example, one of the categories that surfaced in this exploration was *spirituality as a set of capacities*. These capacities include an innate faculty that allows for imagination, contemplation, wonder, reflection, insight, engaged observation, meaning making, and intuition (Hart 2003, Hyde 2005, Montessori 1912, Webster 2005). None of these, considered as an isolated concept, would necessarily be considered a “spiritual” capacity in common parlance, however when combined and identified as such, they become part of a cohesive picture of our spiritual nature that invites careful nurturance of these capacities, rather than incidental acknowledgement. If parents and teachers understand the capacity to wonder as an important part of growth and development, then a sensitivity to moments of wonder and an allowance for the opportunity to wonder might take the place of providing answers, or of expecting pat answers from the child to questions based on prescribed information. There is opportunity for a qualitative difference in interaction between adult and child when a capacity such as wonder is beheld as a unique and spiritual aspect of being human.

In addition to the capacities to wonder, reflect, contemplate, imagine, gain insight, make meaning, observe, and intuit, spirituality includes the

capacity to have a sense of connection or oneness with other people, nature, or the transcendent (Hart 2003, Erricker 2005). In short, our spiritual nature gives us the capacity to love. A sense of connection or togetherness is perhaps one of the most important aspects of spirituality because it addresses not just what exists within an individual but what might exist between individuals. This sense of connection has long been discussed within the realm of psychology (albeit perhaps in somewhat different terms) but when it is cast as a spiritual capacity it may denote a continuum of experience that extends to a capacity for connection with the Transcendent (Hart 2003). (As an aside, since the idea is to steer clear of religious connotation, rather than God, “the Transcendent” is used to mean the feeling or belief in something more powerful or greater than oneself.) The notion of a connection with the Transcendent differentiates the spiritual definition from the strictly psychological definition of this capacity for connection (although *transpersonal* psychology does in fact include the spiritual dimension (ATP 2007).) In this way, an integration of the spiritual aspect is an expansion on the idea of connection, rather than a whole separate concept. In educational or therapeutic settings, if an understanding of the capacity to experience connection and the reality of our interconnectedness were a natural part of the adult mindset, once again this could be nurtured rather than discouraged and an understanding of our interdependence could be fostered rather than denied.

When spiritual capacities are actually developed and utilized, spiritual experiences or states of being can then result. When the capacity to wonder finds expression in wonderment or a sense of deep mystery, this is then a spiritual experience. It is spiritual because it takes us beyond ourselves and can engender an expansion of consciousness. When intuition is nurtured and finds expression through its usage in perception, decision-making, and discernment, this also is an experience of utilizing and integrating the spiritual dimension of oneself. Or when a person makes use of imagination to press beyond the bounds of fact and logic either for play or for intellectual inquiry, this also can be a spiritual experience (Hyde 2005). Perhaps most significantly, when one engages the capacity for a sense of connection, one may experience a deep sense of belonging and togetherness on a spiritual level that can, in turn, facilitate an exploration of some of the existential questions of humanity (Webster 2005, Steiner 1922).

Other examples of spiritual states of being include the experience of being in a “felt space” of mystery (Hyde 2005). This comes about when the capacity for wonder and contemplation lead one to a phenomenological experience of being in a different place than the

“reality” of the empirical here and now. The coalescence of wonder, contemplation and imagination enables the child to enter into and feel the mystery of some of life’s unanswered questions, be they existential questions or the mystery of the sphinx. This state of being is akin to being in a “felt space” of the sacred, where awe and reverence blossom within the child, setting the stage for an experience of reciprocity between the child and the sacred environ.

It is quite clear that without opportunities to experience spiritual states of being, an individual must function in a much dryer and more limited way than when encouraged to give expression to this broader aspect of being human. But when children are indeed provided with opportunities to experience and gain an appreciation for their own spiritual nature and their connectedness with all of life, then spiritual qualities or ways of being in the world become part of their self-concept and part of their orientation to life (Erricker 2005, Webster 2005).

A spiritually imbued orientation to life is an outcome of the nurturance of the child’s spiritual capacities. The spiritual developmental process, rather than stages, is more like having access to a soul-nourishing source that grows like a plant, with more deeply embedded roots and more sun-seeking foliage above the ground. With so much wonderful information already available about the physical, cognitive, social, emotional, neurological and moral development of children, at this stage in our evolution, these can all be complemented by the new and growing body of wisdom about the spiritual development of children. Not only does the wisdom we acquire about this topic inform us as to our treatment of children, but also the quest for wisdom and the application of that wisdom in our interactions with children actually nurtures the adult in his or her own spiritual development. The relational nature of spirituality means that there is no way to engage with the material without it affecting the adult. It is for this reason that this is such a rich and important field of inquiry and one that has potential to contribute to global transformation.

I made a point at the beginning of this essay to note the way in which I became involved with CEINW because I believe it represents a principle at work in the type of co-research and the creative process of education that the Center brings to light. That principle is that this work serves a larger purpose that has its own ways of ordering things which may at times be beyond our conscious awareness. As mentioned, my meeting with Carolyn and therefore with the work of CEINW, was a “chance” meeting through a mutual friend. But even the chance meeting with Carolyn came after a “chance” meeting with our mutual friend at a public event following at least a couple of years without contact between us. So

these multiple layers of “chance” that led to a fruitful connection and the furthering of my life’s work were not random events but are acknowledged as events that line up with the perhaps even unspoken intentions of the participants and the unseen design of a work that is much larger than any of the participants. One might say this type of thing happens all the time and yes, it does, but when the principle behind it is acknowledged, even if it’s not completely understood, and embraced as being at play in the larger work, that’s when a space is created for things to unfold a little bit differently, perhaps bringing to this space a little bit more potential for unexpected but certainly fully hoped for fruitful results. Although Carolyn never knew, before she called me, that I was even considering entering a graduate school whose motto is “tending the soul of the world,” I can certainly see how this larger purpose was influencing events in my life and gracing me with the good fortune to be put in touch with people who were so carefully nurturing this same purpose in the lives of our children and the natural world. I am, indeed, filled with gratitude.

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Part II

A Path of Inner Schooling

I cannot be awake, for nothing looks to me as it did before, or else I am awake for the first time, and all before has been a mean sleep.

~ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

Chapter 10

Opening Meditation

by Carolyn Toben

Inner life of the Child In Nature Retreat

July 27, 2007

I didn't know what to tell you at this session intended to gather our retreat year together, so I decided to walk and ask the natural world what to say.

I first ask the mountain laurel, drooping from the drought, what shall I tell them? The mountain laurel replies: "Tell them not to let drought nor any conditions from the outside discourage them . . . Tell them to listen instead for the messages of all around them, that we are one in a great communion . . . all in one voice. Tell them to listen for that voice."

A bumblebee in front of me lights on a tiny red flower, pulling it down with its weight. I ask it: What do I tell them? It moves on to a purple flower but calls back: "Tell them to keep going."

I pass a tall cedar and ask it, what shall I tell them? It replies: "To stand tall against prevailing practices of destruction and to root themselves firmly in the soil of their own lives."

I see the grove of pecan trees on my right, planted so long ago and ask them: What shall I tell them? The pecan trees reply: "Tell them what we have been giving for decades now . . . shade, fruit, and constant protection."

I hear the morning dove in the far distance and I send a message to it:

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What shall I tell them? And the dove softly responds: “Tell them to listen to my song and come home to themselves.” Other birds hidden in the woods join in as if longing to participate; a bright yellow finch dives down to the garden fence in front of me, a black crow zigzags by on his way to somewhere, and from deep in the woods comes the enchanting sound of the wood-thrush, I toss out the question to them all: What shall I tell them? The answers come quickly: “Tell them to notice us, to pay attention to us, to love us, for those who love are never lost.”

I stop before a small maple tree with twisted trunk and I say: What shall I tell them? It replies: “Tell them to reach for the light, no matter how hard the struggle.”

I pick up a medium-sized piece of quartz and I ask it: What shall I tell them? And the rock answers: “Stay deeply rooted in the earth, and you will find your way.”

And I walk softly over the moss on the trail and ask it: What shall I tell them? And the moss replies: “What is needed now is softness and firmness and vulnerability, coupled with courage.”

I see the fallen trunk of a tree lying on the ground and I ask of it: What shall I tell them? And the tree trunk answers: “Tell them that transformation is a natural process and to fear nothing.”

I look up at a hazy sky with streaks of blue and ask it: What shall I tell them? And the sky replies: “Tell them to see all as I do . . . a communion of subjects all in unison. And also tell them that they are carriers of the spirit of that knowledge from this time forward, and they must now give form to that knowledge . . . to see all with a loving heart and loving eyes.”

And finally, later that night, I ask the moon: What can I tell them? And the moon answers: “Tell them that they are part of the communion of subjects within a great story unfolding upon the earth at this time, and that each must realize her/his own story as an integral part of that great story and bring it into form. It is an altogether new love story in which each makes real the sacredness of the earth and of their own lives.”

Chapter 11

A Welcoming Presence

by Peggy Whalen-Levitt

September 21, 2006

Dear Inner Life Friends,

In the stillness of this first day of Fall in which seasonal changes are revealing turnings and ripenings, we write to welcome you to our forthcoming time in creating together a new vision of the inner life of the child in nature.

For entry into our beginning time together, we are enclosing three readings: Richard Lewis' essay "Living by Wonder," Thomas Berry's reflection on "The Meadow Across the Creek," and Robert Sardello's "Meditation on Silence."

As you enter the land, we invite you to slow down, take in the cosmos field on your right, and stop to read the John Muir sign before the bend in the road. Follow the gravel road to the Magical Garden where you will find a place to park along the fence.

You are invited to arrive between 9:00 and 9:30 am on Saturday morning, October 7th. Warm muffins and tea/coffee will be waiting for you at the Farmhouse. Our retreat will begin at 9:30 am and end by 4:00 pm, with lunch served at midday. Solo time on earth sanctuary trails will be part of the day, so please wear sturdy shoes and come dressed for rain or shine.

We hope you feel the welcoming presence of the land as we come together.

Warm regards,

Carolyn Toben

Peggy Whalen-Levitt

Only the Sacred

So began the two-year journey of our first class of “The Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice” in the Autumn of 2006.

It’s an unusual beginning for a program for educators in our culture . . . A beginning that invites attention to the natural world before the human participants meet one another . . . A beginning that speaks of warmth and welcome and life . . . an intentional beginning to a program that will invite educators to behold what is before them without bringing in other sources of knowledge beyond their own immediate experience.

This kind of beginning bespeaks the intention of the Inner Life program to *expand* beyond the kinds of memory that we traditionally encourage in our schools – the kinds of memory that are primarily functional and logical in nature, where students are asked to learn a body of knowledge and information, to be able to recall it and think critically about it.

There are, however, other kinds of memory that are the focus of our work with educators in the Inner Life Program. We might think of two other dimensions of memory as “intimate memory” on the horizontal plane and “cosmic memory” on the vertical plane.

In “intimate memory,” we recall moments from our own lives between birth and death that have so moved us that they are incapable of being forgotten.

In “cosmic memory,” we move beyond the ordinary consciousness of our daily lives and bridge the seen and unseen worlds.

In our work with teachers, we evoke both of these realms of memory.

On the morning of our first meeting, after we’ve had muffins and tea and a chance to “take in” where we are and who we are with, we sit in a circle in the comfort of the farmhouse living room and ask the teachers to recall an “intimate memory” of the natural world from their own childhoods. We offer up a way of “speaking into the circle,” creating a vessel of trust, before we begin. The educators are invited to speak from the heart . . . to present an image without discourse or commentary . . . to speak one at a time . . . to listen deeply to one another . . . to go in no particular order, until we have come full circle through all who wish to make an offering. And each year, like a new miracle, the whole world comes to us through the heart into the center. One memory evokes another until we have introduced ourselves through these deep moments of connection to places in the natural world. These moments of “intimate memory” bring us into a bond of intimacy with each other and the world. They also bring us back into the kind of beholding that we will practice together for the rest of the year.

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On that first day, and for all our days together during the first and second year, we invite the educators to engage in a practice of beholding the natural world. Through guided solos on earth sanctuary trails, the educators make their first sojourn into this realm. This simple invitation to create new “bonds of intimacy” with nature is not without its challenges for contemporary teachers:

“Solo walks on the beautiful earth sanctuary trails of Timberlake Farm were adventures for me, although I must admit they were not always within my comfort zone, especially in the beginning. Quieting my mind and opening my heart to hear the murmurs of a divine presence took time and patience.

Ever so slowly I was able to trust that ‘being lost’ in the woods was simply a state of mind. Early in the program during one of my solos, I got completely disoriented in the woods, couldn’t find my map of the grounds, and started to panic not knowing how to get back to the Treehouse for lunch. As I feverishly took one ‘wrong’ path after another and grew increasingly anxious (I could say terrified), all my old thoughts of nature being untrustworthy and unsafe welled up inside of me. These voices were strong and loud, but they were countered by other voices reminding me of my positive experiences with nature as a benevolent source of guidance and support. In a complete act of faith, I made a decision to trust that I was safe and would be guided out of the woods. Step by hesitant step, I repeated my mantra that I was safe and being led by a faithful and loving presence. As I walked out onto the field, into the warmth of the sunlight, I realized with gratitude that the person exiting the woods was profoundly different from the person who entered it. I knew with confidence that this experience had changed me so deeply that my relationship with nature would be forever altered, and for the better.”

On the first day, the educators are given journals in which to record their experiences with the beholding practices over the course of the first year. Most educators find it a formidable task to engage in a daily “meeting” with the natural world:

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“I finally stopped and looked up. Sometimes I feel like that’s the best I can do to observe nature – just stop, and look up. The huge loblolly pine trees were reaching up to the sky. It was a still day and there was hardly any breeze that I could feel standing on the ground. But as I stood there and looked up to the clear blue sky the trees were gently stirring, reaching up, slowly swaying in some wind I couldn’t see.”

~

“Though I have yet to achieve a daily routine of sitting quietly in nature—I daily reflect on the idea of it—and imagine sitting in nature while engaged in some other routine. Reflecting so regularly on a daily basis, realizing the body is not keeping pace with the mind, I anticipate getting closer and closer to the two meeting as daily occurrence in the open air.”

~

“Busy, busy, busy. No time to get it all done. Lists, worry, stress. My mind races and fills itself with things to remember and things to do. I sit outside before bed . . . I don’t have time for this. I close my eyes and listen. Crickets chirping, leaves rustling, a dog barking in the distance. This harmony fills my ears, my breathing slows. I look up and see silent waves of white and gray puffs across the black sky. A star shines through, offering a guiding light. Quiet peace.”

Each time these educators find a way to take the time to step out of the busyness of their lives and “see” what is before them, they enter the realm of “intimate memory” and are changed. The inner capacity for “intimate memory” is strengthened, one moment at a time.

Once this practice of beholding is established, we invite the educators to move from “intimate memory” on the horizontal plane to “cosmic memory” on the vertical plane. Drawing upon an essay by Carlo Pietzner, we evoke “cosmic memory” by inviting the educators to engage in a practice of noticing dawn and dusk. Pietzner guides us in this practice of verticality:

One could ask oneself: what are we seeing when we look at dusk or dawn? What is it, principally, in its thousandfold variations and vastly different ways? . . . These two great fundamental moods must be experienced—this gathering up from the widest width into one point and this arising from the center and

spreading into the whole unfathomable periphery. This is what speaks to us at the two portals of dawn and dusk . . . They want us to learn that through them there shines into our life, into our own finite existence, the infinite. The eternal radiates into our transitory existence.¹

For so many of our educators, this experience of dawn or dusk becomes a portal to the infinite:

Dawn

“Woke to bright stars this morning at 6:20. When I stepped outside the tent, I could hardly believe that it was near morning—only the vaguest indication of dawn marked the eastern sky. I bathed in this early morning darkness, the western stars bright in front of me. The cold was exhilarating. And even as it chilled me, I felt considerable inner warmth—perhaps connected to the calm centeredness that comes from moving along my own path within the darkness, beginning my own daily rhythm in relationship to the rhythms of the more-than-human world. When I dried myself off, the sky was already golden-peach with morning.

A crow caws, now, speeding the midmorning on. Another bird calls as a herald of the brighter day—is echoed in three places, a triangle of sound.

There is something wonderfully expansive about solitude from human interaction, something very natural about silent movement through the rhythms of the day. So many of earth’s beings live in a state of silent movement. When we make thoughtless sounds, we seem to lose our attunement to the rhythms—and the existence—of the world around us. Idle noise-making has a strange way of creating insular spaces for us, spaces of limited awareness. Though I’ve often found that the sounds of the natural world draw my circle of attention out beyond the

¹ Pietzner, Carlo. *Transforming Earth, Transforming Self*. Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1996, pp. 77-94.

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reach of my other senses, I guess that even natural sounds can limit the circumference of our attention. We must not be limited to the perception of the spaces they fill, but must listen beyond to the aspects more subtle than those expressed within physical reality.”

Dusk

“Blue on blue on blue on gray, white accent of cloud. The colors of the sky at twilight . . . when all is visible in the light of day, we tend to forget the great mystery, the unseen that lies behind it all, but shadows remind us of the more that is there. The shadow, the darkness, brings the presence of the mystery – more intense.”

Once we have established these practices of “intimate memory” and “cosmic memory” with the educators, we turn our attention to the inner life of the child in nature. We introduce our ways of working with children at the Center and we ask the educators to write a brief description of a young person’s feelings of awe, connection, joy, insight, or deep sense of reverence and love for nature; playful encounter with nature; seeing the invisible in nature, or any other experience at the meeting place between the inner life of the child/young adult and the natural world. We offer as an example Thomas Berry’s recollection of the meadow across the creek when he was eleven years old:

At the time I was eleven years old. My family was moving from a more settled part of a small southern town out to the edge of town where the new house was being built. The house, not yet finished, was situated on a slight incline. Down below was a small creek and there across the creek was a meadow. It was an early afternoon in late May when I first wandered down the incline, crossed the creek, and looked out over the scene.

The field was covered with white lilies rising above the thick grass. A magic moment, this experience gave to 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 the crickets and the

woodlands in the distance and the clouds in a clear sky. It was not something conscious that happened just then. I went on about my life as any young person might do.

Perhaps it was not simply this moment that made such a deep impression upon me. Perhaps it was a sensitivity that was developed throughout my childhood. Yet as the years passed this moment returns to me, and whenever I think about my basic life attitude and the whole trend of my mind and the causes to which I have given my efforts, I seem to come back to this moment and the impact it has had on my feeling for what is real and worthwhile in life.²

This kind of deep connection between a child and nature is increasingly threatened today, so the “childhood entry” can be a difficult assignment for our educators, as one so eloquently explained:

“It has not been easy to respond to this entry. There have been few recent times, even as a teacher of science, that I have witnessed a moment of epiphany for a child or children in concert with the natural world. This is a sad thing to admit, and I offer this reluctantly.

At two schools for which I have worked in recent years, “outside” meant large fields of grass surrounding the centerpiece of “blacktop” that drew the attention of the children. There were no trees, no bushes, only a vast undefined horizon. Yet specific and intransigent boundaries, boundaries created by restricted imagination and fear, confined the children from nature. Joyfully, at another school, there existed a wooded trail of verdant, lush beauty, but the children were not allowed to use it due to liability concerns.

The moments of grace I profoundly recall occurred on a fifth grade field trip to the Sound to Sea program at the Trinity Center

² Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), pp. 12-13.

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on Salter Path. Watching children from the inner city suit up in chest high waders to go “netting” in the shallow yet broad sound, seeing these neophytes become uncannily quiet as they searched with intent stillness for small specimens in the intertidal pond, delighting with them as they re-enacted the births and short journeys of baby loggerheads to their briny home, and witnessing the intensity in their reverential dissection of squid: all of these were a multi-faceted jewel glimmering through the revived imaginations of young people.”

By now, you may be wondering what “intimate memories” and “cosmic memories” are for? They are, as Thomas Berry knew so well, what enable us to unite ourselves with the world’s evolving, to say “I am at peace with the world.” Like Thomas’ moment of grace in the meadow, they are what make it possible for us to know “what is real and worthwhile in life.” They add a dimension of sacred depth to our other ways of knowing and restore us to our full humanity. Imprinted on our hearts, they help us know the difference between nature and virtual reality, between spiritual renewal and materialism, between creative evolution and destructive evolution. Without them, we easily lose our way and take missteps into innovation for its own sake rather than for the sake of the world. They are the touchstones that help us chart our way into a future of love and compassion and peace.

In his closing remarks at the Thomas Berry Memorial Service at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, Brian Swimme told a story about Thomas. Scholars had gathered from all over the world for a conference to consider the question “Who are the heroes of our time?” After the full panoply of talks by illustrious speakers who spoke of philosophers, seers, saints, and others, Thomas rose to speak as the last speaker. He graciously summarized all that had been said over the course of the conference with astute understanding. Then he offered up to the group that the real hero of our time was the bird who was singing outside the conference window. It is this bird who sings the song of life who is our hero, our teacher, if only we can learn how to listen.

One of our educators, Maureen Matthews, in her reflections on the Inner Life Program, came finally to this same understanding:

“It was this *sacred sensitivity* that ached in me, but through the Presence and Practice program at Timberlake Farm it found a resting place. Through the time spent at Timberlake Farm I observed the caretakers (Peggy and Carolyn) set the stage to

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carefully and thoughtfully nurture this “sensitivity” into a conscious felt awareness. It was like having the petals of the heart gently coaxed to slowly open . . . one by one . . . to the light and the rhythm of that place.

As time passed I was aware of the beautiful emergence of the deepest understanding of what it means to feel the sacredness of this reality. With care and great patience, each of us was led to a place where it became impossible to deny or avoid our newly emergent sacred sensitivity.

At Timberlake Farm the land itself honors and welcomes you. To me, Peggy and Carolyn are gatekeepers, doorway guardians, or somehow keepers of the invitation and introductions necessary to participate in the deepness of the Farm and all her “residents”. It often felt like we were going to meet some Great Being. It was Peggy and Carolyn’s sacred duty to create the appropriate preparations and rituals before meeting this Being.

The true spinners of the heart threads were the land. You would set out on your solo walks and *they* would gently tug and pull and weave our heart filaments into a new kind of knowing, or perhaps a more primordial way of knowing.

It is the place that welcomes your heart to open . . . that speaks ever so softly. It is this ability, this ability to hear softly and to see softly that is taught by the Farm. In that softness you can feel your being reach out and touch the *others* and to be touched in return by them.

To have been a part of and a witness to this process, this deep awakening, gave me a great sense of peace and gratitude, after having spent so much time in a space of fear, frustration, and hopelessness for our continued existence and that of the planet.

How my practice will evolve I do not know, but I do know now that I will carry forward the priceless understanding that it IS possible to awaken the human heart from its “mean sleep.”³ I will be able to hold this space for the children so that they too can

³ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*. (Excerpted from the following: "I cannot be awake, for nothing looks to me as it did before, or else I am awake for the first time, and all before has been a mean sleep."

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feel hope and a soft expectancy of the joy that an awakened humanity will share with this sacred place.”

And so, it ends as it begins. Without perhaps knowing it at first, these educators met their Great Teacher as they entered the gravel road, beheld the cosmos field and rounded the bend to the Magical Garden on the first day of the program. We hoped that they would feel the welcoming presence of the land, and they did. And on the last day, as they streamed out into the world, they did so with a feeling of “hope and soft expectancy” about what they would be able to bring to the children . . . and the Earth . . . and the Universe.

Chapter 12

Words for the Silence Before Dawn

by Andrew Levitt

At some point, what I now call *Heron Mornings* became a collection of poetry, but I did not intend that and the initial intentions of origination remain important to me. They still define the parameters of my practice of observation, contemplation and writing. I want to reflect back here to those early principles of origin to tell the story of what this work has been and of the fragments of the collection included here. A number of years ago, while I was walking with my dog in the hour just before dawn, I started to observe what captured my attention each morning. A number of influences inspired me to initiate this practice. The first, of course, came from Sasha, who woke me from sleep. A congenital early riser, I was happy to be up and at the day. Out the door, Sasha became my guide. Several years later in a graduation speech to my high school students, I recommended Sasha as a fine example of the very best kind of teacher. Though I may have spoken with some irony then since I was the students' teacher speaking about my dog as one of my finest teachers, the irony was really only situational. I know it is customary to think of human masters as the trainers in pet relations, but since human beings have lived with dogs for thousands of years and some authorities think we have lived with dogs since the first appearance of homo sapiens on earth, it is likely that as we have coevolved, dogs have been changing our lives and consciousness for centuries. So I feel comfortable in recognizing my canine teacher. Certainly, I learned from Sasha's attentiveness to everything we encountered outside to open my senses to the natural world. As I did I became conscious that I was developing a palpable grasp of each day's unfolding.

Other influences also conspired to encourage me to record my daily observations. One of these I identify as "my return to words." I had been a professional mime for many years. My performances depended on

gesture and silence. Although I had once hoped to be a writer, in graduate school I became disenchanted with words and was happy to abandon them for the art of silent movement when I got a job as a mime just after receiving my PhD. But after many years performing, I began to explore using words in my performances. In the exploration, I recovered the sense that words were a powerful medium of the soul, which was a far cry from my earlier disenchantment with how language devalued meaning and was used instead to broker power, obfuscate and deceive. So I was “returning to words.”

I had also begun an oral history project for the South Carolina Arts Commission, during which I listened to the stories of a group of men who had grown up in a mill village and gathered to share their lives every Friday for breakfast at a local restaurant. I learned to appreciate the power of their stories as a resource that enlivened my sense of the landscape and history of this part of the South that I have come to love and call home.

At the time too, our daughters were in their teens. I became increasingly aware that in a house with three women, as the male representative, I had a rather inarticulate relationship to any sense of meaning and my sense of life’s rhythm was arrhythmic. Certainly, my life as a mime was paced in the erratic rhythms of creative inspiration and performance. Hence my morning walks seemed like a ready resource for knowledge of steady and enduring rhythms.

Not to seem too grandiose about my purpose, however, I admit there were days too when I engaged this practice to avoid feeling dull, flat and dead as I padded around the same streets in the same neighborhood. I knew from my theatre training that if I acted “as if” each day were the first, it could be and the sense of repetition would dissolve in interest.

The point in noting these various influences has been to reinforce, what I said before, that I set out with no intention to write a collection of poems. I simply sought to be attentive and to keep some record of my days, so I would not feel that the days were slipping by unnoticed. With time, the practice became habit. After Sasha died, I walked alone for a year. Now I find myself at the other end of Misha’s leash as he drags me willingly out into the morning in all kinds of weather.

As for the language and form my record keeping has taken, I should say that I stumbled into poetry because poetry is that means of language best suited to the intensification of awareness I experienced. My aim was to find a means for capturing as precisely as I could my sense of being present to a presence in the natural world. I wanted language to capture my sense of immanence in each day. Sometimes that meant holding myself to recording exactly what my senses informed me of. And sometimes description would not serve. In moments of communion, the locus for precision was in the space between myself and nature. Poetic rhythms, poetic forms, figures of speech, and imagery served my effort to find precise language for communion.

This journey continues to evolve through the years. It is evidence that the initiation of this practice represented a pivotal moment in the way I have lived my life between silence and words that, a few years after beginning, I helped found a high school where I taught Humanities for seven years. I am sure the writing was instrumental in my choice to accept that challenge. But what I hear in the collection of these poems are my efforts of many years to listen for the harmonies of being in the ordinary days of my life.

I offer here a few markers along the journey I have been traveling. Shortly after I began writing, I read in David Brendan Hope's *Sense of the Morning* that the Druids had the practice of taking what they first encountered on going out as a spiritual guide for the day. So here are a few of my guiding visions.

~

Over and over as I wrote these poems, I was aware of returning each morning to emptiness within me, a place that could be filled with the figures of the day and the simple gifts to which I was drawn. Adventure was very close to hand. One morning I tried to put my sense of the adventure of the ordinary into words.

Only the Sacred

Not everyone aspires to the heights

Not everyone aspires to the heights
or gets his inspiration from the thin air in the clouds
There must be those who breathe
a rare air in the common streets
who have equipped themselves like mountaineers
to see the vistas and the visions in
the ordinary circumstances of a day
in changes of the landscape over time
and in the silhouetted forms when morning light
reveals the presence of the spirit in the simplest things
who understand the view from here
is just as fine as there

Along with experiencing a sense of adventure, I quickly became aware that the hour before dawn was a holy hour. On such mornings, I was moved by the sense of communion.

The Holy Hour

The holy hour comes the hour before the dawn
before the crows sweep through the pallid sky
with harsh announcements for the working day
The earth still lolls beneath a filmy gauze
that covers over all her sleeping forms
and still breathes moisture from her peaceful lips
Of those who stir before the rising sun
how many recognize this holiness
In other more observant ages worshippers
arose to heed the call to harmonize
their matins with the natural grace

Words for the Silence Before Dawn

Later I recommended the holy sense of the morning to my students in a poem at the end of my graduation speech.

A Sense of the Morning

If I could give you something
I would give you a sense of the morning
when the silence seems more silent
for the song of the cicada
and the darkness darker
under the illumining full moon
I would send you out
in the suspended hour just before the dawn
when nature renews her ancient possibilities
and out of the momentary balance in the unity of all
there stirs an impulse for new being
in the morning of the world
when tension of creation
forms itself within the soul
and the I expands within the grandeur
of the vision it beholds

That was the speech in which I told students that Sasha was my greatest teacher in this realm. I was being truthful. As we walked together, I was carefully observant of what Sasha observed. I came to feel aligned with how he felt about things.

Imagination of an unfenced life

Sasha appreciates the chill gunmetal smell
of the Alaskan air come down
so far below the Mason-Dixon Line
Ancestral memories of ice still travel in his blood

Only the Sacred

He leads with more enthusiasm and cuts through
the fence to walk us in the open field alone
And while I do not have his warmer blood
and memories of wildness are more driven down in me
I too have longings for the wild
that stir imagination of an unfenced life

I also became a close observer of the birds around the neighborhood. I was captivated by the slow contemplative movement of a heron fishing in the creek . Sightings of heron's took on mythological power for me and gave me the title for this collection of poems. A year or so into recording my mornings, I was startled one morning by two herons. I recorded my sense of the embrace of holiness and communion experienced on that day.

Embrace of Holiness

As if the air were folded on itself
I heard a rasping call call twice
and glimpsed one heron shadowing another
as double grace in dimly lighted dawn
I had intended to experience the cold
and know the clarity of mind that can accompany
an early frost before the winter months impose
a hardened freeze My mind and senses were
alert and nothing interfered with my
perceptions of the time Yet there
was something palpable between those birds and me
as if we shared a common spirit in the place
or something holy in the air embraced
all beings in the world with one embrace

Though I see herons less frequently in the morning now because of restoration of our creek, the sense of spiritual encounter still occurs.

Heron Flight

The heron comes to fish
in water hidden by the saplings
that we watched grow tall
We only see him now
when he is in the spectacle of flight
the great wings undulating
with a mystic rhythm
that evokes the deepest secrets
of the universe and time
The bird appears as if just launched
out of an antediluvian age
to pass through ours toward some
predestined goal beyond the pulse of time
I watch it vanish toward that end
where all life's undulations cease
within the heart of silence

Among the other birds I watched, hawks became my representatives of wildness and the wilderness. Interestingly, hawks have increased in abundance over the years I have been writing. Here is an early record of one sighting.

Silence in the over-spoken world

All morning I had listened to the matins of the birds
The smallest often voiced the sweetest notes
and even common looking grackles serenaded dawn
The dogwood-whitened morning whistled clucked
chirruped and tattled on itself so I was ill prepared

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to face the silent aura of the hawk
He is I know a bird with hollow bones
but even as he sat I sensed the power in his breast
and wings And when he left his perch
and all the feathers of his tail fanned out in bold display
before he vanished in an instant through the trees
I realized I was witness to a proud assertion of
the wilderness that still remains
within the silence of the over-spoken world

My own identification has been with crows, who, along with dogs, seem to have coevolved with human beings nearly from the beginning. I identify myself in my practice with their role as the sentinels of dawn who declare the coming of light, despite the dark, shadow-burdened nature of their being.

Mastering the Crows

While you were sleeping I
was mastering the crows
getting their darkness underneath my skin
making the blue-black sheen of midnight part
of all I know so I could greet
the morning and astonished by the light
awaken you so you could know it too

Sometimes in this practice as I felt myself building up a personal mythology and taking myself very seriously, indeed, I deliberately tried to lighten up so that I would not lose my awareness of the immediacy of experience, even if I was increasingly conscious of immanence in everyday things. So once I wrote about a bad case of poison ivy.

Poison Ivy

We should avoid the thickets by the creek
when ivy is abundant through the summer months
But we are fond of tromping over rough terrain
Besides there always is some risk within the natural world
Now I have caught it good
Ah well this outward pain is just a symptom of the truth
I have an inward itch to match each pain with pain
And as Suzuki said *the truth is pain*
raised to the level where the pain subsides

Another time, I traced my own reflections until they looped back upon themselves to the place where they began and almost became self-parody.

The universe dwells tacitly in me

Because I am a part of it the universe dwells tacitly in me
These ducks that swim in their reflections
and quack approval at the drizzle of the rain
swim in a pool inside of me in which
the stars and moon and sun that have been blinded by the clouds
still shine as brightly as they ever have
Beside the pool there is a grove of trees
in which a child has just discovered loneliness
A man who dwells within the grove comes every day
to drown his loneliness in the reflections in the pool
Today as he arrives he hears
ducks quack approval at the drizzle of the rain

I feel it is important to keep some lightness in this practice. As this work evolved I developed a dual sense of my observations, insights, and

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inspirations. One of the two perspectives I developed was a sense of joyfulness. Sometimes I think of such joy as a tipsy kind of wisdom.

The primal joy of recognition

From every dampened leaf I drink
the liquor of the morning dew one droplet at a time
and like a drunken Chinese sage
I meditate on wisdom of the world

*High in the misted mountains near Tibet
a master sits legs folded on the ground
He sets a bowl inside his palm
and with a wooden rod runs round the rim
The deep harmonics open worlds on worlds
The lines inscribed upon the ancient master's mask
brighten with the primal joy of recognition*

At other times, the wisdom of the practice is embodied in the simple act of keeping the practice. Then I feel wisdom is to stay true to how it all began by observing the beauty and holiness of the simple gifts of everyday. The wisdom of years of practice comes as renewed appreciation of the simplicity of the practice itself.

Observing the Sabbath

Sunrise

The clouds are breaking in the east
Between the maple trees a spider
settles placidly along a single strand
The crows have not begun
their territorial defense
Instead like other birds they go about
the business of the rising sun

Sasha comes in
from lying underneath the waning moon
He then resumes his sleep
inside the house where time remains
in half-repose on Sunday morning
The day of rest begins by waking early and
observing simple beings
well-adjusted to their earthly niches
who accept the wondrous gift
of what they have been given
How do you begin your Sabbath day

Though this is my book of *Heron Mornings*, one day I thought about what I would hope if I ever offered these gifts that I received as gifts to others. It was a time when I was studying the textile industry in the South. I was aware how aptly weaving describes the soul situated in the world. In addition my awareness of the woven connections of soul helped me understand that simply observing soul connections, which is the core of this practice, will deepen into communion.

This woven fabric of light

Across the warp the bobbin wound with silver thread

Weaves starlight through the stark solemnity of trees

To fill another run with life's antinomies

Some day the finished fabric will be yours
for though I have not been employed without
a passion for the work I do not sit
long hours at the loom to please myself
I always have your interests on my mind
So if you cut a pattern from this cloth
to make a garment of your very own

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I hope you thread your needle from the spools of light
and wear the garment with the love with which
the fabric first was woven by my hand

Chapter 13

Art and Place

by Katherine Ziff

When moving to a new place, an unfamiliar land, how do you come to call it home? Thirteen years ago my husband Matt, my son Ben, two dogs, a fish and I left our native North Carolina for Athens, a tiny college town in a remote part of southeastern Ohio. Built on a knob above the Hocking River, Athens is surrounded by steep hills that stay brown until mid-April, its land swept by winds that bring a sharp chill in November and wild bitterness in the winter. This wind comes straight down from Canada, and unlike the breezes of piedmont North Carolina it has not been chastened and softened by its passage over the Appalachian mountains. That first year I was lonesome for the landscape and language of our old home and remembered reading something from Wendell Berry:

Always in big woods when you leave familiar ground and step off alone into a new place there will be, along with the feelings of curiosity and excitement, a little nagging of dread. It is the ancient fear of the unknown, and it is your first bond with the wilderness you are going into. You are undertaking the first experience, not of the place, but of yourself in that place. It is an experience of our essential loneliness, for nobody can discover the world for anybody else. It is only after we have discovered it for ourselves that it becomes a common ground and a common bond, and we cease to be alone.¹

So I pulled out my sketchbook and pencil and, on a whim, walked a few blocks down the street to a dirt path by the river to sketch the plants

¹ Wendell Berry, *The Unforeseen Wilderness : Kentucky's Red River Gorge*. 1991. Emeryville, CA: Shoemaker Press. 42-43.

growing there. My attention was drawn to five milkweed plants growing amidst Queen Anne's lace and blue cornflowers, and I sat down on a log to draw. My first drawings showed stiff, upright plants; later I noticed how they tended to bend and sway toward each other, their broad leaves overlapping and intermingling and was more able to capture their flowing connections to each other. I returned to this place each summer to sketch the stand of milkweed plants, following them through their life cycle. I think Nature must shake her head at how slow I can be to perceive her simplest attributes: it took me three seasons of drawing to notice that milkweed leaves are decussate: paired at their leaf nodes and rotated ninety degrees as they grow along their sturdy stalk. And still more seasons for me to realize the plant's glorious Latin name, *Asclepius*, after the Greek healer. I did notice that the plants multiplied each year, from five then nine and finally eleven plants. One year they didn't appear at all until August, four months late, their reaction to heavy dump trucks involved in a construction project traveling all spring next to their spot. Four years ago they disappeared, their habitat all shaded and grown over with trees. But their seeds, floating from a dried stalk and pods I had brought to our house, had taken root in the gravel under the dryer vent of our house. This was thrilling, and even more so when the milkweed plants spread all along the side of our house and hosted Monarch butterflies.

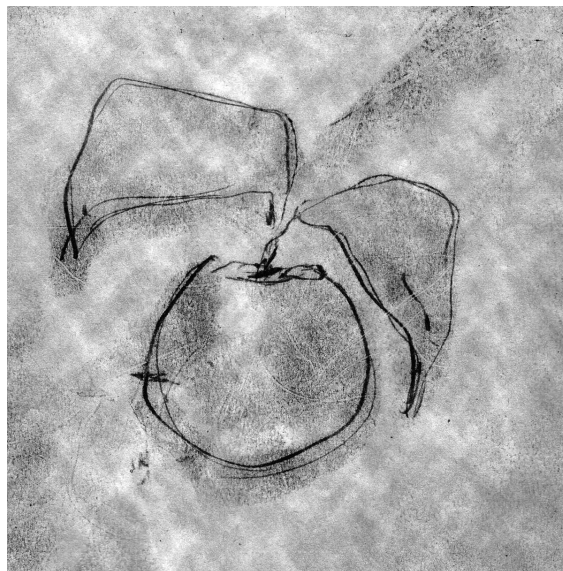
In 2001 I discovered the work of Deborah Koff-Chapin, the founder of Touch Drawing.² Though technically speaking Touch Drawing is a monotype printmaking technique, it is in fact a process for observing, witnessing, expressing, conveying and documenting inner and outer experience and phenomena. It is done with the hands to make marks on paper placed over a surface of paint. The resulting impressions are seen on the other side of the paper as lines flowing directly from the fingertips. The tools are simple: a four inch soft rubber brayer, a 16" x 22" masonite board, water based oil paint, and paper. I like to use the acid-free tissue paper and cotton vellum specially sized to the board and available from Deborah's website. With the tissue paper (\$28.00 for a thousand sheets) one can feel free to make many images in a drawing session with no constraining thoughts of cost; on top of the paint this tissue creates a soft and inviting surface on which to move the hands. The archival quality cotton vellum, quite beautiful in its translucence, is a more substantial paper. Water based oil paints come in many colors and are made with

² See Deborah's website at www.touchdrawing.com for demonstrations, illustrations, and a Touch Drawing community.

linseed oil, also known as flaxseed oil, made by cold pressing the seeds of the flax plant. They have a faint smell and, unlike regular oil paints which must be thinned with solvents, are safe, non-toxic, and easily cleaned up with water.

Though I cannot remember how I first learned of Touch Drawing, I acquired materials and an instruction booklet which I studied for a while before beginning. In our house in an old neighborhood at the edge of the Ohio University campus my tiny second floor studio, years ago a sleeping porch, had three windows overlooking neighborhood backyards and the hills that surround Athens to the north. When we bought the house the backyard was a small plot of grass and nothing else; our spaniel who had before roamed in a big yard of trees and shrubs sniffed her way disappointedly around the place upon our arrival. But by the time my Touch Drawing materials had arrived we had built a gazebo and planted a dozen trees, including one apple tree which was bearing fruit for the first time.

Sketching milkweed plants was teaching me to closely observe with my eyes the physical characteristics of Nature. Touch Drawing introduced me to an inner experience of observing with the heart. Rolling out paint (cadmium yellow and alizarin crimson) for the first time on my board, I lay paper gently over the paint and let my attention be drawn to the apples on the branches below me. As a wave of just barely perceptible sensations flowed from my heart to my hands, I moved my hands quickly and an apple danced onto the paper. I was delighted to see that something so quickly drawn conveyed life and movement with little cognitive effort. Rather it is a state of relaxed awareness that allows the images to appear.



I kept up a regular Touch Drawing practice in my home studio, processing life experiences and also conveying perceptions of nature from my studio vantage point: the contour of a particular hill to the north, the feeling of mostly-spent hurricane clouds as they passed over Athens, rain, roses that Matt grew in our backyard. I noticed that a satisfying Touch Drawing “session” for me lasts about 45 minutes, with time for “warm up” drawings for the hands and heart, several dozen drawings, and time to reflect on and give titles to some of the images. During this time I attended a summer meeting of the International Expressive Arts Therapy Association on the campus of Appalachian State University in Boone, N.C. and studied Touch Drawing there with Deborah Koff-Chapin. At this conference I was exposed to a stunning example of the Earth as a living presence. The conference ended with a “meeting” which I entered expecting rows of seats and talk of professional standards and business matters. What I encountered was an enormous circle of chairs with three musicians at the center, improvising for us. We were invited to individually express our experience of the conference. After a few performances a voice professor electrified us all. She stood and announced that the mountain near us was grateful for our presence and work and she (the mountain) wished to thank us; the professor then walked about our circle extending this thanks, vocalizing beautiful and indescribable music that moved many of us to tears. I left the conference pondering how one might more deeply communicate with a living Earth through visual art.

Two years ago last December we left our old neighborhood for a much quieter and more peaceful location. Just a half mile away as the crow flies, our new place could not have been more different from the busy streets and late-night student parties that had surrounded us. Located near the top of the ridge that I had been drawing for ten years from my old studio, our new house is at the edge of Wayne National Forest which embraces a quarter million acres of steep, forested Appalachian foothills. The house had been empty for a few years, its backyard filled with dead shrubs and grape vines twining their way through the trees to the roof of the house. One January morning I pushed my way through the thicket of lifeless branches and found twelve foot boulders forming a magnificent wall of stone against a hill. The stones, standing in a forest of black walnut, sassafras, redbud and sycamore trees, were covered with sprawling grape vines thicker than my wrist, layers of decomposed leaves, and broken wine bottles flung years ago by revelers from a house at the top of the hill. Working through the winter I cut and cleared the dead shrubs, trimmed back the vines, and cleaned out bags of human-produced trash from the small finger of forest adjoining our house, arduous work but

satisfying. By spring the stones were clear and, with the thicket of dead branches gone, now visible from our kitchen windows.

On a day in June I felt drawn to pull out my Touch Drawing materials for the first time in our new home. With the studio doors open to the sun, my hands moved over the paper creating twenty or so drawings on tissue paper. I find that in such a series of Touch Drawings a few images emerge to tell a story. In this series four drawings came together. The first simply shows me working to clear and open the forest, the second is sunlight streaming through the trees. The third is the Forest Keeper, an image of a luminous energy that I do not fully understand yet experience as present with the forests that stretch north and east from our home. The fourth is a Forest Faun, or place-spirit, I imagine him as a cheerful presence among the ferns and wildflowers that are beginning to grow by the stones.



It is early spring now in Athens; this week we have had sleet and snow and the daffodils are just beginning to open. It is time to listen for what must be done in the backyard here at home, and to get out my Touch Drawing materials.

Katherine Ziff

Athens, Ohio

3 April 2011

Chapter 14

Revealing the Essence of Nature

by Marnie Weigel

Gold light of nature

Illuminate radiance

Jewel of peaceful change

My life and work as a clay artist are influenced by the natural world. The sights, sounds, and movements of nature are an integral part in the creation of my work. Nature has revealed her connection to me through line, color, and form. The organic forms and lines that I see in nature are a blessing to behold. The fluid, graceful lines that are created from nature are comforting to my heart. I am drawn to the symmetry and asymmetry that I see in landscapes. I create work that is revealing an essence of the natural world. I embrace the fragile, peaceful, and transformative beauty that I experience in the presence of nature. My expressions in clay give the Earth a voice through sculptures and carvings. When I go deeper, exploring my senses, and behold the simplicity of nature, I sense a delicate beauty. She is so lovely, tender, and alive. It is my hope that I capture the delicate balance that reveals the importance of our connections. My carvings and sculptures are a story unfolding of sacred relationships. This story is in the clay and our hands for generations as a glorious celebration.

I have been observing color in nature. I am still amazed and curious about how all these intricate and rich colors are created. They remind me of minerals to create glaze. When I create glaze, I think of these colors found in nature. I look at the texture of color and see an Indonesian batik fabric with layers of color. Glaze color is fascinating and mysterious to me. I look at glaze color with childlike wonder and curiosity. The green is a symbol of a beautiful sedum garden or a soft grassy meadow under a rhododendron thicket high on top of a mountain. The color turquoise is a symbol of the Earth and sky, the turquoise stone. It is also the ocean

water reflecting the sky and the robin's egg. Snow and clouds are the symbols for white. Nature and her colors have woven a tapestry in my heart. The golden threads that surround some of these works are symbols of the connections between all living things. When they mysteriously appear I feel like an alchemist who discovers the mixture of gold. If one thread is loosened or torn, it affects the other threads in the tapestry and it may become disconnected. If the threads are sewn together well, the tapestry stays connected and whole.

I am also drawn to the simplicity of line in the natural world. My designs in the clay capture this and bring the essence of the flowers and plants to life. They are impressionistic images from the heart of the Earth. Lines can be bold and thick as an ancient tree or delicate and thin as the most beautiful, antique Queen Anne's lace. Line reveals a lot to me, and I begin to see the purity of the natural world.

When I embrace the clay with my hands, I feel deeply connected to the Earth and the natural world. It grounds me and gives me roots in the Earth. Water and clay take me back to our ancient roots and connections with Mother Earth. I give thanks for this gift and the offerings that I can share with generations here and to come.

My life and work as a clay artist are like a gentle stream—water winding her way through the smooth, round stones. Sometimes the currents are fast and my body becomes alive with creative ideas and visions. And other times the currents are slow and the water settles in a crystal, clear pool. But if I look closely and deeply at that pool, I see reflections and movement on and under the surface. The sunlight reveals the amazing colors of the stones on the bottom. The wind makes subtle ripples and waves on the surface. A leaf moves slowly through the currents under the water's surface.

The vessels I create are like that moving leaf through the water's currents. Each piece of art tells an ancient tale of the Earth and contains the essence of the natural world. Each is a precious gem and an offering to the Earth for generations to behold. As a potter and an artist I am grateful for the beauty, wonder, and intimacy of the natural world that has given me roots to grow and sustains me in the circle of life.

Chapter 15

Silence

By Sandy Bisdee

*Silence is the bountiful source of our sensing our self and
all creation with newfound clarity and intimacy.¹*

~ Robert Sardello

Before I began working at the Center for Education, Imagination, and the Natural World five years ago as an earth guide, taking children for walks on the beautiful earth sanctuary trails, I taught kindergarten in a Montessori classroom for over two decades. During my training with the Center, I was told that the earth walks were done mostly in silence, except for the carefully developed practices that we would stop to offer to the children along the way. These practices would awaken their senses one by one to the natural world and help them to develop a bond of intimacy with all of life.

My experience of silence in the natural world with young children up to that point had been limited to the “silence game,” part of the Montessori philosophy and curriculum. We played this game whenever we entered a forest for a field trip and at circle time inside of the classroom. The silence game was a small part of our excursions into the woods where silence was forced into a form, a game, and a time frame. But now I was being asked to take groups of students K – 12, from all kinds of schools, both public and private, into the earth sanctuary in silence. “Right,” I thought. “Silence.” I remember thinking inwardly that this was not going to work. I remember wondering how in the world I was going to pull this off. I seriously wondered how I would temper my own exuberant enthusiasm for every little detail of our blessed earth that I experienced every time I set foot on the sanctuary paths. How would I be

¹ Robert Sardello, *Silence* (Benson, NC: Goldenstone Press, 2006), 17.

quiet enough myself to set a tone that would serve as a role model and offer an opportunity for silence among the children?

Five years of experience with multi-aged groups has taught me much about the nature of silence. Even before I chose “Silence” as my project for the Inner Life of the Child in Nature program, I began to wonder what would set the stage for silence to come to us during our earth walks and solo times, what it felt like while silence was present and lastly, what made silence withdraw? In the last four years my journey has taken me into subtle realms that I had not anticipated when I began this research. Entering new territory, I began to break out from the confines of the Montessori silence game and into the presence of Silence. As an eager new student of Silence, I was wide open to guidance. I learned that Silence is not the absence of noise. It is not unpleasant or unnatural for children and young adults. It is not something that I do. Autonomously, Silence invites, Silence gathers, Silence enfolds, and Silence permeates. What I discovered by choosing Silence as my dedicated intention for the Inner Life of the Child in Nature program is that I had already been in the presence of Silence at various times in my life without my conscious awareness. There had been very special times during my prayer life and times in the natural world where my inner and outer worlds had merged and I felt as if I were one with it all.

During my research I have learned that there are different types of Silence that go with different places and circumstances. I have learned that there are guardians at the threshold of Silence that allow it to be present or cause it to flee. I have learned that Silence can remind us that we are part of a much greater reality than our own narrow viewpoint of life and assure us that we are never alone. I have witnessed and experienced the healing power of Silence and I have come to know Silence as a friend of my heart. The totally unexpected outcome of this work has been the growing awareness of Silence as a living presence.

There are several books that have helped me navigate these various realms and expressions of Silence. *Silence*, by Robert Sardello, has been instrumental in helping me interpret some of my own experiences while in the presence of Silence. His book continues to offer me a new way of thinking about Silence, even during my third reading. He says that “the book is offered to us as an experience that deepens our relationship with the world and all that is within it.”² He goes on to say that “Silence is the

² Sardello, 2.

bountiful source of our sensing our self and all creation with newfound clarity and intimacy.”⁴

The Wisdom of Wilderness, by Gerald G. May, has helped me put into words some of my own encounters with the presence of Silence. He calls this presence “The Power of Slowing.” There are certain conditions that invite the presence of Silence when I am working with children. To begin with, as their guide, I must be inwardly silent, relaxed, present and attentive. It takes time for the children to leave behind their regular school day and habits of thought. A gradual shedding of the everyday world begins to occur as they begin to focus their attention on the miracle of life that surrounds them. When the children become more fully present, then and only then, will the guardians of Silence let us through. Gerald May knew how to get in touch with the presence of Silence: “Now, when I walk in the woods and field, I like to stop, sometimes suddenly, sometimes softly. I stand like a tree. I look around and feel my body. I notice my breath streaming in the cool air. I sense inside, my emotions and heart-perceptions. My listening is sharp and my seeing acute. I feel the temperature, the sun or the snowflakes, and what thoughts or images may come to the surface of my mind. If I want to know which way to turn next, I wait, see, listen. My being lives and Wisdom comes.”⁵

I would like to share four examples from my experience with Silence and children that encompass three different age groups: kindergarten, lower elementary and middle school. The first two stories are from “Children of the Forest,” an after-school program that meets once a week over the course of eight weeks at the Center. The second two are from a Special Design program with middle school students.

In *Silence*, Robert Sardello tells us that “Everything, it seems, has its own quality of Silence. It is a unified but many-qualified phenomenon.” He speaks of different qualities of Silence in various locations such as the “immensity” of the “Silence of high rocky mountains,” the “darker, deeper, and more inward” feeling of Silence in “dense forests,” the “radiant but oppressive Silence of the pyramids,” the “magical Silence of the stars” and the “vast interior Silence of the cathedral.”⁶ The following experiences are but several of these many facets on the diamond of Silence.

⁴ Ibid, 17.

⁵ Gerald G. May, *The Wisdom of Wilderness* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 168.

⁶ Sardello, 14.

Kindergarten Children of the Forest

The misty autumn rain had fallen lightly all day, soft and feminine like a gentle snow. The Children of the Forest and I were dressed in our rain gear as we walked toward the trail. Hand in hand, we walked through the liquid air with no destination in mind. As the rain began to fall harder, I found it necessary to seek the shelter of the Forest Canopy. Following a small deer path we emerged into a thick forest. Ancient fallen trees covered with moss exposed cavernous spaces underneath. We walked around tangled windfalls and there were serpentine vines hanging from the tall trees that surrounded us. We walked down a steep hill, trying not to slip on the leafy wet forest floor. Aliÿse paused and looked up toward the sky at the steady falling rain and it dripped off her poncho hood freely onto her face. She stuck out her tongue. She had not let go of my hand for the entire journey, but now, she loosened her grasp and stood freely in the rain. Quinn found a little piece of mud which she rolled into a ball. This had a deeply calming effect on her and she looked through her rain-speckled glasses dreamily into the distance, feeling the mud ball in her palm. And then it happened. With no verbal agreement, the four of us stopped on the slanted hillside in the rain and stood very still. We became part of the forest and the rain and we were still and we were quiet. We were one with the rain and with the Silence that had permeated time and space. There was a palpable difference in the moment: an expansive quality as we merged collectively with the Silence and the rain and the forest and each other. How long we stood suspended in the magical moment, I cannot say. After a while, Nathan suddenly remembered that there was a creek at the bottom of the hill and we slipped and slid our way down to the water's edge.

Grade School Children of the Forest

My second example is intended to illustrate what conditions led up to the presence of Silence during one of my programs with seven and eight-year-olds. The chapter titled "Entering the Silence," by Robert Sardello, has helped me in my research to be more aware of and witness to the presence of Silence. He said: "We need not do anything to increase the sensitivity of our sensing other than to be present to what happens when we experience Silence in the midst of the natural world. We said that Silence gathers in nature. Instead of simply enjoying nature's silence, however, our initial practice consists of noticing what happens when we are within the Silence, for we are within a very active presence."⁷

⁷ Sardello, 31.

It was the first day of autumn and it would turn out to be a day of many new discoveries as four children and I headed out together on the Creeping Cedar Trail by the lake. After reconnecting with each other and playing along the trail for a while, we explored the pond's edge and the teepee area. The children asked to make "blessing wands" out of sticks and thread. They proceeded to shower the day with their love, blessing every little thing along the path: frogs, flowers and mushrooms. They sang songs of love and gratitude for the earth, sun and stars. As we climbed the steep part of the trail, new friends in the form of rocks came to meet us. The children began collecting them to take to the creek where they could be washed. There were longer pauses in their conversations as they filled their pockets and shirts with quartz. As we approached the creek, I noticed that a peace and stillness began to fill the air and that this Silence enfolded us and surrounded us. We climbed the fern laden banks down to the creek's edge. Time stood still as we washed our treasures and the children played by the creek, lifting up rocks only to find salamanders and crayfish hiding beneath them. There was little need for conversation as we shared in the magic of the moment. I sat a short distance from the children on a large rock and cherished the Silence while they played in and by the creek. There were times that one or another of the children, ages six and seven, would pause in their activity and sit very still and look out on the scene before them with soft, slightly unfocused eyes. They looked so still, relaxed and thoughtful. I don't know where the time went, but my watch told me I only had fifteen minutes to get them back to the treehouse to meet their parents. The Silence stayed with us for most of the walk back. Nourished and refreshed, they would soon be driving home for supper and bedtime. This Silence will be etched in their hearts, and as their guide I will be on the lookout for this gentle presence again.

Seventh grade Students

There is one group of students that has been coming to the sanctuary for three consecutive years now, thanks to a grant that was awarded to their school. They know that they will be with silence for certain times throughout the program. They know there will be times for outer and inner listening and a silent solo time to reflect on a question that is related to them and to the natural world. Over the last three years, I have watched them change from pre-teens to blossoming adolescents. During their seasonal visits they have openly talked about their hurried and high-pressured lives, sleep problems, heavily booked schedules, and peer pressures. They have also written and talked about the value of having the opportunity to come to our sanctuary and to have a beautiful place in the natural world to slow down and to think their own thoughts. They have told us that this is one of the only places in their lives where they are with Silence. The following two examples are from this 7th grade class. The first example is a testament to the healing power of Silence.

Silence

It was a crisp clear autumn day. The little girls that I had met three years ago were now young women. Our theme for the day centered on a relationship with water in our lives. The assignment would take place by a remote creek in the deep, dark forest. The students would be asked to observe the flow and stagnation of the water in the creek, and then would reflect on their own inner flow and obstacles in their lives. My group of five girls was very talkative that beautiful fall morning as we headed out on the mossy path. One girl lagged behind. She had always enjoyed the silent nature of our earth walks in the past and I thought that she was distancing herself from her chatty classmates. As we walked, the chatter died down and I noticed tears on her cheeks. I was unsure what to say in the moment, but her jovial classmates responded by surrounding her in a big group hug. We then began the climb up the hill on the narrow little path that would take us into the darker part of the forest and down to the wide shallow creek. The chatter had subsided during the steep climb up the hillside and all the way down the leafy, dark carpeted floor to the creek's edge. I could feel Silence begin to surround each girl, like a beloved and familiar crocheted shawl, as they settled down by the creek, anticipating the precious solo reflection time and the writing assignment. We observed the way that the creek flowed and the obstacles in the water that held up and diverted the stream's path. We observed stagnant pools. After I gave them their assignment, they silently split up without a word and found their own special place by the creek to sit and to write. I was humbled by their surrender to total stillness and silence. I found a comfortable place to sit that was clearly in view in case they had a question. I hardly moved a muscle as I gazed at the sunlight dancing along the surface of the creek and imagined that a chilly salamander was nestled under the rocks. What blocked my flow? The girl who had been crying pulled her hood over her head and wrote for a long time. The girls spent their time alternately writing and gazing at the water. After they had finished writing, they said not one word, but sat quietly and peacefully in their spots. Nobody wanted to leave the compassionate embrace as we flowed together in a river of peace and silence. After some time, one of the girls rustled in her spot, another threw a pebble into the water and as quickly as we had accepted Silence's embrace, we let go. Tears dried, the girl that had been sad looked noticeably lighter. She shared the contents of her writing with the group, much of it about peer pressure and individuality. A healing had flowed through all of us. It was time to walk to the garden. Tears dried and with a smile on her face, the once troubled girl let her hair down and skipped ahead.

When we are in the stillness and Silence comes, we are reminded that we are not alone in the world. This student later wrote a poem, found at the end of this segment that illustrates her inner recognition that Silence releases us from feelings of isolation and, as Sardello says, “cures us of the disease of dualism.”

Only the Sacred

It was a cool winter day and a 7th grade group had returned to the sanctuary. The assignment for the day was to find a special place where they could contemplate the nature of a covenantal relationship with an animal or a person in their life and what the unspoken promises between them might be. After a happy and somewhat brisk walk we stopped to center ourselves by observing the movement and colors that surrounded us. We felt the temperature of the air on our skin. We came into a quieter frame of mind as we noticed what had remained unseen. By the time that we got to the Creeping Cedar Bridge, the group dispersed and found private and comfortable places to contemplate its assignment and to write while sitting along the mossy creek bed and the wooden bridge. The Silence was immediately welcomed and natural. No one spoke. After the students finished their writing, they gazed thoughtfully out at the landscapes (both inner and outer, I assume) and some noticed the tiny kingdoms that surrounded them. They remained in the Silence. When I saw that they had finished their writing and our time was coming to an end, I gathered the group together to share what they had written. The students were notably more thoughtful, mellow and peaceful. Paige shared with the group that when she had come to the Center today she had a lot on her mind and had been thinking of everything that she had to do for school, extracurricular activities and relationships at home. She said that while she was sitting in her special place she began to realize that she was not alone in the world, that she was part of something much bigger. She looked happier and more relaxed. Later she wrote this poem.

Living in the noise I feel alone

Living in the silence I feel at home.

Some silence is heavy, this silence is light.

Some silence is shallow, this silence is deep.

Some silence is mean, this silence is kind.

Some silence is hurtful, this silence is my band-aid.

Our children live in a noisy world. Their days are overly structured and their senses are overloaded. The quiet moments of reflection and contemplation in the natural world that were taken for granted when we were growing up are disappearing. Robert Sardello says it well: "Happiness and Silence belong together just as do profit and noise. So long as we live in a commercialized world, noise reigns. All the distractions that keep us from the center of our being, where stillness of soul can resonate with Silence, belong to the world of profit."⁸

⁸ Sardello, 8.

Silence

Now I know that, 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. I am convinced that Silence is what our children and the earth will require for our mutual survival for seven generations to come.

Chapter 16

Lessons on a Path

By Lisa Tate

Life is a journey toward the purpose of one's existence. I think some people feel that journey more than others as they move through different pieces of their lives. Some know that the different and varying events of their lives are lessons guiding them toward the knowledge or the enlightenment necessary to perform the tasks commissioned to them before their birth. I have moved through 47 years of events and lessons on a path. At times I have understood the work at hand. Other times I have reminded myself that I am learning necessary lessons and building the needed character to better fulfill my destiny. It sounds simplistic, but I feel this and the last two years have led me to this point on this evening as I begin this final writing for the end of an experience that has taught me so much in the most gentle light.

I have said many times that I have felt commissioned to teach children. Not just teach them, but understand and guide them, to be with each child as much as needed and for as long as possible as they develop the gifts granted and find the path toward their own journey. The first day I observed a Montessori classroom I understood and sat with tears sliding down my face as I experienced the beauty of teaching children through a method filled with respect and the understanding that each child is truly an individual and deserves to be treated as such. That was twenty years ago. I have embraced this method of teaching and now work with children daily, guiding them as they discover their gifts while learning the lessons they have to teach me.

My heart is heavy with the responsibility of making sense and accurately recording in words the understanding that lives and has lived in my soul for as long as I can remember. Having these last couple of years to express the simplicity of the natural world through journaling has given me the chance to develop a voice for the comfort and acceptance I experience when in the presence of animals or surrounded by a forest. I am still new to this outward expression and find it, at times, laborious and tedious. I feel my words fall short of the experience, like looking at a

photo of a beautiful sunset. Yes, it is amazing, but you needed to be there to breathe in the full explosion of light and color as it bathed the earth from east to west and awakened all that is alive with its touch. So, with this understanding I hope that you, the reader, will bear with me and find the meaning of my words, however tenuous they may be.

Journal entry – November 8, 2008

Walking through the dried soybean fields listening to the seeds in the pods jingle. The leaves are blowing from the trees. They will be gone very soon.

I have been granted the precious love of the natural environment. I have always found serenity in gardening. I have always felt quiet, simple joy when surrounded by a barn filled with horses munching hay, shifting about and nickering. I have always found renewed energy in the woods, around hidden ponds and in fields blanketed in tall grass with seed heads blowing in the wind. As a child living on a farm, I ran to the woods, across fields plowed or planted to the shaded comfort of the forest canopy. Sitting among the ferns and moss on spongy ground, watching the insects, hearing the squirrels and rabbits, settled me from the inside out. I found refuge in the top of the barn where sun streamed in through the cracks of the boards lighting the dancing dust particles. The baby cow, the kittens, the horses, the ducklings and of course the dogs were always present as my most valuable companions. All of these things were my entertainment and I never found myself wanting more when in their presence. Peace. I have wanted to gift the children in my life with this . . . this peace that is present in me when I am within the natural environment . . . to guide them to a world that is there for them and yet is so foreign to so many of today.

Journal entry - June 20, 2009

Camp – week 1 – is over. The children were amazing yesterday. Despite the heat they were all excited and anxious to get to the hike. As I gathered water bottles into my pack they began to gather. They were choosing paper, pencil, markers. I asked what they were doing. Owen (pre-k) answered, “We have to take paper and pencils. We want to write down what we see.” We began our hike walking first through fields over to a pond with a large hickory tree. As I read the novel Trumpet of the Swans by E.B. White they looked for sticks. They pulled long tough grass blades and tied them together and then tied them to the sticks. It wasn’t long before they were all fishing with the fish friendly poles made by their own hands. We moved on through another sparse, scraggly field to the entrance of a wooded trail. The earth is black in the forest from the

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continuous cycle of falling leaves rotting and feeding the soil. The air is cool as the canopy keeps sun and heat from reaching in. Mmmmm. On days this hot I am even more grateful for the forest. The hike leads us back to the cabin that sits by a pond covered in algae. There, behind the cabin, is an outhouse. All the children know this and wait, reserved (however you choose to think) for the opportunity to use the outhouse. Once we have all had a turn, we continue on the forest trail. There are hills now and one leads down into a shallow creek. Ferns cover one side of the steep bank while small rocks mixed with larger ones carpet the floor of the creek. The water is about two to six inches deep, perfect for walking through. So much to explore. They want to go deeper – but I know we still have a ways to walk. The sun is warming the path we must take home and soon their tummies will be demanding lunch. Our way back is filled with talk of the bulldog we may see, snacking on blackberries that we find on the way and – no talk – silence as we walk along the tractor road. Cooper slips in next to me and takes my hand. We walk a few steps and then quietly he says, ‘Everyone’s faces are sad today.’ This is the last day of camp~

During the first year of this work at the The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World I enjoyed the walks, the silence and the guided discussions. Peggy, Carolyn and Sandy led us all into the places in our souls where we needed to be. Each of us was in a different place in our work and yet we were all together working towards greater understanding of the communion with the earth about which Thomas Berry spoke and wrote. As a teacher I enjoyed the methods of peaceful direction, the guided, thought-provoking readings and the moments of transition punctuated by the flute or a bell. We were able to move from one thought to the next without the expectation of immediate enlightenment, which, for me, would often come later when I had time to contemplate.

The time for choosing a practice was drawing near. I thought I knew the direction my practice would take. I had been planning it in my mind and very much looked forward to the second year when I would work with my favorite animals among children. Well, I had actually been doing this for years. I looked forward to recording the results and watching perhaps at a different level the progress of the children. Because this kind of work had been a part of me for so long I was looking forward to honing the process under the guise of class work. However, the universe has a plan and that was not the work that was to be mine. I arrived at Timberlake Farm that morning as the fog lifted from the field on the right as the driveway winds around to the house. The trees were holding their arms out to me in a comforting manner. I was excited about this day and had no idea that hours later I would experience such overwhelming

emotion as my practice was revealed for the first time to the others in my group, to my guides and also to myself.

Journal Entry – September 7, 2009

Dawn flowed over the backyard in a billowy cloud of mist swirling with the breeze around the corners of the house and shed. The breeze was more than cool, yet not chilled. It felt of fall. In that moment I felt the leaves turning, the acorns dropping, the winter coats thickening.

After a day of writing, listening and contemplating, I discovered that my practice would be focused toward the adults who are connected with the children I work with. Through the work of bringing the adults of the children closer to the natural environment, I felt the children would have a better chance at not just having an occasional experience within the natural environment, but regular interactions with the natural world. This could only enhance the experiences the children have, giving them the opportunity for a genuine relationship, or, as Thomas Berry said, a “communion” with the natural world.

So, this is my work, my job, my commission, my practice. It is not a yearlong project. It is a lifetime of looking for the best methods of connecting with the adults in order to assist them in their connection with the natural environment and then having the presence to make the connection in a way that is non-confrontational and yet inspiring, gentle and rewarding for the adults in the children’s lives.

Journal entry – January 7, 2010

The sun in all its glory rose today to bathe the brown oak leaves in golden light. The ice in the water buckets began melting. The horses sighed relief and the birds sang. This morning was full of spirit as we stood ankle deep in mud watching a bull calf, that had to be pulled from its mother, find his shaky legs and search for his mother’s milk.

The adults will always be the difficult students. The walls and fears are sometimes insurmountable. Some embraced the newness of the gardens, the animals and the forest. Many succumbed to their disconnect, but hoped for their children to have the connection. Yet some have never understood the importance of the connection with the natural world. If the children are to have a reverence for the earth, the living earth, the parents need to have an understanding. How am I to manage this? How to plant the seed of understanding that we are no more important than

the blades of grass we walk on? I, in fact, have come to realize that if every blade of grass were to disappear from the earth the erosion, the food chain and the air would suffer devastating results. The earth would die. If people no longer inhabited the earth, the air, land and water would slowly heal itself of the wounds from the human race.

In attempting to focus on the adults and their connection with the earth, or at the very least their awakening to the need for their children to have a connection, I have searched for and tried a variety of ways to voice the message of the earth. I have wanted to be gentle enough to engage the least likely audience, hopefully creating “cracks” in the walls that have been built over years of misunderstandings.

Our actions directly affect the earth. At Montessori Farm School we work daily to reduce our footprint through a variety of methods. Our families and their actions in relation to their children’s school experience are important areas where we work to educate. We recycle everything, including paper from the classrooms. We ask our parents to assist us by using reusable containers in lunchboxes and sending reusable water bottles with the children to school. Our meal gatherings are paperless. Each family attends with their own plates, silverware, cups and cloth napkins. We worried that this would prove to be a difficult task for parents, but they have embraced this action. We communicate through email and the school website. Our newsletter is delivered electronically. We are even sending bi-annual reports for each child electronically, reducing paper use dramatically. These actions do not immediately connect the adults to the natural world, but give them a sense of connection through nurturing in a safe and non-threatening way.

Through various sources, I have shared quotes from environmentalists and naturalists, books written for children and some written for adults. I have photographed nature and shared my albums on facebook and framed photos on the walls at school. I share insights regularly concerning my interactions with animals, what is alive and producing in the garden, along with tales of the latest hike hoping they may be moved to join us the next time. The children will remember their experiences in the natural world more readily if their parents are a participating part of the experience.

Twice monthly the entire school community is invited to join me for a hike at the farm. We always meet at the barn for a little time with the horses and then head out in a direction most appropriate for the participants. We may hike to Back Creek for a little wading time and rock hunting, or hike through the back field to a pond I refer to as the “secret pond.” It is a small pond completely surrounded by trees. The far side has a place where the roots of the trees have created steps down into a

gully area. The greenest moss grows around these steps with small pools of water in each that the frogs seem to love as hatcheries. Any hike provides the opportunity to view a variety of animal prints in the mud or sand near the water's edge. Children and adults alike enjoy the notion of the deer standing where they are while drinking from the pond.

We are working with the goats now for the next month. Everyone who is interested in working with a goat meets two evenings a week and then on Saturday and Sunday afternoon to work with a goat their child has chosen. We will present our goats to our community at the end of April. The children and adults will share what they have learned through the lessons and from their goats. This year we have fifteen families working with the goats at Elodie Farms. The parents are becoming interested in the goats. They worry about the goats' wellbeing, and ask about care, feeding and management. They often choose a goat to brush and handle while their child is working with their chosen goat or ask if the child is paying attention to what the goat is saying or how the goat is feeling about what is going on. It is beautiful to see the entire group connecting to these gracious animals.

Gardening is an ongoing project at the school and at home. Everyone gets to participate, giving each individual the chance to feel the earth, smell the earth and enjoy the results. Parents are interested in how to plant the potatoes and when the peas will be ready to harvest. They walk with their children through the garden paths, looking and asking questions. I have a friend who has never experienced the wonder of planting seeds, watching them grow and then harvesting and enjoying the most amazing flavors, scents and colors of fresh grown food! She is truly a willing participant and wonders daily what needs to be done in the garden!

Journal entry – October 25, 2009

It has been a week of beauty and fire. The early mornings have been full of shooting stars, crisp air and furry animals. The evenings have displayed colors of rich oranges, peaches, vibrant reds and solemn browns. Fall is here and on the way out faster than I am wanting. More time to contemplate please . . .

The past two years have strengthened my relationship with the natural world. I have always loved the woods, the animals, plants and everything that goes with it. I have felt more at home alone in the woods than in a mall. I have spent years with children connecting them to the natural environment. As I write this paper and have spent the week thinking

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about the path of the last two years, I realize that my relationship with nature is deeper and much more intimate than before. I have written, read, walked, communed in silence and taken pictures. I have experienced seasons through these methods in ways I only skimmed before. Through the work of the program I feel more comfortable with the task of connecting others and feel that I have Thomas Berry, Thomas Merton, Black Elk, John Muir, Andy Goldsworthy, and countless others to turn to when in need of inspiration. I am forever grateful for the experiences, dedication and direction given to all of us from The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World's staff. Their work will live through all who have experienced the transformation and deeper understanding of a communion with the earth.

Part III

Sacred Presence

Finally we begin to recover a reverence for the material out of which we were born, for the nourishing context that sustains us, the sounds and scenery, the warmth of the wind and the coolness of the water – all of which delight us and purify us and communicate to us some sense of sacred presence.

~ Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*

Chapter 17

“I am a We star”

by Marie Nordgren

Owen is a three-year-old boy whose entire being was captivated by searching for earthworms. Prancing on tiptoes and beaming with anticipation, he repeated over and over “look for worms, look for worms.” So with shovel and bucket in hand we went to look for worms in the layers of composting leaves under the oak tree. In no time we were delighted by an abundance of fat earthworms and Owen shouted “worm jackpot, worm jackpot”. Undeterred by grime and goo, he carefully pulled worms out of the earth, adjusting the tension of each tug so that each one was extracted whole. He gently placed them one by one in his cupped palm until it was full of squiggling moist movement. Then gently closing his fingers around them he ran off to play. When lunch arrived and hand washing was required, Owen opened his fist to reveal a lifeless blob of twisted worms and dirt. Disappointment and confusion washed across his face.

My intention for the Inner Life of the Child in Nature project was to deepen my own relationship with the natural world and form communion with the larger universe. My practice was to include a daily opportunity for experiences in the natural world, journaling about the relationships that developed, and discovery about how that relationship might radiate into my work with young children, my family and my own sense of being. I intended to begin this journey with the practices of beholding, solo walks and bringing my questions to the natural world.

My practice began with an enthusiasm that captured my whole being. I organized my day to include an early morning nature walk and after school stroll around the pond to “bring my day to the natural world” and listen for what the natural world may have to say to me. I was inspired, engaged in the project and expectant. I was going to be in communion

with nature. I would know Mother Earth and she would know me and this relationship would inform my entire life - teaching, parenting, relationships and my inner being.

Joy, mystery, amazement and awe characterized my early practice. I was disciplined in my walking and pond reflection. I collected an image every day in a beholding exercise: An alpaca lying on its side in the sun being held by the earth and blanketed with warmth and light, mushrooms and wheat grass sprouting from an old wheat straw bale, the moon cradled in the branches of a tree. I asked questions of the natural world and sat in silence expectantly. I contemplated the images and questions and made efforts to integrate these experiences into my stories for the children and conversations with family and friends.

For a time, this held my interest and inspired my days. But in this grasping mood of acquisition and use of images and experiences as product of my efforts, my “cupped palm” became full. With my collection of images in hand and held tightly, I became less disciplined in my walks and journaling. General busyness became my focus along with teaching, house hunting, moving, grieving, and worrying. Something about my practice or intention was not working.

Golden haired, blue-eyed Nora, just four, dreamily strolls through the vegetable garden. She comes to stillness in front of a broccoli plant that has blossomed into yellow flowers. She stands in her dreamy state gazing at the plant. Silently they stand, golden haired girl facing a golden flowering plant. Minutes pass with no movement. Then, Nora takes a long deep breath, sighs and the spell is broken. She turns and skips off to the holly tree, climbs its branches and perches on a limb 10 feet above the ground. There she sits in the tree for the remainder of playtime, happy as a lark.

“The Earth is a communion of subjects to be revered, not a collection of objects to be exploited”. These words, from eco-theologian Thomas Berry, were repeated in some context at each gathering we had at the Center. They are foundational to this work. A communion of subjects, a communion, communion.... I had been looking outside myself for something to bring into myself, to have and to hold, to share and perhaps “exploit”. A communion of subjects, a communion, communion...?

“I am a We star”

In the universe
Wafts man’s essential being.
In the heart of man
Wafts a mirror-picture of the universe.
The ego connects the two
And so fashions
The true meaning of existence.

Notebook entry by Rudolf Steiner, 1918⁹

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!”

Today, my intentions remain the same: to deepen my relationship with the natural world and form communion with the larger universe. My practice is shifting however, and the expectations I had are shifting as well. Now my practice includes daily opportunities **to be** in the natural world. Being present in the presence of the universe is a large enough task for me. I am trying to uncup my hand and stretch it toward the WE.

⁹ Urieli, B. L. and H. Muller-Wiedmann, *Learning to Experience the Etheric World* (London: Temple Lodge Publishing, 1998), 41.

Chapter 18

The Opening

by Trish Corbett

*... when children come in contact with nature,
they reveal their strength.¹*

~ Maria Montessori

*The excitement of life is in the numinous experience wherein we are
given to each other in that larger celebration of existence in which all
things attain their highest expression, for the universe, by definition,
is a single gorgeous celebratory event.²*

~ Thomas Berry

As I reflect on my experiences during the past two years as a participant in “The Inner Life of the Child in Nature” program, I marvel at my journey. Could I have envisioned what my inner landscape would look like now or how the changes in me would manifest themselves in my work with children? My answer would definitely be no. I did have the intention of deepening my connection with the natural world, a connection that would hopefully spill into and inform my interactions with each child I encountered; however my intention was very vague and

¹ Maria Montessori, *The Discovery of the Child* (Oxford, England: Clio Press, 2002), 71.

² Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), 5.

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without form. Little did I know that this lack of apparent clarity would be the very doorway through which I would enter into some of my most important personal and professional work.

To help put my story in context, I think it's important to give you a glimpse of my relationship with nature as seen through my eyes as a child. Where I grew up in an urban environment in the Northeast, grass and flowers were seen as intruders that were routinely dug up and replaced with asphalt. Homes were tall, close together, and mostly devoid of natural character or enhancement. During the winter months, snow was perceived as a headache for it reduced the space available for the parking of cars, and, in the summer months, the heat was seen as the enemy so we closed our shades during the daytime to keep out the light and hot air. The sole natural element that I remember being embraced and celebrated was the ocean. My family took annual vacations to Cape Cod, and our two weeks on the beach was like heaven to me. It nourished my parched soul with the soothing sound of the waves, the unique fragrance of the ocean, and the wonderfully grainy feel of the sand. Although there were elements of the sea that remained scary to me, in particular the horseshoe crabs and the occasional jellyfish, most of the time I felt great comfort sitting on or walking along the beach, lost in the experience of my awakened senses.

Fast-forward thirty years . . . My mindset or beliefs about nature hadn't changed dramatically, but my exposure to natural settings increased in small but significant ways. We moved to the Midwest and settled into a community with large old beautiful trees. We even had a small lawn and garden that we tended. Well, to be truthful, my husband did most of the work. But I did start to appreciate and value having elements of nature as part of my everyday experiences. When our first child was born, the miracle of a new life opened my eyes and heart wide open to the possibility of a cosmic connection to an infinite source. As our son grew, his innate curiosity and sense of wonder about the world awakened these same, long dormant qualities in me. Seemingly for the first time I watched with great pleasure and delight how an ant climbed up the side of a tree or how clever a squirrel was as he dug for nuts. I experienced the freedom of spinning my body around and feeling the cool air surround me, then the pure joy of collapsing in giggles onto the soft welcoming grass. These experiences were the initial deposits into a treasury of wondrous experiences in nature. For a long time, they existed alongside my beliefs that nature could not be trusted, was invasive and restrictive, and thus needed to be limited and controlled.

It was within this duality that the teachings of Maria Montessori entered. When looking for a preschool for our son, a friend

recommended a Montessori School. Our intention was to find a safe, loving learning environment, and this school seemed to fulfill those goals. We knew little of Montessori's underlying reverence for the child and her belief in the importance of a child's spiritual development through a strong connection with nature: "the child possesses an active psychic life . . . the child must secretly perfect this inner life over a long period of time."³ As I learned more about the Montessori philosophy and experienced it firsthand, the desire to integrate this way of being into my life became stronger. After many years working in business, I re-careered and went back to school to become a Montessori teacher, focused on the 3-6 age group.

These past six years of teaching have inspired, challenged, and changed me in significant ways. In retrospect, I see my transition into teaching as a pivotal point in my life for it was then that I consciously entered into and embraced my work with children within a spiritual context. At that time I made a decision to challenge my beliefs about nature and about my relationship with the natural world. This choice was not a one-time thing. It needed and continues to need ongoing renewal and commitment to keep my mind and spirit looking inward and outward simultaneously to ensure congruence with my new view of my connection with all living things. A significant support in this process has been my participation with "The Inner Life of the Child in Nature" program.

During the past two years I have had many opportunities to nurture my inner life. A firm believer in "you can't give what you don't have," I knew that in order to provide rich experiences in nature for the children in my classroom, I needed to continue to develop a deep personal connection for myself. This process was aided in many ways. By sharing my experiences with others and hearing about other participant's journeys, I grew in my understanding and reverence for nature, as well as a respect for each person's unique journey. Solo walks on the beautiful earth sanctuary trails of Timberlake Farm were adventures for me, although I must admit they were not always within my comfort zone, especially in the beginning. Quieting my mind and opening my heart to hear the murmurs of a divine presence took time and patience.

Ever so slowly I was able to trust that 'being lost' in the woods was simply a state of mind. Early in the program during one of my solos, I got completely disoriented in the woods, couldn't find my map of the grounds, and started to panic not knowing how to get back to the

³ Maria Montessori, *The Secret of Childhood* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), 34.

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Treehouse for lunch. As I feverishly took one ‘wrong’ path after another and grew increasingly anxious (I could say terrified), all my old thoughts of nature being untrustworthy and unsafe welled up inside of me. These voices were strong and loud, but they were countered by other voices reminding me of my positive experiences with nature as a benevolent source of guidance and support. In a complete act of faith, I made a decision to trust that I was safe and would be guided out of the woods. Step by hesitant step, I repeated my mantra that I was safe and being led by a faithful and loving presence. As I walked out onto the field, into the warmth of the sunlight, I realized with gratitude that the person exiting the woods was profoundly different from the person who entered it. I knew with confidence that this experience had changed me so deeply that my relationship with nature would be forever altered, and for the better.

Enter the children. Throughout these past two years, the children in my classroom have been enthusiastic and willing sojourners with me. My grand plans of what my practice ‘should’ look like fell away, and we spent our time developing an intimate relationship with the nature on our campus. We started the school year by making individual “Cosmic Jars.” Each child collected elements of Mother Earth - land, air and water. As a class, we collaboratively developed a set of classroom agreements, one of them being respect for all living things. So when insects found their way into our classroom, one or several of the children gently helped them back to their home outside. I knew we had made significant progress as a community when one of our older children reported with great pride that “Nick (one of our 3-year olds) saw an ant today and didn’t step on it.” During parent/teacher conferences the parents frequently share stories that reflect the children’s intimate love and respect for nature. For example, several parents have recalled occasions where there was an insect in their home that they were about to kill, but were stopped in their tracks when their child looked up and said, “But Daddy, that’s a living thing!” I delight when a parent tells me of how they took the time to crouch down on the ground with their child to observe a crawling ant. They may not realize it, but their children are giving the entire family the gift of reverence for nature!

The children and I delight in the change of the seasons, observing nature’s wondrous process of renewal. The practice of beholding prepares us to be present to the process of a flower opening its petals, the subtle changes in the color of the leaves, the active animal life in our patio garden. We become still internally and externally, increasing our awareness of and appreciation for the earth’s natural rhythms. We frequently do science experiments - some of our favorites this past year had to do with water. During the winter months we explored how water

changed form due to the temperature, and the children delighted in the formation of ice crystals on our playground mulch. Currently we are experimenting with how flowers get water, using colored water with white carnations. In our classroom we have an aquarium. The children sit in front of it for long periods of time, sometimes noting the swimming or feeding habits of the fish. More often, however, the children simply gaze at the tank in apparent wonder and awe. They are calmer and appear refreshed after their quiet time with the fish.

I am eternally grateful for the opportunity to participate in this amazing program. It has enhanced my life in immeasurable ways, far beyond any plan I could have come up with two years ago. Like a pebble in the pond, its ripples extend beyond my work with children, for it has exposed me to the amazing work of Thomas Berry, has helped me make connections with some really amazing fellow journeyers within this program, and has expanded my advocacy of sustainability. Both Maria Montessori and Thomas Berry had a similar passion for building a stronger connection to and reverence for the earth. Montessori saw education as the primary vehicle, with the spiritual education of a child an integral component of that mission. Berry was an earth scholar who was a constant, compelling voice calling us to awaken to the damage we are doing to Mother Earth and challenging us to embark on a new path of appreciation for the sacredness of our planet. I can think of no better way to carry on the work of Montessori and Berry than to help reawaken and reinforce in children the majesty, wonder, and beauty of the natural world. There is nothing more important in our lifetime than this, and our collective future depends on it.

Chapter 19

Horseshoe Crab

by Cathy Simon Cord

It was the last field trip of the year. The class was well prepared, but not really sure what to expect once we reached the bay. Many of the children and parents thought we were spending a day at the beach, when actually we would be spending a day saving horseshoe crabs from exposure. A horseshoe crab comes out of the water to lay her eggs. They rely on the tides to take them in and out of the deeper waters, and if stranded about the tide line, can become flipped. Once flipped on their backs, they are defenseless against the sun and shore birds. The children all knew this, but I don't think they were prepared for the hundreds of crabs that had been left stranded the night before. We had learned throughout our study of horseshoe crabs that you never flip a crab over by its tail or telson. That could damage the crab's only means of defending itself. You had to pick the crabs up by the sides of the shell and flip them gently, set them back down and let them go on their way back to the sea. This information is difficult to digest for small children and adults alike. The crabs, although harmless, have the look of something that could hurt you. They have sharp spines on their shells and tails to protect them from predators. The myths abound about how they pinch or sting, but they do neither, and we told the children this over and over again. This would be their first encounter with live crabs, up until this point we had only seen molts or models. What would happen? I wasn't sure.

The day was perfect weather wise, not too hot and the humidity was bearable. Something that is not always true of May in Delaware. We arrived at the protected beach after being on the bus for 45 minutes, a long bus ride for 3, 4, 5 and 6 year olds. Once in the parking lot, we disbanded and walked toward the beach. The tide was low; so many crabs had been stranded. Some of the children were disturbed by the amount of crabs and the smell. The flies were buzzing and the shore birds were

calling in the swampy section beyond the dunes. We got right to work. I had only flipped crabs once before and now I was the example for my own twenty children. Some children found the water's edge too muddy, a mix of marsh and bay, you sunk straight down, and shoes of any sort were not possible.

One of my youngest boys was there with his dad; he was so excited to be the "super-hero" to the crabs - a term we had been using to entice their interest. He flipped crabs and bravely walked through the muck to place them in the brackish water. Throughout the morning, I heard him call my name as another crab was found and brought back to the water's edge. Most of the other children had flipped a few crabs and then went off to scavenge the beach for treasures. They were tired of the hard work and the messy business of flipping heavy crabs and walking them back toward the water. Not this one little guy. He must have flipped fifty crabs. Even his dad tired before he did. He was so focused on his task, that even as everyone else was packing up for our next stop, he was still flipping crabs. He was sun-kissed and sweaty, muddy from head to toe, but smiling for his efforts. He wasn't doing it for me, or for his dad, he was doing it because he knew he was doing something important for nature.

One last crab, a huge female that was dug down low in the mud, had probably just laid her eggs. He saw the wave toss her up and he went in to get her. We were all waiting on the beach, watching this just turned four-year-old boy do what he had been doing all day. When he flipped her she jack-knifed and the telson caught him in the face, scratching a long red mark down the side of his face. I went to help and so did his dad, both assuming he would drop the crab, but he didn't. He placed her down in the water and looked at the adults standing there watching him. He smiled and you could tell he was being brave, not wanting to cry from the scratch that had to hurt. He said, "I must have held her too close to me, or she would never have scratched me". We were all so surprised. He didn't blame the crab, he knew she was defending herself, and we all knew he was wise beyond his four years. He will be five when we go back this year, and he is already talking about saving more crabs this year. I think we have instilled in this child a sense of respect for nature that may have not been there before. Anyone who comes to our classroom to talk about horseshoe crabs is grilled by him, he is the expert, and this has given him both a boost in his self esteem but also a sense of the greater good. One child, one special day, a lifetime of memories of doing what was right.

Chapter 20

Holding A Vision in One Small Garden

by Jo Anne Kraus

“I sincerely believe that for the child, and for the parent seeking to guide him, it is not half so important to *know* as to *feel*. If facts are the seeds that later produce knowledge and wisdom, then the emotions and the impressions of the senses are the fertile soil in which the seeds must grow. The years of early childhood are the time to prepare the soil.”¹⁰

~ Rachel Carson

I was experiencing a familiar panic recently as my thoughts turned to summer camp. What could I come up with this year to keep 240 little hands and 120 little hearts and minds at the A.C.T. Summer Camp engaged with the natural world of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine grounds and the one small children’s garden I oversee as the camp Nature and Garden Specialist. There isn’t vastness or silence here to command awe, no water life except children in sprinklers, no trails to explore or rocks to climb, and not much space for personal anything. Like the city, whose sounds and sights and smells are all around us, every inch of the garden and grounds is shared property.

What the Cathedral has is two square blocks on the Upper West Side of New York City. For decades this site has provided spiritual succor not only through religious services conducted in its buildings but through the shade of its enormous trees and extensive, lovingly tended grounds and gardens. It is an oasis, a respite from asphalt, steel, and brick, from the exhaust of high-rises, trucks and taxis, and rushing citizens. But the grounds shrank in the past year as one large corner, the corner closest to

¹⁰ Rachel Carson, *The Sense of Wonder* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998), 56.

our children's garden, became the site of a sixteen story high rise. With this development, places wherein I hoped to draw city children into a 'feeling' connection with the natural world, had as backdrop enormous cranes with a surround sound noise of jackhammers and drills.

A city camp inevitably offers such challenges to the naturalist-gardener, though ours is a more generous urban setting than many in its ratio of earth to child. Our 40 by 60 foot triangle-shaped children's garden, surrounded on two sides by an asphalt driveway and on the third by a school building, serves approximately 150 pre-school through third grade children who come in groups of 15 twice a week for a 45-minute visit. Together we plant and maintain the garden, hoping to harvest at least some of what we sow given our late start in the growing season, the partially blocked sunlight, and the predators—peacocks, small birds, and squirrels as well as humans strolling through the Cathedral grounds—who sometimes pick off the fruit and pull up our plants.

To these urban challenges, I add a personal one. I insist on keeping our focus clearly on the immediate natural world around us. I want the children to know the non-human lives that share our urban world 'intimately, particularly, precisely, gratefully, reverently, and with affection,' as Wendell Berry defines imaginative knowing in *Life is a Miracle*.¹¹ So we explore the Cathedral grounds to observe, touch, listen for, smell, and taste the flora and fauna we can actually find at hand. But the natural world operates in its own cycles and on its own time. And even the species that live here do not predictably show up when required, their dramas playing out in a mostly invisible, parallel world. This is the ultimate challenge—to help the children tune in to the quiet stories playing out around us.

Yet despite the many obstacles confronting this nature-garden program, something worked last summer. I found myself writing at summer's end that, amazingly, like the loaves and fishes of the biblical story, the small offerings of the diminished environment provided enough for all. Little surprises continually fed the curriculum and the children were happy and engaged.

Some of the summer's success is due to simple mechanical improvements—an added bench in the seating circle, an added table in the crafts area, the large blue tubs that made watering an independent and ongoing activity—and some resulted from making room for the children's ever present desires to dig, water, find worms and roly-polys, taste, touch,

¹¹ Wendell Berry, *Life is a Miracle* (Washington, DC, Counterpoint, 2000), 137-138.

make things. But a grace was also present that I attribute to the practice of “beholding.” Beholding is about just taking a moment to stop in the presence of nature, to look closer, to acknowledge beauty, life, complexity, mystery. Beholding is about understanding that the moment one gives attention to anything, even a blade of grass, the marvel of its particular life and its connection to the bigger world becomes clearer and deeper.

My own inclination to look closely at nature was fostered in early childhood, but last summer I was bringing to it a new consciousness, a new practice, and a new name, the result of my participation in a year long seminar on “The Inner Life of the Child in Nature” at The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World at Timberlake Farm in Whitsett, North Carolina. Through readings, a nature journal, and several daylong retreats which included “solos,” where we went into the woods to spend quiet time alone, I found a relaxing, deepening quiet, and a new trust that the natural world anywhere is alive with possibilities.

Over and over in my own beholding practice, I marvel at what I see when I stop and really look, but the trust in this process grew over the summer. I was certainly not aware that it was in place as the summer began, yet I see now that I was more open to the garden’s potential last year, to seeing the lively diversity in that small place.

I came to treasure my quiet time alone there—while setting up before the day began or cleaning-up after the camp day ended or waiting for a group to arrive. When I had a spare moment during the camp day, I stayed in the garden or headed back to it, wanting to be there. Without the children’s lively bustle, birds and animals came, and I became aware of plants and wild flowers I had not noticed. As I nurtured my own connection to the garden, I lost some of the weight of responsibility I carried for persuading city children that the natural world was worthy of their interest. With the small improvements added to make it easier to accommodate the large groups, I found it became a place I could welcome the children to with pleasure, trusting somehow that what sustained me would reach wide enough to sustain us all.

What Nature Provided

The children, never far from awe and reverence if the adult world allows it, caught the tone easily. There were little moments of shared wonder, like when a first grade group trooped into the garden one hot afternoon and found me sitting “beholding” the sow thistles I had just noticed at the edge of the garden; together we marveled at those tiny, wind-borne seeds that keep the species alive, lifting them into the air to

watch them blow away. Or the rainy day walk in the gardens to see what liked the rain, that produced not much in the way of slugs and worms, but opened us to the quiet, damp pleasures of a garden stroll when everyone else is stuck indoors.

There were planned activities, like the worm garden, that worked better than I had imagined and extended throughout the seven weeks of camp, growing in interest and depth. What began as a two by six-foot boxed bed of dirt located under a mulberry tree, too shaded to grow much, led to much exploration and imaginative learning.

Most days some children wanted to dig in the worm garden. And most days I set out the trowels ready to hand in a pile just behind the worm garden box. The only rules initially were to keep a safety space between digging children, to keep the dirt in the box, and to put the worms back in at the end of the day. Children dug and squealed and clutched worms in dirty fists, but they also watched how eager the worms were to crawl back into the dirt. Why was that? They wanted to water the dirt in the worm box, and flooded it in their unchecked eagerness, so we stopped to consider what worms need to survive. Can they drown? Do they need air? Do they breathe?

One day a group of children ran into the garden shouting and quivering with excitement. They had discovered a cache of worms in a pile of leaf mold outside the Cathedral House and were bringing them to live in our worm garden. They now had confirmation that worms love decaying leaves and a greater stake in taking good care of the worm garden. Raking dead leaves became another garden activity because the worms needed food.

There were planned activities, like our search for insects, that surprised all of us. The first surprise was mine when several second-graders said in mid-July, "I saw that bug from last year." They didn't remember the name, but they recognized the insect. Too early for cicadas, I thought, but I was wrong. Cicadas were earlier this year and the children had found them before me.

The next day as the children were searching the garden area for whatever insects they could find, two children ran to report a hole with a "strange bug" in it. I went to look and saw a half-inch hole in the middle of the garden path, but no bug, strange or otherwise. No doubt it was a fanciful act of their imaginations. But soon they came back to say it was coming out. This time I saw what they were seeing—a cicada still in its shell and making its way out of the ground. This is something I knew about and had described to children, but had never actually seen.

Overwhelmed with the coincidence of it happening in the middle of a camp visit in the middle of the day, I said, “It’s a miracle!” and called all the children together around the hole. The insect poked up, pulled back, turned around, digging with its strong front legs and expanding the hole, but not coming out. It was hard for the children not to poke and prod, but they worked at self-restraint and we sat and watched quietly for longer than I thought them capable. While they watched I recounted the life cycle of the insect. Then, as they drifted away into other activities, I heard, “It’s a miracle—it’s a miracle,” echoing from the children.

This launched our cicada study and everyone in this group left camp that day with a story to tell. Throughout the remaining weeks of camp, we stopped to listen for the raspy buzz of cicadas and children found live cicadas, cicada shells, and more holes in the ground. Some of the children will carry this with them and remember when they see a shell in years to come or hear the summer sound that means cicadas have hatched for another short season of life above ground.

So it went, with the quiet, invisible dramas of bugs and worms, squirrels and birds selectively making themselves known to us. We went looking for squirrels’ summer nests in the treetops, but the squirrels came to us when campers, who had hidden unshelled peanuts to test whether they, like squirrels, could remember later where to find them, found the squirrels beat them to the peanuts and ate some before the children could find them.

Children regularly sited the red-tailed hawk family that lives on the north side of the Cathedral, especially in the early pre-camp and late post-camp hours when the Cathedral grounds are quieting down from the bustle of the day. The day we were looking for birds, however, two children heard a hawk cry overhead and called out to me. It was the first time I had stopped to listen for it. And several days later a young hawk, injured and distressed, landed in the play area behind the garden, crying loudly and persistently. No one who heard it will ever forget that sound.

In August, our camp reorganizes into a two-week Arts and Sports camp. The garden serves both. Now the challenge, after five weeks of July Camp, is to keep the interest and attention of the returning children and to help the new children feel connected with the natural world of garden and grounds. I took my themes last year from the seasonal calendar—the harvest and the weeds.

By August camp, the weeds threaten to take over the garden, but weeding does not have much meaning for young children, especially city children for whom green is green and one plant is much like another. It takes repeated exposure—looking and naming—for children to learn to

distinguish plant species, and camp is not a school science class. I hope they will make a feeling connection through concrete associations, so my nature curriculum focuses on the beauty and usefulness of weeds. August (known as “Weodmonath” in old England, because just as the garden plants are reaching harvest stage, weeds too get a burst of energy) is a good time to make this our subject.

Weeds are marvelous, nature’s tricksters—their flowers and foliage beautiful close up, their adaptation strategies masterfully cunning. Some of the species we find everywhere in disturbed soil are invasives with storied histories behind them, brought over hundreds of years ago for their medicinal value. They can be found in abundance even in the city. This makes them good for search and find missions. In untended green places around the A.C.T. garden they can be dug up without permission, and since their roots tell a big part of the story of how weeds survive, digging is as useful as well as fun exercise. Some common weeds can even be eaten.

Second graders like knowing things, but they want to do it through hands-on discovery. So each day the children were provided with basic history and identification facts of one weed—this year lambs quarter, dandelion, and violets. Then each child got a trowel, and the group dispersed among the banks of weeds outside the garden. Each was to contribute a few choice leaves for the food pot, a good specimen for his/her own identification page, and roots to examine.

Tasting or eating anything holds the children’s interest, and knowing that some common weeds are edible—even delicious—deepens their respect for these visible but undervalued plants. Boiled lightly in a hot pot, then dipped in salted butter is the only recipe required. Even squeamish little mouths open for a leaf to taste and many children come back for seconds and thirds. Something of this will stick with them.

The children had helped plant the garden and I hoped they would experience the fruits of their labors. The first graders were focused on the harvest aspect of the garden during August, but what could we harvest where peacocks, squirrels and people had robbed us of tomatoes, peppers, corn, and peas before they could even grow enough to be harvested? The beans, growing prolifically, were not ready to be picked by early August, and the only two things we had planted that we could harvest were lettuce and mint. We picked and tasted both, but the children only really loved the mint tea. That we made several times as they learned to identify the plant by smell, to carefully pick only the tips, to drop them in boiling water, add sugar, and wait for the tea to steep.

The world around the garden supplied the rest. A crab apple tree near the garden, planted decades before, had a bountiful harvest in August. Children picked, washed, and quartered the tiny apples with plastic knives and we boiled them to make jelly. The wild grape that hangs over the garden was also ready by the last week of camp—its tiny green grapes watched all summer finally turning deep purple-red. Several boys determined to make “wine,” and were happily busy for two days, picking and squashing grapes with the kind of total focus that make-believe brings.

All in all, it was enough.

Saying Good-bye

As the last week of August camp approached, I felt the need for closure. The garden had provided so amply for us all summer and we needed to take our leave consciously, gratefully. With the first graders, I returned to the feature that had pleased so many of them so well—worms. I talked briefly about earthworms and reinforced the idea that we were not going to dig them up this time but wanted to gently rake aside the leaves on top and see if they were near the surface. My plan was aided immeasurably by the soaking rain we had had earlier in the morning. Mostly we raked with our hands—finding nothing at first then, one by one, WORMS!

After we had several worms, we took them to the art table to put them on paper and examine them with hand lenses. I had hoped they could hear the worms’ setae (bristles) on paper, but the jackhammers were going again. Still we could all see their tube-like mouths, their circular muscles, and I, at least, saw the bristles on one worm with a magnifying glass. The children were engrossed in this exploration and some wanted to keep their worms, but we put them back, then hunted for more “food”—raking and piling dead leaves in the worm garden.

After this I generated a spontaneous game of “It all comes from Worm Poop” as they volunteered what they were going to eat for lunch and we traced it back to soil. They clamored to mention lunch foods and then to cry “soil!” as we discovered what our very life depends on. “I’m going to do this all day,” I heard one child say.

By the final week of camp last year, I expected what I remembered from the year before. With over one hundred children trooping through a small garden space day after day the place soon gets a weary, trampled look. As the summer sun beats down and the asphalt and brick surrounding the garden heat up, the plants lose the vibrancy, the freshness

of early summer days. But after the last sessions of August camp, where we said good-bye by clipping weeds and raking paths, setting in a few late summer flowers, and putting the worms to bed, the garden looked great.

And what mattered even more to me, the garden had become more than a classroom or an activity center. It had become a place of being together—with even the art activities a natural extension of our experience, another way of engaging our subject, more than a place to keep little hands busy and focused. By summer's end, the children could easily be called together, frantic activity had become more purposeful, and something like harmony reigned. I think of one child in particular who represents for me this shift. When Harold first came into the garden he was cocky and full of scorn, challenging the activities, and threatening to undo the tone I was working so hard to establish. But two weeks later he came quietly to me and asked if he could plant a bean too, and from then on he participated as fully as anyone.

I learned an important lesson last year. I want the children to make a deep, feeling connection with the natural world, but I don't have to make the garden a sacred place—it already is. In some way it is my role only to acknowledge this, to let it be a part of our common understanding. Last summer the garden was a place of small but powerful miracles.

This year as I prepare for camp, I note that the new sixteen-story building south of the garden blocks the late afternoon sun, that someone pulled out the whole mint patch in the herb bed, that the trees need to be pruned radically if we are to grow anything. But I see, too, weeded areas that can, with a little planning and nurturing, make a wonderful bird garden; that the crab apples and wild grapes are going to be earlier this year. And with my continued practice of beholding and radical trust, I expect it will be a summer of happy exploration and wonderful surprises, and that the children and I will all end camp with a deeper respect for this one small urban garden and the larger natural world beyond it.

Update - October 2010

At the end of the camp program in 2008, we said a more final goodbye to the garden, thinking the children's garden would be moved to another location the following year. But next year it was still there and many improvements made the children's garden of Summer 2009 better than ever. To date this small garden is growing in productivity and in value with staff, parents, and children, and it has become a year-round project for A.C.T. programs and the Cathedral School.

Chapter 21

Unveiling Nature's Stories

by West Willmore-Dickinson

*Now I know the secret of making the best persons; it is to grow
in the open air and to eat and sleep with the Earth.*

~ Walt Whitman

In one sentence, Walt Whitman offers what I believe to be the first step in knowing higher worlds; bringing awareness to anything that might create a barrier between us and the natural world, dissolving that barrier and becoming one with the Earth. I stumbled into this conclusion about eight years ago when I first began to truly listen to Nature's stories.

Earth Speaks to Me

During the very early stages in the development of my relationship to the natural world, I first began using my physical body to relate to nature. Using the senses at a very basic level became the foundation of experience for me. Through heightened senses, eating and sleeping with the earth, and succumbing to Earth's elements, I began getting to know her. My relationship with the natural world began as a form of discovery learning, evolved into an addiction, morphed into Earth honoring behaviors and then into a spiritual awakening. Exploring one's inner life in nature is a lifelong and sacred journey, and over the last year, it has become my sacred work to begin to facilitate the sacred and spiritual development of my students. Not only am I their teacher, I have also become their Earth guide.

Nature as Curriculum's Compass

I believe it should be every teacher's goal to educate the whole child: mind, body and spirit. A holistic education is what we offer at Rainbow Mountain Children's School (RMCS) and at the root of our holistic approach is the spiritual domain. This domain has become the compass with which we guide our curriculum, and as a result RMCS is a nationally recognized leader in contemplative education. Within my classroom, contemplative education is inspired almost entirely by the natural world. Nature is also peppered throughout my curriculum and imbedded in my thematic units. For my students, school becomes a journey into the natural world. It is not my job to impose ideas, thoughts or things on a child but rather to bring forth each child's inner knowing and to help them achieve a spiritual sense of themselves. Therefore we explore our relationship to the natural world through entirely experiential and discovery learning and in return meet my teaching goals, but more importantly have an amazingly rich experience in the natural world.

Richard Louv's (2005) book, *Last Child in the Woods*, quotes one of his children saying, "What's the relationship between God and Mother Nature—are they married or are they just friends?"¹ Children are fascinated and inspired by nature. They are full of a sense of wonder, as their senses are so open and they have an exceptional awareness. These characteristics yield very spiritual beings. For example, when British pedagogue Edward Robinson asked adults if they had ever "felt that their lives had in any way been affected by some power beyond themselves," he discovered that a significant proportion of the experiences occurred during childhood and in nature.² These findings give all teachers an indication of the crucial role of nature in contemplative education.

Centering

Every day the 2nd grade Owls explore their spirituality in the form of something we call Centering. Centering is aimed at setting the tone for the day and getting our mind, bodies and spirits in sync with one another. I begin each Centering by creating a sacred space using these daily rituals: a series of hand mudras, 3 breaths, lighting a candle paired with a daily

¹ Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature Deficit Disorder* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Press, 2005).

² Edward Robinson, *The Original Vision: A Study of the Religious Experience of Childhood* (London, Religious Experience Research Unit, 1977).

intention, greeting one another with a Namaste and experiencing a Golden Moment during which we gaze through the window upon a gift from nature, beholding it and meditating on it. We then move into the heart of each individual Centering experience, the lifelong lesson. Imbedded within each Centering is a lesson or theme that aims to heighten each child's spiritual, moral and/or emotional awareness. By sharing these sacred experiences, we are connected with our heads and our hearts to each other and the greater universe. The result is a community of children harmonizing on a spiritual, emotional and/or moral level and fueled by positive energy that will carry them through the rest of their day. Carrying this experience throughout the day, letting children sit with it and become comfortable with it, will help them begin to uncover their inner being.

My Inner Life practice emerged out of our Centering experiences. As an Earth guide for my students, I have designed and implemented Centering experiences that aim to spiritualize the natural world and to foster the inner life of my students in nature. I hold a space in which nature is magical and can reveal itself, can tell its stories, and can inspire movement, words, sounds and wonder. The result is always a healthy, curious, whole body exploration of the natural world. Exploration of this kind often lends itself to transcendent experiences within nature. Not only are the children having fun and learning in nature, they are also learning to honor Earth's gifts, see themselves in the Earth, hear Earth's stories, and awaken their senses . . .

Child-Tree Relationships

Children are instinctually drawn to trees for many reasons. These child-tree relationships come in several forms: Tree as protector (tree houses, tree forts, hide and seek, and tree shade); Tree as fun and magical friend (tree climbing, tree swings, tree houses, leaf piles and fairy homes); Tree as provider (hunting for and gathering apples, nuts, and flowers). Children see trees as their counterparts. Despite the instinctual relationship that arises between child and tree, I also attempt to cultivate that relationship through a series of Centerings called *Friend Through the Seasons*. I begin this set of Centerings by first sauntering through the campus silently while the kids follow and mimic my behaviors. As I am sauntering I may stop and touch a tree, hug a tree, stop to listen to or smell a tree, hide behind a tree or spiral through a grove of trees—I just have fun with the trees. The kids then reflect on what they experienced, which leads to a discussion about the trees on campus. In the next Centering, I read *The Giving Tree* and then we head outside to the eldest tree on campus, the Copper Beech. We circle around the tree and I talk

about the stories it has to tell us, the many years it has rooted itself in the land and all the history it has within its body. We stand and listen. We then saunter around campus listening and appreciating all the trees that are our campus guardians. After we have built a group relationship with the trees, each child then chooses a tree on campus to build an individual relationship with and thus the tree becomes his/her “Friend Through the Seasons”. Once a month he/she will sit with the tree, name it, read to it, draw it, build altars for it, listen to it, get to know it using all the senses, appreciate it, write to it and the list goes on. I believe that as a result of these particular experiences, the children will have life-long physical, emotional and spiritual relationships to these trees and are likely to have those meaningful relationships with many other trees.

All I See Is Part of Me

Children are fascinated and awe-inspired by nature—its beauty, its vastness, and its magical powers. Children want to get close to the Earth, to be dirty, to be wet, to feel the sun and to stop and smell the roses. Children feel that spiritual connection to Earth on a much deeper level than do adults and know it calls to them. I teach the children through various Centerings about how we are so deeply connected to the Earth because everything we see in the Earth can also be seen within us. I begin these lessons by first handing each child an item from nature. Then the children are asked to think of how they are like that item. We then build an altar with these gifts from nature while sharing how we are like the gift. For the following Centering, I read the book, *All I See is Part of Me* and we discuss its lessons. We then follow up with a movement Centering that takes place outside. I tell the children that when they move the Earth moves with them and movement is but one way to communicate with the Earth. The children then choose a being from nature, come up with a movement inspired by that being and then express something like this, “I am the flower because I am full of color!” Throughout the year, I reinforce these ideas. For example, every time I hear a child say something like, “That flower is beautiful!” I say, “I see the flower’s beauty in you too!”

From Fruit to Fruiting

Metamorphosis or change is something all creatures go through. The child, the adult, the bird, the insect, the flower, the mushroom—all go through change. It is my job to encourage the child to not only see, hear, smell, taste or touch the bird, the rose or the fruit, but to join in its change, its creation or the process of making the bird, the rose or the

fruit. These processes are called birding, rosing and fruiting respectively. The child will move from knowing the noun (fruit) to understanding the verb (fruiting). Raising awareness within each child is simple. During Centering, I create an altar that consists of a piece of fruit, a flower and an insect specimen. I begin the discussion by asking them what they see and they respond with very literal answers. Then I ask them to choose one of the objects, close their eyes and imagine that they are watching it form, or grow into its current being. They share their visualizations. I then ask them to get into a comfortable yoga pose (child's pose or corpse pose) and I take them through a visualization of the fruit as it cycles through its life from seed to seed again. By looking deeply into the change, cycle or metamorphosis of nature's gifts you are joining them in their creation on a soul level. The fruit becomes much more than just a fruit, it becomes the seed, the bird, the soil, the roots, the stalk, the leaves, the pistil, the stamen, the flower, the fruit . . . This can be done with many of nature's cycles, water, rocks, insects, trees and can even be used to look at your own personal learning history.

These Centering examples are a few of the many jewels that help to tell nature's stories, that help to connect the inner child to the inner soul of the Earth and that help to foster transcendent experiences in nature.

Lifelong Lessons

If our relationship with the natural world is indeed a stepping-stone to higher worlds, then the implications of this work are so vastly important. My hope is that this work is twofold: If and when a child has a transcendent experience in nature that she will begin to uncover her inner knowing but will also translate these experiences into ecological values/land stewardship as an adult. David Sobel, in his book *Childhood and Nature*, explores these implications:

Regardless of how we feel about nature play preparing our children for religious experiences, I think it becomes clear that there's a relationship between powerful nature experiences in childhood and adult environmental values and behavior. Therefore it follows that if we want to develop environmental values, we should try to optimize the opportunity for transcendent nature experiences in middle childhood.³

³ David Sobel, *Childhood and Nature; Design Principles for Educators* (Portland, Maine: Stenhouse Publishers, 2008), 18.

If we want children to have powerful nature experiences or want them to protect the Earth, then it is not enough to teach them the species of a bird, the name of a tree or flower but we must empower them to listen to the birds, hear the trees' stories and see the flowers' beauty within themselves.

Chapter 22

My Thoughts in Timberlake

by Alina Gabitov

In the spring of 2006, Alina Gabitov traveled with her sixth grade class to the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World for a program. What follows is her remarkable reflection on that day, told in two voices.

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.

Here I heard the trees rustle, as to give me a sign.

As the trees rustle and bend in the wind so do you. As the animals crawl, soar and leap, you are with them.

Here I saw the muddy bottom of the creek and the cloudy sky, as Carolyn told us to observe our surroundings.

Even if the sky isn't fair and the creek may be muddy, your heart is as clear and pure as the air we are breathing.

Now I saw the different patterns of the trees surrounding me.

*The patterns of life are different for everyone, yet everything is the same. Though nature isn't yours, you can be it, you **are** part of it. Everyone. Everything around is helping you. You might not even know it.*

Only the Sacred

Here a bunch of people in front of me stepped on some leaves and scared a blue jay away.

Tread silently not to scare them away.

Now we stopped at the Wishing Rock. As I made my wish, for Nature always to be like in Timberlake at least somewhere, gentle waves showed up on the surface of the lake.

As the lake ripples with the wind, you bend and sway along. All wishes for nature shall be held together by the bond of life. The sun will smile its benevolent warming smile.

As I looked across the lake I noticed a white fallen tree.

For those who have fallen many have grown.

The tree next to the wishing rock had a carved figure hung on its bark, so I thought of this:

The spirits of life are all around, they encircle you in a caring grasp. Back and forth, back and forth. You walk with the wind, you learn to fly.

As we arrived at the circle of pines, Carolyn explained that they had been moved during a very harsh winter. She was afraid they would not survive.

If you have been moved you shall live on, with strong spirit and energy from others. During spring the young will grow, flourish, and give everything they can.

Now we went to different places to draw or write.

Pick a special place, for only you and nature. Give your heart to nature, without her you would die. So be thankful, and learn to know.

Now at my special place, I had a song stuck in my head, that I forgot the words to, so I made them up.

Everything that is around all depends on its environment, and it never really is the same. Like the river and the fire ever changing every second. You can never step in the same river twice. But the old Sequoia trees, they may look to be the same, every year they change a little more.

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Here I thought of a book we had read a year ago, *Tuck Everlasting*, and its connection to nature. As Tuck had said, they were left behind, like rocks on the side of the river of life.

Life may be a little hard, but you must move along, never to be left behind. Let your heart lead the way. In the center of nature is a heart like yours, but no one knows where. It can be anywhere in nature. Park, valley, mountain, hill, prairie, desert, and ravine, nature resides in them all. Nature is much stronger than you think it is. It may be slow like a river through a canyon.

We are now in a circle, at the treehouse. I see the trees slowly swaying in the breeze.

The roots stay far in the ground while the tops bend and sway in the wind. Some things live long, some short, and they all have a part in the circle of life.

Now we went to go across the marsh bridge.

Feel nature closing in around you, leaving no space for the honking and hammering of civilization. Let it bring you into slow time. Relax, calm down, return to nature. Cross from civilization to calm, beautiful nature. The whistle of the wind, the rustle of trees, all belong to nature.

As I crossed the marsh bridge, I saw another white, dead branch, half hidden in the ground.

Those who have fallen go back to the ground and help the ones growing. Can't you see a circle in everything, in every little plant? The vine loves the tree for it twirls round and round.

As I finished the next phrase the drizzle began.

The rain refreshes nature. It helps seeds grow into huge trees.

Chapter 23

Silence, Thoreau, and a Covenant

by Marti Canipe

A Never Ending Friend

You can feel alone among people
But, Mother Nature is always by your side
The sun will smile down on you
The trees will protect you
And the river is a never ending source of life
Next time you feel alone
Go outside
Because Mother Nature will heal our heart ache

~ Alli Lindenberg

Framework of the Practice

My students generally come from very high-achieving families who have been successful in their material lives. In many cases this leads to a great deal of pressure put on these students both by their parents and themselves. Even as middle schoolers they worry about establishing a competitive position to get into the “right” colleges and universities. Many of my students regularly complain about being “stressed-out” by all that they need to get done.

I'm busy with life.
There are so many
tasks that I need to
complete, so many
goals I need to
accomplish. People
expect so much from
me, and I'm busy
trying to give those
people what they want
from

~ 7thgrader

It was with this thought in mind that I set down my dedicated intention for my yearlong practice. The guiding thought behind my practice would be the question: How can I help my students connect with the healing and renewing power of the natural world? I had seen the capacity of my students to make deep connections to the natural world through days spent at Timberlake Farm. I hoped to give them a place and the ability to bring this into their “regular” lives.

Each class begins their day with a “morning meeting” which has as one of its goals to build a classroom community. I utilized part of this time on a semi-regular basis, meeting with each of the three middle school classes in our outdoor chapel. The outdoor chapel provided an ideal space for this practice. I chose the chapel for several reasons. One is its physical location, nestled amongst the trees at the edge of our schoolyard. As a chapel, it is also imbued with a spiritual quality that is essential to the goals of my practice. Finally, it is located just outside of the middle school wing of our building and I hoped that seeing it would remind my students of the times we spent there.

I started my practice with the goal that I would meet with each class of students once a month throughout the duration of the school year. Due to the time constraints of our schedule, each meeting would last only for a short time. Each gathering had a single idea as its focus to facilitate looking deep rather than wide. In reality with the demands of a tight schedule and special events, I meet with each class on a less regular basis.

The Practice Begins with Silence

“We need to find God, and he cannot be found in noise and restlessness. God is the friend of silence. See how nature—trees, flowers, grass—

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grows in silence; see the stars, the moon and the sun, how they move in silence . . . We need silence to be able to touch souls.”

~ Mother Teresa¹

I decided that our practice would begin with experiencing silence. The world of a typical middle school student is the antithesis of silence. It is not an easy experience for many of them to spend time in silence with their own thoughts. At our first gathering I gave the students a general idea of the practice we were embarking on together. I shared the quote on silence from Mother Teresa and asked each student to find a place where they could sit in silence for five to ten minutes.

The students chose spaces they were comfortable with; some stayed on benches in the chapel, others ventured to a spot on the grassy hill adjacent to the chapel. Several students found it difficult to move away from a group of their peers and sat clustered together. As we all settled in our spots and grew still, the natural world began to emerge from the background.

For this first gathering I had not asked my students to write anything during their time. I hoped that by removing the automatic pressure of “handing something in” I would encourage students to focus on their own thoughts. Before going back in to start the school day, each group gathered back in the chapel space to share their thoughts.

“As soon as it was quiet I felt calmed down.”

“In silence you can actually think and notice.”

“Without nature, there is no God.”

~ B’Nai Shalom Middle Schoolers

Reflections on the feeling of calmness and peacefulness dominated the thoughts that were shared by students in sixth and seventh grade. Several

¹ Mother Teresa Quotes, Think Exist (October 12, 2007), http://thinkexist.com/quotes/mother_teresa/

students also commented about feeling nearer to God when they are outside in silence. Unexpectedly, the few reflections offered by the eighth graders focused primarily on it being hard for them to be silent. I had been pleasantly surprised at how well the days had gone with the sixth and seventh grade and I was troubled by the response of the eighth grade.

As I looked back on the days, I wondered what had been difficult for the eighth grade. Had I expected too much from them just because they are the oldest class? Did I affect their experience in some way since it was the third time I had led the gathering? Did the “personality” of their class make them more reluctant to share their feelings with each other? Most importantly, what should I do differently the next time we gathered?

How great was the silence the world once knew?

Everything under it flourished and grew.

Where did it go?

Why don't we know?

~ Alina Gabitov (7th Grade)

Silence remained the focus of our practice for the next several gatherings. As we continued to work with silence students were able to move into it much more readily. They were noticeably more at ease with moving into a calm, peaceful place within themselves. My students continued to reflect on the calmness that being in silence brought to them. They expressed the feeling that somehow when you were in silence the world slowed down. Several commented to me that the demands of their lives tend to overwhelm them and that being quiet really helped bring back their focus.

Moving into Thoreau

Having spent some time with their own thoughts in silence, my practice moved on to students spending some time with the words of Henry David Thoreau. As we gathered for our “morning meeting” that would focus on Thoreau we spent a little time exploring who Thoreau was and what he had done while living at Walden Pond. Many of the students were very intrigued by his lifestyle which seemed very foreign to their lives. After this brief introduction each student selected a quote from Thoreau and found a quiet spot to spend some time with his words.

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As part of this practice, I asked each student to write something while they were sitting in their quiet spot. It could be a response to the words of Thoreau or just something that they felt while they were sitting in the natural world. Some of their responses follow below.

“Not until we are lost do we begin to understand ourselves.”²

~ Henry David Thoreau

“When you have time to think and when you are alone, you can start to think about who you really are in the world. When you are lost and you have nothing to do or think about—you will think about who you are right now and who you want to become.” ~ 7th Grader

“I often feel that whenever something goes wrong in my life, or I go to a place that is unfamiliar to me, I begin to examine and learn new things about myself. When you are out of place, you go to a place inside yourself. When I am doing my normal routine, I don’t have very much time to stop and think about my life.” ~ 8th Grader

“If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer.”³

~ Henry David Thoreau

The birds are your companions. Their chirping is the beat that guides you. There are so many different kinds of birds, and each one is its own drummer. ~ 6th Grader

“Most of the luxuries and many of the so-called comforts of life are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind.”⁴

~ Henry David Thoreau

² Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2005).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

Silence, Thoreau and a Covenant

“You don’t really need all the ‘luxuries’ to be happy. They seem to be good things in life, but are really just obstacles in your way from becoming a better person.” ~ 7th Grader

“Nature will bear the closest inspection. She invites us to lay our eye level with her smallest leaf, and take an insect view of the plain.”⁵

~ Henry David Thoreau

“Observe an insect at the same level, not looking from above, not feeling like a human, feeling like that insect.” – 7th grader

After our time working with Thoreau we came back together to share our reflections from the silent time. Several students commented about how the quote that they selected randomly spoke to them and the way that they are feeling. I have seen that when doing this activity with students they almost always get the “right” quote for wherever they are in their emotional lives at the particular point in time.

Working with Covenant

Behold

The first time I looked
All I saw was a tree
The second time
All the shapes appeared to me
The third time I glanced
It seemed more magical to me
The last time I looked
The spirit of the tree came to me
And now it will stay forever
As a covenant

~ Eliana Fishbeyn (Seventh Grade)

⁵ Ibid.

Only the Sacred

I am blessed in the fact that my school, through a generous grant, is able to bring groups of students several times a year to the Center for Education, Imagination, and the Natural World at Timberlake Farm. In the spring I accompanied our seventh graders on a day where they worked with the idea of a covenant. The idea of covenant is central to Judaism and while at the Center the seventh grade expanded their covenant to include a covenant with nature.

Before we left for the day, I gathered the students together to talk about what we would be doing at the Center. I asked them to try to leave behind all of the things that “stress them out” in their lives. We reflected back to some of the times we had spent in silence at school and the calm feeling that that induced. We agreed as a group to try and “let go” of social issues between peers, the stress of upcoming tests, and anything else that might cause us to not make the most of this opportunity to spend a day away in the natural world.

I was pleased that the seventh graders rose to the challenge and allowed themselves to be immersed in the spirit of the day. I watched with great happiness as they spent solo time along the trails at Timberlake Farm. The day closed with the sharing of beautiful and poignant reflections by the seventh grade and a sealing of a covenant between each student and the natural world.

Some silence is heavy, this silence is light.

Some silence is shallow, this silence is deep.

Some silence is mean, this silence is kind.

Some silence is hurtful, this silence is my band-aid.

~ Paige Feldman (Seventh Grade)

Reflections on the Practice

“When I have this time to disconnect from my structured life I feel really connected to nature. Then after I go on with my life I forget this calming, relaxed feeling. Nature is always welcoming and gives me a peaceful feeling inside.”

~Jessie Winfree (Sixth Grade)

As the school year draws to a close, I always spend time looking back over what has happened. I ask myself what I could do differently and how I could do it better next year. As I look over the yearlong practice I see successes and challenges.

I was very pleasantly surprised by the willingness of my students to take on something that is very different from their day-to-day lives; by the way they embraced the new experience with curiosity. I was heartened when seventh graders stopped to ask when we would be doing it again. Most of all, I was touched by the depth of caring about the natural world that so many of them exhibited.

There were also challenges which will inform my practice as I continue incorporating these ideas into the way I teach. While many students embraced the experience, there were those who were reluctant. I feel that much of this reluctance is based in being uncomfortable with a nontraditional school experience. I hope to help them overcome some of this reluctance so that they can share in the positive feelings with their peers. The logistical challenge of being able to get the time that I would like was one of the most frustrating parts of my practice. Just like the students, I tend to get bogged down in the mundane details and things that have to be done, all of which are a barrier for me to immerse myself in this practice.

As I move forward, this last year informs how I will teach my classes. It brings to the forefront of my mind the need to keep balance in the lives of my students. I hope to continue these silent “morning meetings” and perhaps expand the practice to other teachers and the lower school classrooms. The effect that this practice has had on my students cannot be quantitatively measured, but I believe that it has had a positive effect on them and will continue to impact them as they move into the even more hectic years of high school and beyond.

“The chilly breeze feels nice to me. As I sit outside it’s nice and quiet. Even though it’s quite cold and breezy it feels nice. I hear the sweet birds chirping and waking for the bright day ahead. I wake up more and more. Even though it’s soothing it wakes you up and puts you in a good mood to start off the day. So, as I go from class to class I’ll think of this experience and have a great day. A chilly breeze feels nice to me!”

~ B’Nai Shalom 6th Grader

Chapter 24

Aurora Borealis

by Corie Davis

It is a June evening, the likes of which we have all known, when the air is still and fresh. Your skin feels as though it were simply a part of the gaseous make up of the earth's atmosphere. It is as if the world is new and your presence in it begs no question. There is a calm unlike any other. There is a sense that you are suspended in the balance of the universal blend. You are one with all of the elements and all of the organisms in your midst. Your 15-year-old daughter is no exception as she stands beside you and you gaze at the dancing lights of the aurora on the horizon. Rapture!

It was that event that leapt into my mind when pondering the requested anecdotes for the Inner Life retreat. While I have had numerous experiences in the natural world with children, very young through adolescence, none marked the spirituality of this event in quite the same way. While I knew and understood the moment's tranquil and centering effect on my own spirit, I never fully recognized how powerful it had been for her until a few years later when she related the story in her own words for an English assignment.

Her essay follows. She embellished a bit (based upon true and actual experiences) to add interest to her essay but the spirit of the moment is genuinely captured in words that I could not hope to do justice to should I attempt it on my own.

~

The crackling fire spread a warm glow over our circle of friends. In the distance the cries and laughter of children's last few minutes of play reminded me of the pure joy of innocence. As the music of their play gave way, the orchestra of night rose to a steady beat. Crickets sang.

Frogs peeped. Owls called. The gathering dusk enveloped us in a blanket of serenity. The moon would not rise tonight. Darkness would be all encompassing.

The reflection of the fire set our eyes ablaze, providing confirmation that they are indeed windows into our depths. The sense of our bond became rekindled on that chilled evening. As the smoke feathered through our hair and clung to our clothing, an invisible line was drawn, connecting us to each other. As our ancestors had been drawn together around the fire for its warmth and light, we too gathered with a kinship and an inner flame we shared.

An unspoken understanding of what hovered above us moved through the circle. I raised my gaze to the sky. There I saw dancing shadows sparkling across the firmament. At my gasp, the others tilted their heads skyward to join me in witnessing this spectacular performance. I stood in awe. The silence from my companions and the extraordinary hush that fell over the woods indicated to me that the world had somehow changed.

The glow in the sky seemed to be pulling me in, away from my body; I could move and change with the lights. The colors swept, and leapt, and licked the ink-black canvas like the stroke of a master's brush. With the shimmering shades of color, it was as if they announced the coming of God.

With the wind's rustling of leaves my trance was broken. I returned to my body, my feet on the ground. I was alone. Friends surrounded me but I was alone. They were still gone, twinkling in the stars, tumbling in the colors, frolicking in the wisps of Aurora Borealis. Their expressions fixed in amazement. A haze of innocence covered their faces; children receiving a gift they never imagined they could have.

With the grace from which the lights first appeared they began to fade into infinity, to a place beyond our earthly reach. As my friends and I began our descent from the heights of sensory awareness, a realization set in. Nothing could compare to this moment. The shimmers proved our vulnerability. With not even a flinch, they had taken us away with such ease and then gently dropped us home again.

Only the Sacred

We were small. We were small but essential to the expanse of the universe. Our presence is undeniable. Each of us has our place, dependent on one another. We are each a quivering glimmer, pulsating in the universe and all that moves the universe, stirs within us. We are one.

~ Jael Jaffe

Chapter 25

The Evolution of a Science Teacher

by Randy Senzig

My mother often told the story that when I was three years old I stepped on a grasshopper. As I picked up the little flattened grasshopper I began to cry. She saw in me a spark that would grow into a flame later in life. I planted a vegetable garden in the back yard, found and kept a Horned toad as a pet and loved to listen to the wind symphony in the Pines.

Thomas Berry speaks of the “meadow across the creek” and the need for everyone to have a nature experience. A number of years ago I traveled the same road home every day from school. The road stretched and twisted its way between communities and subdivisions cutting only briefly through isolated open spaces such as farms. Most of the roadbeds were laid down years before by pumping limestone gravel and sand onto the road, leaving canals alongside the road. This particular canal had been there a long time as evidenced by the large wax myrtles and oaks growing on its west side. So, in the afternoon a long shadow would move across the canal and road. It was pleasing to the eye as the sun’s glare retreated in front of the marching shadows. My eyes were drawn to this section each day for a moment’s respite. There in the shadows and at the canal edge was life. Wildlife thrived in this microcosm. Little Blue Herons, Great Egrets, Cattle Egrets, Green back Herons, White Ibis, and Anhingas.

Tricolor Herons found food at the edge of the canal and refuge in the trees. In the dark green waters with white water lilies and water hyacinths were red-eared sliders resting on the bank and long nosed alligator garfish swimming. As the afternoons turned into weeks and weeks into months I began to notice changes. Arriving one day I found a group of earth-moving vehicles parked in the field behind the trees and wax myrtles. Soon a bulldozer began to chew up the south end of the canal and spit sand into the far end of this watery refuge. Daily, foot-by-foot, the bulldozer and its waste of sand clanked forward. I saw the destruction

each day as the shadows lengthened and the canal shortened. I also noticed that the animals, especially the birds, were not leaving but moving closer and closer together at the north end. Population density increased. How could there be enough food now? What life had already been lost under the tons of sand? Day followed day as the struggle continued and as I observed.

This particular afternoon, as I drove home, would be different. The canal was over half filled with the bulldozer's sands and the birds were pushed wing to wing at the north end. Cars and drivers traveled unaware of the destruction of nature just a few feet away. My car slid to a stop as it left the four-lane thoroughfare. The shadows marched toward me as I open the car door and walked toward the canal bank. The white lime sands colored my pants as I knelt down. I felt the sadness rise from this tiny community. There, across the canal no more than 30 feet away, a Great Egret stood alone—a good distance from the others. As my eyes moved along the opposite bank counting the many birds, I came to this grand bird regally standing there as lord of the land with long white plumes falling from his breast. Our eyes locked. We were at the same level. We stared at each other, for a time. I don't know how long but it seemed to span epochs. Across a great chasm we called to each other. As the thick fog rose on communication between Human and Nature, we stood in a common world, the Egret and me. Looking deeper into his eyes I saw my own reflection and asked, "what can I do to help?" The reply was "teach the story—my story, the story of the insensitive destruction of my home and that of my fellow beings, the story of living side by side, humans with nature, interwoven and interdependent sharing the same air and the same earth and the story of possibilities. This was a catalyst that changed the way that I teach. Helping children to look at all life and their environment differently than previous generations became my passion. It was a moment that taught me the importance of reflection in our lives and of the importance of Thomas Berry's *The Great Work*.

It is through the sharing of Thomas' "the Meadow across the Creek" that I began to fully comprehend the meaning of my egret encounter. After exploring what Thomas felt about the meadow, I began to see that my experience was a life changing experience. Being a scientist, I took Thomas' words to heart: "While we have more scientific knowledge of the universe than any people ever had, it is not the type of knowledge that leads to an intimate presence within a meaningful universe."¹² It took an encounter of being in the presence of other beings to hear the voice of

¹² Thomas Berry, *The Great Work* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 15.

nature, and to feel the connection between us. Thomas also writes “...no effective restoration of a viable mode of human presence on the planet will take place until such intimate human rapport with the Earth community and the entire functioning of the universe is reestablished on an extensive scale.”¹³ I have accepted the voice of nature to teach this message to my students.

Richard Louv writes of a new disease among children and young people that he refers to as “nature deficit disorder.”¹⁴ Many years ago on an Everglades field trip there were two female students who, after disembarking the bus, refused to leave the sidewalk for a hike along a trail in the Everglades. They were visibly afraid. After encouraging them to walk on the trail I asked questions trying to find reasons for this behavior. They told me that they had grown up in an apartment complex in Miami where signs proclaimed, “Do not get on the grass” and the playgrounds were covered with asphalt . . . so they knew that there were dangers in grass and other natural surfaces. We got through that and were able to go on the hike together.

And Rachel Carson spoke of the need for every young person to have an adult to share nature with.¹⁵ As I reflect on her work, I have come to understand that my Grandfather was that adult to me. I dug holes around the fruit tree as he told me about Native Americans’ way of fertilizing fruit trees, followed him into the neighborhood to collect oak leaves to mulch and compost the azaleas and camellias, and watched the sun rise as we would encircle and herd up hundreds of fiddler crabs to bait our hooks for sheephead fishing on the jetties of the St John’s River. He would tell me that “you have to learn these things”—they make you part of this life. So, I grew up, went to college, found professors passionate about science and I fell in love with the science of ecology.

My formal science education was standard science. We studied processes, structure and function. I learned it all in the lecture room and in the lab. My university training was very typical and analytical. I used the scientific method to understand the parts and functioning of the earth. But, I was the happiest and most excited when my botany teacher took us out in the fields and forests of South Georgia or made us go to search for

¹³ Ibid, 19.

¹⁴ Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature Deficit Disorder* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin, 2005).

¹⁵ Rachel Carson, *The Sense of Wonder* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), 55.

new plants to add to the herbarium. In my senior year the department introduced a new course—Ecology. I was hooked. I had found relationships in university work and science. The very relationships that my grandfather had taught me years before were now being explained in a science text and in class. Now, it began to become clear.

Being present to the natural world is something that happens to you. You may want it or try to be present, but I think that you have to grow into it. It is a gradual process that slowly infiltrates every cell in you body. You begin to learn by being in tune with your surroundings. In my case, I have learned some valuable lessons from listening to my students. I was teaching the class about the various forms of pollution. I talked of air, water, soil and noise pollution, giving examples of disasters and numbers. I was giving the lecture that every environmental science teacher gives. Trying to motivate the class to action, I was speaking in an animated way to stimulate interest and excitement. As I looked around the room trying to make eye contact, I saw a “zoned-out look” from many in the class. I stopped. Didn’t they care, I asked? Why weren’t they getting excited about the need to work on these conditions? A young lady in the third row on the left side of the room spoke up and said, “Mr. Senzig, it is all too overwhelming.” That statement hit me like a blast of arctic air. I lost my breath and could not speak. She taught me something very important that day.

The shift in my understanding began when I realized that beyond the teaching of content, people are drawn to you because you act in a way that says to others that you care about all life. People begin to sense it in you even before you acknowledge it in yourself. And then it begins. Students begin bringing birds injured by flying into a window or glass door. Giving the bird some water and a quiet place to rest or taking it to a wildlife rehabber is the strategy. A student rescues a baby turtle in the middle of the faculty parking lot and comes to me wanting to know what to do. There is a snake in the hall that needs to be saved before the next class bell. At 7:00 am two students appear at my door upset. “You have to come now. There is a bird trapped in the media center hall. When the bell rings the students will trample it.” I rushed down the stairs with the student to find a tiny Yellow Rumped Warbler in one corner of the hall. I reached for it and it flew to the other end of the hall. The wings were not broken. I followed it to the other end and this time picked up the little bird in my two hands. It was so small and fragile that I had to be focused so that I didn’t crush the little creature. I cradled the tiny bird in my hands and moved towards the door. One student opened the door for me. As I carried that fragile small body through the door I heard the other student say, “He is the Bird Whisperer.” I carried that bird outside to the now

silent courtyard. I opened my hands expecting it to fly away. Instead, it climbed onto my finger, sitting there and looking at me. It felt like a long time before it flew to a nearby post. Students have kind hearts. They want to help other creatures. They say that, “We did not know who else to go to or what to do.” They return to find out how the animal is doing. They stop me in the hall and light up when told the success of the rescue. When news is bad they go away crushed.

I have filled the room with tropical plants and desert cacti. There are aquaria filled with tadpoles and snails, algae and parrot’s feathers, turtles and snakes, fish and more fish. The room has become a nature museum of sorts as all the things that my students find and bring in are on display. Teenagers and faculty walk by the room on the way to class and peer in asking what class is this? The plants and animals call out to them to come join us. “I want to take this class” and “I want to be in this class” are heard as the student heads on to her class.

The practice that I have started in my classes is one that ties observation of the natural world to the development of individualized environmental ethics. The practice is based on Thomas Berry’s idea that we must “reinvent the Human for the 21st Century”.¹⁶ The unit that I am developing starts with observation activities designed to have the student in the field learn to observe by using the senses. Through various activities that use and stimulate the sense of smell, touch, sight, and hearing, the student becomes aware of his natural surroundings. Through these low stress activities students can have the unstructured time to observe and reflect on the natural environment and their relationship to it.

Next, I use Aldo Leopold’s environmental education materials, as well as materials that I have developed using Thomas Berry’s *The Great Work* to help students work on their Environmental Ethics. Journaling is a very important tool in the exploration of one’s relationship to the Earth. I use the outdoors to teach my students. Finally, I use many techniques that I have learned from nature educators to enhance and teach the public school science curriculum.

I use whatever I have available to produce times where observation, journaling, imagination and creativity are promoted in ways to see things as they are and then to reflect on how things might be. Old calendar pictures, broken shells, wildlife slides, socks filled with objects to touch, film canisters filled with items to shake or to smell are used in activities to encourage the use of imagination and creativity. I am using several of Joseph Cornell’s “Sharing Nature” activities such as “the unnatural trail”

¹⁶ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*, 159.

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and “the trail of beauty” to give students the opportunity to look closely at things and then to reflect on the experience.

Using Aldo Leopold’s environmental education materials, we read from *A Sand County Almanac*, work in the environmental heroes and heroines activity book, see his video, use the activity cards outside, and complete many of the natural outside activities aligned with *A Sand County Almanac*.

Using Thomas Berry’s *The Great Work* proved that his work is both relevant and understandable to the students. The book provided a framework for the student to begin to develop his or her own environmental ethic in the following sequence:

1. History of Thomas Berry
2. Ethics and Ecology-Paper at Harvard University
3. Introduction of the concept of the four wisdoms from *The Great Work*: Wisdom of Indigenous People, Wisdom of Women, Wisdom of Classical Traditions and Wisdom of Science
4. Student will read about each wisdom from selected articles (print and web)
5. Develop essential questions to help relate articles to personal journey
6. Select quotations by prominent individuals in each wisdom. Develop questions to help student think about and incorporate lesson in to one’s life
7. Opportunities for student to behold Nature (personal experience with the outdoors)
8. Student will have the opportunity to develop, to reflect on and to write about one’s own personal ethic statement in an ethics essay.

Journaling is supplementary to the class. I give them the permission to relax while completing this series of tasks. Journaling has a very unique way of showing the what, how and why of looking. During the course of each term, each student must reflect on and journal on 60 prompts. One student wrote that “the journal made me stop to see these important things.” My students, again and again, told me that the journaling assignment gave them permission to slow down, see things and think about them.

When we are studying the world biomes, I have the students work in groups to develop oral presentations. They have to use technology, so they prepare power point presentations, create a piece of art about the biome, and prepare note cards for the speech. But there is a twist to this

assignment. Borrowing from John Seed's "Council of All Beings," each student is required to make a mask of one of the biome's animals. The animal mask is worn during the presentation where the student is to become the animal and speak of the biome from its point of view. To set the stage that first day, the room is darkened, some instrumental music is played, the students are asked to close their eyes and come with me to a distant place where animals talk and all beings are heard. As I walk around the darkened room, waving a large pelican wing to send a gentle breeze to touch each cheek, we enter the new place and begin the reports.

When teaching Biodiversity, I use birds to illustrate the points. We devote a couple of class periods to learning to recognize birds from photos and slides. I teach the students to use binoculars in the classroom and then outside. I bring in some local Audubon club members to lead a bird walk in order to help students begin to learn to identify birds in the field. We learn to identify local species. After some work together, I have borrowed an activity from John Connor at the Museum of Natural Science called Flat Birds. Gather twenty pictures of the birds that you want the students to know, cut the shapes out and glue them to a stiff, thick paper. Then go to Joseph Cornell's Sharing Nature website to download the quotations that he uses with his Trail of Beauty. Now you are ready to start an activity that will reinforce the learning of science with the help of the humanities. Now find an area around the school that you could use as a "trail." The trail could be as little as the side of a building or as great as a local trail in the woods. The quotations are laminated and tacked to trees or other structures at about 30-50 feet apart. The separation between quotation signs gives the students time to write the quotation in their journals. The flat birds are placed somewhere within 360 degrees around the sign at some distance from the central quotation. The student writes the quotation in her/his journal to reflect on later. Now, the student must apply his or her binocular skills to find and name the bird with the help of a Peterson Bird Field Guide. In this way, the student is applying the skills necessary to science while at the same time having an experience of the humanities.

In the end it is what the student has learned that makes success:

"...I HAVE LEARNED MANY THINGS ABOUT BEING HERE ON Earth. I look at our earth more seriously than I did before. Rather than saying that we live on our earth, I have learned that we actually live in our Earth."

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“I see myself relating to the Earth and all of the beings that share this place because we are all living organisms and we all have the same rights on this Earth . . .” ~ Gabe

“ I have come to the realization that the Earth is my home and we need to preserve it and keep it in its natural state of being.” ~ Ariel

“I have a great deal more respect for the environment because I have a much better understanding of how much it really affects my life.” ~ Kyle

“This class has given me some rewarding experiences. From journaling to solar cooking, it has been fun . . . it was the first time I thought seriously about the environment and developing an environmental ethic.”
~Anthony

“Environmental Science has changed me so much. I have so much new knowledge and experience. Before I took the class I thought I had a pretty good grasp on the environment. Then I took the class and learned so much more that I ever knew. I would like to educate people about the environment so they can grow to respect and love it also. I see all living things as equal to each other. Everything that is alive demands respect and should receive it. Humans were not meant to rule over everything. We don't have the right. The Heart of Nature is the center of what connects all of nature together. It is a state of harmony and love between everything on Earth. I have learned that I love my planet Earth.”

“ . . . these classes have changed my way on thinking.” ~ Chris

“I have learned that Earth cannot survive on the linear path we are on. We must learn how to live in a circular path.” ~ Chris

“ I see myself relating to the Earth by living with the organisms and the things in the Earth rather than just being here with no purpose.”
~ Christian

Evolution of a Science Teacher

“ . . . I have changed some views and refined others. I would like to remember the effect we as people have on the environment. I have become more enlightened on the issues of the environment and what we can do to save it.” ~ Kelsey

“I would like to remember when we went outside and explored the Earth around us and figured out the age of trees, and looked at animal tracks, and even looked at our own soil.” ~ Amanda

“ We are the heart of nature because we are what controls the fate of our environment and we decide what happens to it.” ~ Amanda

“I really believe that writing in my journal also helped me appreciate the Earth more because I went outside, observed what was around me and wrote down what I saw. It helped me collect thoughts and feelings and I opened my eyes and saw many things that I have never taken the time to look at before.” ~ Amanda

“ . . . all the times we went outside in the woods observing animal trackings and trees and plants and insects, it was way better and more fun than sitting in class and taking notes. I learned a lot of good things from this class, like about taking care of our community. That time when we picked up trash along the road was my first experience at that and I don't think I would have ever done that except for in this class. Well my attitude towards throwing trash out the window of my car have changed.” ~ Melissa

“Having to take time out of my day to appreciate nature was not a task I found tedious or difficult. However it did provide me with an opportunity, or, rather, an excuse to spend more time outside.” ~ Joanna

It is important to teach the analytical aspects of science, but I have come to understand that it is also very important to help students develop the intuitive parts of their brains. If one develops equally the analytical and the intuitive parts of the brain then one will bring the Right Brain together with the Left Brain to arrive at wisdom—Earth Wisdom. Earth wisdom will prepare all beings including the human for the 21st Century and the flaring forth of the Ecozoic Era. Be Brave. Listen to the Heart of

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Nature and the Spirit of the Earth. That song will bring new ideas and new understandings to share with students. That song will bring humans into harmony with all other beings and the Universe itself.

Chapter 26

Hérons

by Anthony Weston

I have noticed that all people have a liking for some special animal, tree, plant, or spot of earth. If people would pay more attention to these preferences and seek what is best to do to make themselves worthy of that toward which they are so attracted, they might have dreams which would purify their lives.

~ Freeman House, *Totem Salmon: Life Lessons from Another Species*

I teach a variety of courses at Elon University, but in almost every class I find a way to ask my students to choose totems: animals, or places, or forces of nature, with which they identify and whose power and magic in some way they feel they share. Many pick specific animals. Runners pick cheetahs, others cats or dogs, chickadees, walrus, deer. Some pick favorite places, places that speak to them, like the beach. Some are waves, there is the occasional tree, sometimes wind or rain or lightning. Some choices are poignant. An African-American student at heavily white Elon declared herself (I am still not sure how self-consciously) a chameleon. A partly Native American student told us he is a Buffalo: in his dreams he becomes a buffalo, runs with his fellows, and asks them to take him other places in turn. And unlike most students, he did not choose this totem: it was his from birth, his clan animal.

Actually, I tell the students, none of you should really think that you are doing all the choosing. To some degree our totems choose us. Are there animals that regularly come to you, in dreams or awake? What

animals? Are there days when all the world seems alive to you and you are “in your element”? What is that element? Borrowing from the Council of All Beings design, at the last session we return as our totems, all together one last time, and deliver both warnings and gifts to the humans (a few participants or students are assigned, usually unwillingly, to stay in their human skins). A turtle offers us his deliberateness. A tern her agility.

This year I am piloting a new course called “Environmental Visions” – an attempt to look beyond the immediate dimensions of the current crisis to longer-term, more systematic, and also more inspiring visions of “green futures”. Of which there are (many) more than one, a fact that already surprises a few people. We aim to get past the sense of threat and imminent disaster that hangs like a pall over any “environmental” news or thinking these days—for ultimately what we will defend “environmentally” are the alternative worlds we are inspired to create. For Environmental Visions too the students pick totems, in this case when we come to the part of the course that highlights “Connection,” a vision of humans once again co-constituting a celebratory and communicative world with other creatures of all sorts—the perfect setting in which to explore and declare one’s own more-than-human identifications and possibilities. The Visions course meets at The Lodge, a former church-camp about a mile from campus (we bike or carpool) with a lake, a few shelters, a fire circle, large grassy areas where we meet and sit on blankets in a circle. Most of all it offers us relative quiet, the chance to be outside all the time without distraction, with alert senses for once, in good company: with the winds that are always active; the turkey vultures wafting about and checking us out, along with the occasional hawk and chittery kingfisher; sun and the falling leaves; and, at the start of this Fall’s term, lots of rain and thunderstorms as a succession of hurricanes brushed by. We spent a lot of our first few weeks meeting in the shelters.

We always take some time in special sessions to declare ourselves and then to speak from the totem’s place, to really inhabit that animal being or the natural place or force. For the Visions course it was around a smoky fire on a cool afternoon at the fire circle. Windy, too, with low clouds scudding by: the smoke blew everywhere, and there was a lot of it, so we all went to our next classes smelling like we’d been camping all week. This year it turns out I have Rain; a Dolphin; a Jaguar (a Mexican woman with Huichol roots, whose distant shamanic ancestors might well have been jaguars too); a Salmon (we read Tom Jay’s lyrical essay “The Salmon of the Heart” to introduce the project, a lovely exploration of the whole interplay of science and myth in the formation of a totem); a Bear; and many others. Each declared themselves and was ritually welcomed into the circle.

I also have a Great Blue Heron. As it happened, we had seen a Great Blue here at the lake below the Lodge, once, early in the term. Never since, though one end of the lake is good heron feeding-ground: anyway I'd frequent it if I were a heron. The heron's appearance was one reason D. chose it for her totem, I think. The other reason was some kind of quiet grace, a body that, I suppose, could be ungainly but in fact has an unmatched elegance; and a quickness too. Long periods of utter stillness punctuated by the lighting strike of the beak. Imagine the inner life.

Today D. who is also the Great Blue Heron is presenting her term project on animal - animal communication. Normally, she has been very quiet and has not said much, though she is a lovely and animated person when she gets going. Now she has just begun to speak, already with that same animation and self-possession, the first time for a while we have heard her speak like this. Everyone is a bit electrified. We sit up straighter, smile. But now just as quickly our eyes are drawn up and behind her – D. is sitting with her back to the lake – as a shadow floats by to her right and spirals down toward the water. Great Blue is back. She flies down to the brilliantly sunlit end of the lake, the deeper part where feeding is (I'd think) not so good, lands in the most graceful way right in the brightest sun. She stands there for maybe half a minute, looking us over and showing herself just long enough, and then just as elegantly takes back off, skims the water down to the other end of the lake, lands, and proceeds to hunt slowly up the stream and out of sight.

We are stunned into silence. I seriously wanted to end class right there – what could you do after that? It was D.'s day, though, and she had a lot to say. So after a time we collected ourselves and began to speak again. Still, in a certain way, everything had already been said. We have come back to that Visit repeatedly in every reflection on the class since then. No one who experienced that moment could have any doubts that animals "communicate," indeed in a far deeper way than any one of us, even D. herself, had yet named. What emerged here was something primal, some kind of communicative flow vastly more powerful than language itself, something for which our only available word may be "magic" but which hints at far deeper receptivities and harmonies possible in the larger world. Some say that magic only happens to those who are prepared to receive it. Maybe so, in some ways. But the truth must also be more than this: for this way of putting it probably still gives ourselves too much credit. Here, anyway, it feels more as though we were given the merest hint of a pervasive unseen flow, a gift out of pure generosity, and still almost too much to assimilate. The world was just too full; it overflowed at that moment, and there we were.

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I would only add: what if the world *always* is overflowing like this, only D. isn't always there, so to speak, or hasn't declared herself, or maybe it was a bit nippy and we just decided to stay inside? There's a "vision" for you, eh? And a question: how do we find the key again; how do we awaken again, and this time stay awake, to a world so eloquent it hurts?

Envoi

Chapter 27

I Would Give You a Sense of the Morning

by Andrew Levitt

On June 7, 2008, Andrew Levitt gave the following Commencement Speech to the Class of 2008 of the Emerson Waldorf High School in Chapel Hill, NC.

Well, class of 2008, at the end let's talk about teachers. One of my greatest teachers in life has been my dog, Sasha. Like Dante, who had the constant companionship of Virgil on his journey through the Inferno and Purgatoria, I have traveled a distance beside my dog. To many in Greensboro, I am known only as the man who walks the big white dog.

Sasha and I have had a daily habit of going out in the morning in the darkness or half-light just before the sun comes up. We have seen the morning star, moonsets, sunrises, changes of the seasons, clear days and storms, and hundreds of other transitions. One day early in our walks together, I realized that I was not only walking with my dog, I was beginning to become enlightened through our daily companionship because I was present for all these moments of transition in the time between night and morning. As I grew aware of this, an intention developed in me to seek in these moments to find a way to harmonize my rhythms with the rhythms of the earth.

Let me give you the picture. On the first morning I realized that I was entering into a kind of initiation, I recorded my experience in words you have heard from me before. Since you may not remember them, let me refresh your memory.

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It was still in the gray of the dawn
a good twenty minutes yet before
the sentinel crows would call through the light
As usual Sasha and I stopped on the road
above the creek and I looked down
to the unmarked glass surface
of the heron's favorite fishing site
Suddenly there was a flutter of gray
in the gray field the gray on gray
set off only by a noticeable grace
Then there he was standing in that
or any other reflection the signal
most alert figure of the hour
And despite the shadow in which we stood I knew
for that impenetrable moment I was awake

These many years later, I have learned many things from the liminal realm in which Sasha and I have traveled. Among the many things I have learned at Sasha's side, one of the first was to sniff things out each day. Sasha never assumes that a single blade of grass just outside our door today is the same grass he sniffed yesterday. He checks each bush and tree and blade of grass with enthusiasm to discover what's new.

He also knows each and every blade of grass is unique. He may not know that the Talmud says there is an angel above each blade of grass whispering, "Grow, grow!" but he acts as if he does.

Sasha can see things I cannot. From him I have learned to look to see. On another morning beside the creek, he stopped. I stopped with him, but, though I knew there was something to be seen, as I looked I saw nothing. Then I got down to focus my gaze where he looked. Still I saw nothing. Then in the grass across the creek, an ear twitched. Suddenly a red fox leapt straight up into the air, came down completely visible, and looked across the creek at us. We three acknowledged each other for a while. The communion was palpable.

In great transitions, Sasha and I have read portents and signs. While an owl soared overhead and my thoughts westered on his wings to time beyond the brief imperial moment of a life, we watched the auspicious arrival of a new century after a total lunar eclipse. We grew in respect for nature's power to rejuvenate as we saw her heal the scarred landscape devastated by a storm with tornado force that had torn up one-hundred-and-fifty-year-old oaks and thrown them at homes, over roads, yards, and fields.

We stopped to read the signs in lesser transitions, too, like the day a titmouse cried in a dogwood tree mourning the death of his mate who lay at his feet and one could feel domesticity and wildness in the moment. We saw the terror of beauty when we passed through the tightening of nature's fist as crystalline ice on encrusted branches maimed trees. When we saw a trail of bird prints end abruptly, we were reminded that the trajectory of life can never be fully recorded.

As the years passed, I learned distinctions, like how to tell the difference between a shagbark oak, a hickory, and an ash in winter, just because we visited the trees regularly and I had been paying attention. I learned to distinguish markers in nature of times of passage through the day, seasons and year. And through life's longer stretches of time. Now that he is old, Sasha has shown me how to take on graciously the burden of one's own dying.

At his side, I have learned about the world and I have learned deeply personal things. It has been a practice of taking the sage's stance of reverence, as Abraham Joshua Heschel describes it: "Awe enables us to perceive in the world intimations of the divine, to sense in small things the beginning of infinite significance, to sense the ultimate in the common and the simple; to feel in the rush of the passing the stillness of the eternal."¹

The great lesson in it all has been to realize there is a direct line between the wilderness that is all around us and our home in the holy. There are messages sent both ways. In the wild and ever-changing world outside the door where foxes, deer, raccoons, otters, muskrats, herons, hawks, and songbirds still hold authority in the principality of nature, we are all pilgrims passing through. And yet there are moments outside under the planets, moon and stars when I know that one may find one's place in the magnificence and come to rest at home in the universe within the embrace of the holy.

¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1955), 75.

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You know I do not believe in giving advice. So this is the only advice the man who walks the big white dog will dare to give: *Find a good teacher and go out into the new morning every day of your life.*

Now let me offer you one last gleaning from reflections on walks with Sasha, something I wrote with you in mind on a morning this fall as Sasha and I went out to see what kind of a day the world had laid at our feet.

If I could give you something
I would give you a sense of the morning
when the silence seems more silent
for the song of the cicada
and the darkness darker
under the illumining full moon
I would send you out
in the suspended hour just before the dawn
when nature renews her ancient possibilities
and out of the momentary balance in the unity of all
there stirs an impulse for new being
in the morning of the world
when tension of creation
forms itself within the soul
and the I expands within the grandeur
of the vision it beholds

Contributors

Thomas Berry was a cultural historian and ecotheologian who was born in Greensboro, NC and returned there at the age of 80 for the last 14 years of his life. It was during this time that Thomas served as the mentor for the Center For Education, Imagination and the Natural World. For over twenty years, Thomas directed the Riverdale Center of Religious Research while he chaired the History of Religions program at Fordham University in New York City. He served as President of the American Teilhard Association from 1975-1987. His books include *The Dream of the Earth*, *The Universe Story* (with Brian Swimme), *The Great Work: Our Way Into the Future*, *Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as Sacred Community*, *The Sacred Universe: Earth, Spirituality, and Religion in the Twenty-first Century* and *The Christian Future and the Fate of the Earth*.

Sandy Bisdee is the Director of Children's Programs at the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World. She completed her Montessori International (AMI) Teaching Certificate in 1979 and brings over thirty years of experience as an educator of young children to her work at the Center. A gifted storyteller and musician, Sandy has engaged in a deep study of Native American perspectives. She has studied with the Choreocosmos School of Cosmic and Sacred Dance and has completed both The Inner Life of the Child in Nature program at CEINW and the North Carolina Environmental Education Certification Program.

Marti Canipe is currently a PhD student studying Science Education at the University of Arizona. She holds a B.S. in Biology from the University of North Carolina and studied zoology and freshwater ecology at the University of New Hampshire. In her career as an educator, she has spent thirteen years teaching middle school science. During the 2009-2010 school year she served as an Albert Einstein Distinguished Educator Fellow at the National Science Foundation. Marti has also served on the Board of the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World. The natural world has been a lifelong passion for her; beginning with childhood days spent in the woods and creeks of North Carolina and continuing in the open spaces of the American Southwest.

Contributors

Trish Corbett has been a Montessori teacher in the Winston-Salem, NC area, co-learning with children ages 2 1/2 to 6 years old. Her journey to teaching took many twists and turns for she originally graduated from college with a Bachelor of Science degree in Accounting. After working in the business arena for almost twenty years, she re-careered to support a desire to follow in her children's footsteps and fully experience and reside in the world of wonder and awe as envisioned by Maria Montessori. Her daily intention is to remember and respond to the cosmic invitation to be present, be aware, and be open.

Cathy Simon Cord has been a certified Montessori teacher of three to six-year-old children since 1990. She first came to the Wilmington, Maryland, Montessori School as a parent in 1983 and has worked there for the past twenty-six years, except for an interlude in Goteburg, Sweden from 2004-2006, where Cathy taught in an international school 4-year-old class. Married for thirty-three years, Cathy has three wonderful children of her own. After being inspired by her work at the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World, Cathy became a certified Delaware Naturalist in 2010.

Corie Davis is an early childhood care and education professional who has worked in both rural and urban settings in direct services, professional development, family support programming and quality improvement initiatives. She has a love of art and the natural world which she would one day like to fully integrate into her work with young children and their families.

Alina Gabitov was a sixth grade student at B'Nai Shalom Day School in Greensboro, NC when she visited the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World and wrote the piece included here. She graduated from B'Nai Shalom's eighth grade in 2009 and is a high honor roll student at Grimsley High School in Greensboro. Alina is an accomplished cellist who plays with the Mallarmé Youth Chamber Orchestra in Chapel Hill, NC.

Jo Anne Kraus has lived and worked in New York City and environs since 1968, but her love of the natural world was fostered in her rural Virginia and Indiana childhood homes. She holds an M.A. in Medieval Literature and a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from CUNY and has taught ages pre-school through college. Ten years ago she developed and

ran a literature-based literacy program in transitional housing facilities in the North West Bronx, working with children, parents, and teachers to promote a love of reading. There she began taking the children outdoors for nature explorations in city parks. Currently she teaches remedial reading at Northside Center for Child Development in Harlem during the school year and worked for the past six years as the Nature-Garden Specialist at A.C.T. Day Camp, situated at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine.

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. In his career life, he has worked with silence and words. He performed and taught mime professionally for over thirty years. He 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. As Dr. Merryandrew, he currently works as a clown doctor in the Pediatric unit at Moses Cone Memorial Hospital. He lives in Greensboro, NC with his wife, Peggy. In his neighborhood, he is known as the man who walks a big white dog.

Richard Lewis is a teacher and writer—and the founder of the Touchstone Center for Children in New York City. Begun in 1969, the Center's major focus has been to explore the imagination, and its relation to the natural world, as a source of learning and expression, for both children and adults. Richard's essays on the imaginative and poetic life of childhood have appeared in journals such as *Young Children*, *Elementary English*, *Childhood Education*, *Parabola* and *Orion*, and were collected in his book *Living By Wonder: The Imaginative Life of Childhood*. His recent books include: *Sea Tale*, illustrated by Gigi Alvaré, *Shaking the Grass for Dew: Poems by Richard Lewis*; *Each Sky Has Its Words*, illustrated by Gigi Alvaré; *The Bird of Imagining*, illustrated by children from New York City public schools; *CAVE: An Evocation of the Beginnings of Art*, illustrated by Elizabeth Crawford; *A Tree Lives*, illustrated by Noah Baen, *In the Space of the Sky*, illustrated by Debra Frasier, *From the Sleep of Waters*, illustrated by Susan Joy Share, and *Taking Flight, Standing Still: Teaching Toward Imaginative and Poetic Understanding*—a gathering of essays and reflections which have appeared in *Encounter*, *Teaching Artist Journal* and *Paths of Learning*.

Marie Nordgren is the founder, director and a teacher at The Children's Garden Preschool, a nature and play based early childhood program. Her

training is in Waldorf early childhood education from Sunbridge College. Most recently she has been participating in The Inner Life of the Child in Nature program at the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World and studying with the Choreocosmos School of Cosmic and Sacred Dance. Her three grown daughters and husband of 31 years, Carl, are also a never-ending source of new learning experiences.

Lisa Marie Peloquin holds a Ph.D. in Sociology from Duke University. She has applied her sociological training and bilingual skills in work with Latino immigrants and migrants in North Carolina, adults diagnosed with mental retardation and mental illness, and alternative health care centers. Entitled “Vibrant Weave: “‘Holistic Healing’ and the Embodiment of Community in a Southern Mill Town,” her dissertation explored how contemporary healing practices and green lifestyles serve as a valuable lens through which we may re-think the nature of culture, power, and the self. As a university professor, Lisa taught courses on women and gender studies, contemporary social theory and embodiment. She has also pursued independent studies in Ayurveda and yoga. Lisa presently serves on the Board of Directors for The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World.

Colette Segalla is a doctoral candidate in clinical psychology at Pacifica Graduate Institute. From a depth-psychological perspective, her dissertation investigates how spirituality contributes to the development of a sense of self in children. Before returning to graduate school, Colette was an AMI certified Montessori teacher in a lower elementary classroom of six to nine year old children. She has also explored the work of Rudolf Steiner and Waldorf education as part of her interest in children and spirituality. 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.

Randy Senzig has taught science for 33 years in North Carolina and Florida public schools. He holds a NC Science Teaching License as well as being a NC Certified Environmental Educator. Randy is a NCSU Kenan Fellow, the 2010 Unsung Heroes’ Teacher of the Year, the 2009 Wake County Soil and Water Conservation District Environmental Educator of the Year, the 2006 NC Environmental Educator of the Year and NCSTA District Science Teacher of the Year. He was selected twice as his high school’s Teacher of the Year. Randy is a Leopold Education

Program facilitator and has received many grants to promote outdoor education. He was the co-director of NCSU Summer Environmental Camp. His article, "A Letter from a Teacher of Young Women," was published in *The Ecozoic Reader*. His website, *Birds in the Schoolyard*, promotes outdoor education. Randy wrote the Wake County Environmental Science Curriculum and has most recently co-authored a CORES program to restore mutually enhancing relationships between middle and high school students and the Earth. He has studied at the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World, pursued graduate studies in Conservation Biology at Florida International University and earned a Masters in Education at the University of North Florida.

Neetu Singh loves to be in nature and backpacking in the mountains. He is an educator at The Valley School in Bangalore, India, where he facilitates inquiry into right education with children and adults. He is concerned with education to bring a new culture of awakening intelligence and flowering in goodness.

John Shackelton has been an educator for thirty-four years. His twenty-two years of teaching experience have included lower elementary, middle and high school, and college; he has served as head of three alternative schools, most recently Rainbow Mountain Children's School in Asheville, N.C. John is semi-retired and currently teaches as a part-time adjunct at AB-Tech Community College in Asheville. He is on the board of an alternative school which emphasizes learning in the natural world, Mountain Sun Community School in Brevard, N.C. He also does educator training workshops focused on teaching as a sacred work. He has one published novel, *The Lowly Papers*, a story of Appalachia, and is currently finishing a non-fiction work, *The Pedagogical Imperative: Rethinking Education for a Healthy Planetary Future*.

Lisa Tate is a Montessori teacher and Head of School at Montessori Farm School in Hillsborough, NC. She has spent more than 20 years teaching Montessori, running summer camps, teaching adults the Montessori method and raising children. Lisa lives on a farm in Efland, NC, with her husband, horses, cows and various other animals. She enjoys hiking the forest around her home, spending time with her family and animals and gardening.

Carolyn Toben is the founder of the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World. She has taught in public and private schools and colleges with an emphasis on alternative and interdisciplinary education and served for 18 years as a seminar leader at the North Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teaching and at the Center for Advancement and Renewal of Educators in San Francisco. Her article, "Teacher Renewal: Pilgrims and Passages" was published in the *Holistic Education Review*. Carolyn has pursued post-graduate studies at the Jung Institute in Switzerland, The Institute of Creation Centered Spirituality in Chicago, the Guild for Psychological Studies in San Francisco and the School of Spirituality Psychology. She is currently working on a book that comes out of her companionship with Thomas Berry in his last ten years entitled: *Conversations with Thomas Berry: Recovering a Sense of the Sacred*.

Jessica Towle is a graduate of Prescott College in Prescott, Arizona. She has walked a path of eco-consciousness that has brought her into relation with Genesis Farm, Pickard's Mountain Eco Institute and Plant walker Frank Cook. Jessica worked as an intern at the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World, where she served as a master gardener, earth guide and camp counselor. She studied natural building and permaculture in Argentina. Most recently, Jessica has served on the board of Plants and Healers International and has been a home school teacher using the Waldorf method. She is grateful for the many ways the earth has shown its magic and taught us how to live, and for the many guides who have inspired her along her journey.

Marnie Weigel is a potter in Greensboro, NC. She shares her life with her loving husband, Fred Weigel, their wonderful dogs and cats, friends, and family. She received a Bachelor Degree in Environmental Science with a minor in visual arts from Warren Wilson College in the Swannanoa Valley in Western North Carolina in 1995. Her love for making pots began in this beautiful mountain valley. After receiving an Associates Degree in Professional Crafts at Haywood Community College in 2000, she was able to realize her dream of making pots as a profession. Marnie enjoys biking, camping, yoga, and walking Violet in Fisher Park.

Anthony Weston teaches philosophy and environmental studies at Elon University. He is the author of over ten books including *Back to Earth: Tomorrow's Environmentalism*, *An Invitation to Environmental Philosophy*, *How to Re-imagine the World: A Pocket Guide for Practical Visionaries* and *The Incomplete Eco-Philosopher: Essays from the Edges of Environmental Ethics*.

Peggy Whalen-Levitt is Director of the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World. 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 newsletter. Peggy coordinates the Center's national program for educators, "The Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice" and compiles a monograph for each two-year program. She has pursued studies in phenomenology and contemplative practice with The School of Spiritual Psychology and the Choreocosmos School of Cosmic and Sacred Dance.

West Willmore-Dickinson has been teaching 2nd-3rd grade at Rainbow Mountain Children's School in Asheville, North Carolina for 3 years. Prior to joining the Rainbow Community, West worked as a naturalist and environmental educator for 4 years in various parts of the country. She received an Environmental Educator certificate from the Teton Science School in Jackson, Wyoming and her teacher licensure from Montana State University. West is currently working on her M.Ed thesis and is in her first year of Waldorf teacher training. The nature experiences and mentors West had while studying Natural Resources and Environmental Science at her undergraduate college, Sewanee, led her on this life-long journey with the natural world. West continues to strengthen her own relationship to nature through rock climbing, backpacking, nature journaling and naturalizing.

Katherine Ziff is an elementary school counselor and an exhibiting artist. She was born by the ocean in Jacksonville, N.C., raised in the piedmont area of the state in Winston-Salem, and since 1998 has lived with her husband Matthew and son Benjamin in Athens, Ohio. She holds a doctorate in counselor education and is the author of *Asylum on the Hill: History of a Healing Landscape*.

The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World

The mission of the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World is to bring to life a new vision of the relationship between the inner life of the child and the beauty, wonder and intimacy of the universe.

Presently, the natural world is viewed as a commodity to be used rather than as a sacred reality to be venerated. A shift in our way of relating to the natural world is essential if we hope to participate in nature's unfolding rather than in its demise. This shift is nowhere more crucial than within the field of education where the child's way of relating to the natural world is formed.

The Center is guided by a Council of Educators as a working embodiment of its mission to recover a sense of the sacred in education through publications, educator retreats, consulting, and outreach programs for schools.

The materialist philosophy that has dominated Western civilization for the past four hundred years is coming to an end. In *Only the Sacred: Transforming Education in the Twenty-first Century*, we are introduced to a new vision of reality where we sense that there is a more profound world within this material world we know so well. We begin to recognize a sacred universe that is intimately connected to the consciousness of the human being. Those of us who see ourselves as educators now have to reckon with a question that can no longer be ignored: Can we, in good conscience, continue to educate our children from within the materialist worldview or are we now being asked, really required, to allow the new life of a more profound world to penetrate the consciousness of our schooling? In this remarkable collection of articles originally published in *Chrysalis*, a publication of the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World, we journey with twenty-three educators through an exploration of fundamental questions of our time, a path of inner schooling for educators, and practices where we see this new understanding of a sacred universe actualized in diverse educational settings. Inspired by the mentoring of Thomas Berry, this collection makes it clear that the depth and fullness of the universe, from the stars in the heavens to the dirt beneath our feet, cannot be known by the intellect alone. Only a sense of the sacred, developed deep within the human soul, will reveal the whole.

PEGGY WHALEN-LEVITT is the Director of the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World, a work for teachers and children devoted to Universe as sacred community. Peggy coordinates the Center's program for educators, "The Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice" and is the editor of *Chrysalis*, the Center's newsletter. She holds a Ph.D. in Language in Education from the University of Pennsylvania.

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