



The Place of Our Belonging

A Work for Children and Educators Mentored by

THOMAS BERRY

Edited and Introduced by Peggy Whalen-Levitt



Thomas Berry reciting his poem, "Children of the Forest,"
with children at Timberlake Earth Sanctuary, 2000.

Photo by Linda DiLorenzo.

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The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World

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Dedication

*To our companions of the forest, of the meadows, creeks and ponds of Timberlake
Earth Sanctuary, who allowed us to share their home for a time and taught us how
to listen and go deeper.*

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Introduction

Beginnings

This book is a companion piece to Carolyn Toben's *Recovering a Sense of the Sacred: Conversations with Thomas Berry*, an "intimate communion of thought"¹ between Carolyn and geologist Thomas Berry from 1999 to 2009 that formed the foundation for the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World.

After the death of her husband in 1999, Carolyn Toben invited fourteen colleagues from her former teacher renewal work at the North Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teaching to gather at her home at Timberlake Earth Sanctuary to help her consider the question: "What is trying to be born on this land?" Among those invited was Thomas Berry, who was delighted to accept the invitation.

On that day in October 1999, Carolyn Toben accompanied Thomas Berry on a walk along the Creeping Cedar Trail, where she experienced a moment between Thomas and a sprig of Creeping Cedar that provided an answer to her question:

That fused moment was to live deeply in my memory as a new way of seeing the earth as Thomas Berry saw it, as a 'communion of subjects' with everything connected through his vision. It was an

opening into a deeper reality in which he and the creeping cedar and the sun and the woods and the universe and the Divine were one. From that moment on, a sense of unity of all things began a shift in consciousness within me that would evolve through the rest of my life and lead to the birth of a work for children and teachers on the land.²

This work, as it evolved, was to be called “The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World,” a work blessed by the mentorship of Thomas Berry and by the twofold devotion of Carolyn Toben to found a nonprofit work for children and teachers and to care for her family-owned earth sanctuary, which she placed in a conservation easement to protect it in perpetuity.

The early years of the Center from 2000 to 2005 were a period of sensing and listening and feeling our way forward. Always a small and deep work, one of our first programs brought Thomas Berry together with Richard Lewis, founder of the Touchstone Center for Children in New York City and author of *Living by Wonder*. Called initially “The Biological Imperative: Nature, Education and Imagination,” and later revised by Thomas to be called “The Primordial Imperative,” this was a “by invitation” program for educators from two Quaker schools in North Carolina to explore deep connections between the interiority of the child, the realm of education and the natural world. Held in the Fall of 2000 and the Spring of 2001, we gathered in the Great Room of the Farmhouse at Timberlake Earth Sanctuary and walked Timberlake Trails as an integral part of the program.

Thomas’ opening remarks on October 12, 2000 were illuminating:

The capacity of presence is so important. When I was eleven, we moved from one side of town to the borders of the other side of the town when Greensboro was 18,000 people. The destiny of the children and planet is going to depend on us to respond to their deeper mode of being. In 1926, just a few years before the Depression, we were building the new house and I went there and there was an incline down to the creek. I was a wanderer and a brooder. I was a solitary in a sense. I

knew I couldn't make it in a commercial world and survive. It was too unacceptable. I would have died in some sense...A meadow was there. The grass was growing and the crickets were chirping...an extraordinary view of a meadow and the white lilies. It remained in my mind and it developed into a referent, like this place (gesturing at Timberlake Earth Sanctuary) could be to children. It became normative. Whether the woodland, the meadow, the creek, it was something very sublime. I think when a child sees a butterfly, there's some kind of ecstasy. *The natural world is there to present the numinous aspect of existence.*

Once I was in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine where there was a meeting of people: Lama Deer, a Sioux Indian was there; Zen master Roshi, astronaut Edgar Mitchell and myself. We had a meeting on technology. The zen master and Edgar Mitchell argued that technology is indifferent, it is just how we use it. Lama Deer and I argued no. Lama Deer mentioned the Cathedral. As beautiful as all of this was, the Sioux needed the sky above to draw in everything from the four directions, above and below. *You establish yourself with the universe before you do anything.* Black Elk is a patron saint of mine. His vision was profound. He was ill as a child in a coma and a vision occurred. He came out of the coma and it was six years before he would speak to the medicine man of his vision. The culmination of the vision can be read to establish a community of what we are all about. Loren Eiseley is my next patron saint...

My childhood dream is what has guided my life...of what it should be... what I should strive for...what I should do. Particularly in relation to children. That's why I've been dedicated to children. Imagination has to be activated by the natural world. I would push things back from the biological imperative to the primordial imperative; to the universe itself and within the universe, *the human participation at the deepest level of the universe is our gift of imagination, but our imagination has to be activated by the natural world.* So this goes with the fact that it's one thing—a self-activating process. The universe gives us the imagination and it imprints the imagination.³

The Place of Our Belonging

So began our work for educators and children at the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World, guided by these words Thomas Berry spoke that day:

The capacity of presence is so important.

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

The natural world is there to present the numinous aspect of existence.

You establish yourself with the universe before you do anything.

My childhood dream is what has guided my life...of what it should be...what I should strive for...what I should do. Particularly in relation to children. That's why I've been dedicated to children.

...the human participation at the deepest level of the universe is our gift of imagination, but our imagination has to be activated by the natural world.

But where to begin in a world where the institutions of education were far removed from these understandings?

During these first five years, Carolyn Toben and I were the primary staff members of the Center who received these guiding words and began to ponder how to bring them into a tangible work for children and educators. Our pathways prior to the formation of the Center converged in this formative moment. Carolyn's background included extensive postgraduate studies in spirituality, world religions and depth psychology. Her work in teacher renewal at the North Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teaching in Cullowhee, NC and at the Advancement for Renewal for Educators in San Francisco spanned more than fifteen years. My early experiences as a storyteller with children led me to complete a Masters degree at the Annenberg School for Communication, where my studies focused on perception, aesthetic communication,

and phenomenology as presence with living experience. These studies continued at the University of Pennsylvania where I earned a Ph.D. in Language in Education with a concentration in Childhood Imagination. Both Carolyn and I had studied the work of Thomas Berry for many years prior to the formation of the Center and even discovered our mutual reading of Edith Cobb's *The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood*⁴ in 1977, years before our first meeting in 1992. We also studied at the School of Spiritual Psychology from 1992 to 1999, a work in depth psychology and phenomenology devoted to facing the world with soul. Our individual journeys were deeply rooted in the soul and spiritual dimensions of earthly evolution when the Center was formed.

As we sensed our way forward, we reached out to others whose work was engaged with the deeper modes of being of children and the earth. Among our first companions was Richard Lewis⁵ with whom we had many conversations and consultations. In his essay entitled "Our First Conversation," Richard captured the essence of these conversations:

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?⁶

Another companion who we brought to the Center during these early years was Joseph Bharat Cornell, who often spoke of “Balancing Science with Love” and who brought a contemplative dimension to presence with nature. His book, *How to Deepen Your Awareness of Nature*, was an inspiration for our work in addition to many of the practices he created through flow learning in his books *Sharing Nature With Children*, *Sharing the Joy of Nature With Children II*, and *Journey to the Heart of Nature*. Founder of the Sharing Nature Foundation, Joseph cultivates capacities to calm the mind, develop receptivity and intuitive ways of knowing, as well as wonder, empathy and love—all qualities that Thomas Berry recognized as essential to nurturing a bond of intimacy with the earth.

On our journey into this realm of exploring the deeper modes of being of children and the earth, we were also blessed during these early years by the presence of Tobin Hart, author of *From Information to Transformation*, *The Secret Spiritual World of Children*, *The Four Virtues: Presence, Heart, Wisdom, Creation* and, most recently, *The Integrative Mind: Transformative Education for a World on Fire*. Tobin is the Co-Founder,

with his wife Mary, of the Child/Spirit Institute. For years, Tobin has championed the inner life of children in a world focused on externalities:

In the West...the dominance of a largely Aristotelian emphasis in logic, the natural sciences, and theology beginning at least by the twelfth and thirteenth centuries pushed the contemplative out of favor. Today we often discount the direct knowing that emerges as an inner sense or voice in favor of measurable observation or logical deduction that science and reason value. Essentially, adult society has grown a cataract on the eye of contemplation—we have made it cloudy with mistrust. But the direct sight of contemplation is alive and well in most children; they are natural contemplatives.⁷

These early conversations with Thomas Berry, Richard Lewis, Joseph Cornell and Tobin Hart provided a gestating period for us as we sensed our way forward. Almost everywhere in the culture, those concerned about children and the earth were creating environmental education centers where children were provided with information about the environment. But even the phrase “the environment” set the natural world apart from the deeper modes of being of children and the earth.

How might we capture the importance of interiority in our new emergent work? When Carolyn asked Thomas, “How then should we address the needs of children in our educational programs,”⁸ this was his response:

The child needs to be initiated into feeling at one with the universe through both inner and outer development. The universe story connected with earth studies is now presented only in its physical aspect; it must also have a spiritual dimension to initiate the child into a deeper relationship with the natural world in order to evoke the numinous and mysterious aspects that a child needs for entrancement with life.

Our most basic issue is how we bond with the earth. Every field of education needs to be integrated into the new sacred story from geology, biology and astronomy, to poetry, literature and the arts. *Both* the scientific and the spiritual story are needed for children to become intimate members of the earth community.⁹

As we considered a name for the Center, we wanted to distinguish our fledgling work from environmental education centers. As we pondered how to capture an identity for the Center, we returned to the title of our very first program, “The Primordial Imperative: Nature, Education and Imagination,” and chose the name “The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World” to indicate the deepest intentions of our work.

While the word “imagination” is often used in our culture to refer to individual fantasy, Thomas meant something quite different: “*the human participation at the deepest level of the universe is our gift of imagination, but our imagination has to be activated by the natural world.* So this goes with the fact that it’s one thing—a self-activating process. The universe gives us the imagination and it imprints the imagination.”¹⁰

We were beginning to find our way, reflected in the following Mission and Vision Statements that we hoped would situate our work:

Mission Statement

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.

Vision Statement

The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World is a leading advocate and model of a view of educational practice in which intuitive, imaginal and contemplative ways of knowing, in all their unifying capacities, are seen as central to the development of a mutually enhancing relationship between the human being and the natural world. Such a view, if practiced at all levels of learning, can begin to change our understanding of the role we play within this life-bearing process we know as “nature.”

Through its programs for educators and children, the Center is a national resource—a remarkable gestating environment—of reflection and practice that is leading to practical outcomes affecting the child, the natural world, and the culture at large.

This was, perhaps, a radical mission in a world where it was poorly understood. Even with our own clarity of purpose, there were many discouraging moments during these first five years. As Carolyn and I sat together during a staff meeting in early 2005, our spirits revived when we read about a new book that was about to be released by Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill entitled *The Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder*¹¹ by a man unknown to us named Richard Louv. We immediately contacted Algonquin Books and devoured the book upon its arrival. We were amazed by the synchronicity of the founding of the Center and Richard Louv’s recognitions about the spiritual necessity of nature for children and the soul loss that is occurring from the separation of children from the earth. The “nature-deficit disorder” that Richard Louv recognized was deeply resonant with the “soul loss” that Thomas Berry describes when children are deprived of experiences with the natural world:

In every phase of our imaginative, aesthetic, and emotional lives we are profoundly dependent on this larger context of the surrounding world. There is no inner life without outer experience. The tragedy in

the elimination of the primordial forests is not the economic but the soul-loss that is involved. For we are depriving our imagination, our emotions, and even our intellect of that overwhelming experience communicated by the wilderness. For children to live only in contact with concrete and steel and wires and wheels and machines and computers and plastics, to seldom experience any primordial reality or even to see the stars at night, is a soul deprivation that diminishes the deepest of their human experiences.¹²

Soon after becoming acquainted with Richard Louv's book, Carolyn shared word of it with Thomas Berry:

During one of our lunch dates in the spring of 2005, I had the pleasure of telling Thomas about the recent publication of a new book entitled, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder*.

"Who wrote it?" he asked.

"His name is Richard Louv," I replied.

"That's wonderful," Thomas said in delight and said he wanted to meet the author who had accomplished such a task.

The opportunity came a few months later, when Rich Louv came to Raleigh for a book signing event. A few hours prior to the event, a reception was held that was cosponsored by Rich's publisher Algonquin Books and our Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World. Friends brought Thomas to the reception from Greensboro.

I will never forget the joy I felt as I introduced the two men on that evening.

Thomas said to Rich, “a magnificent accomplishment!”

And Rich replied, “You have always been my hero!”¹³

The year 2005 marked a turning point for the Center as our work was beginning to mature. Carolyn’s conversations with Thomas continued until his death in 2009 and were always at the heart of our emerging work. Over time, we came to understand the deepest intentions of our mission, taken into contemplation each week during our staff meetings every Wednesday. In 2005, educator Sandy Bisdée joined our staff, bringing her background in both Steiner and Montessori education to her work as Director of Children’s Programs of the Center. A born naturalist and Native American flute player, Sandy was schooled in Native American ways of knowing and in HeartMath under the mentorship of Margaret Heath.

Always, Thomas Berry provided an evolutionary context for our work. When Carolyn spoke with him about how the children of our time might have abstract knowledge of global warming but often lacked firsthand experiences with the natural world, Thomas gave this response:

The child of the twenty-first century will live a very different life than the child of the twentieth century when the natural world had a certain integrity.

Our children will live with eight to ten billion people in a culture which did not embed itself within a cosmology. Now we initiate our children into an economic order based on exploitation of the life systems of the planet as our schools work to incorporate children into the world of the greater society. We have dedicated our educational programs primarily to the pursuit of so-called “useful” knowledge, not to knowledge as intimate presence and participation in the wonder and magnificence of the universe through which we find the meaning of our existence.

To achieve this “useful” attitude we must first make our children *un*feeling in their relationship with the natural world, whereas the

child is *organized* (and he used the word again with strong emphasis) for feeling everything living. They need direct experience of the living earth; the world we manufacture is not living. Children need to relate to living processes because they have a natural “friendship relation” with the natural world that needs to be cultivated.¹⁴

Our work was laid out before us. Programs for children began to unfold as a context where children could have a direct experience of the living earth—programs where children could reclaim their feeling relationship with the natural world. And a work for educators began to evolve that would bring them into a new understanding of the living earth as a context for schooling.

A small and deep work always, the work of the Center has been scribed in field notes, reflected in journal entries, and expressed in our biannual journal *Chrysalis*, always with the intention of deepening our understanding. In 2011, we published a *Chrysalis* reader, *Only the Sacred: Transforming Education in the Twenty-first Century*.¹⁵ Now, after twenty-three years, we offer this book as a testament to this in-depth work that it may serve as an inspiration for others.

In the chapters that follow, you will be taken into the interior landscape of our ways of working with children and educators. Each part of the book begins with an introduction and includes essays written by those who have participated deeply in this intimate communion of thought and practice. Part One, “The Meadow Across the Creek,” begins with Thomas Berry’s own childhood experiences that serve as a touchstone for our ways of being and working with children. Parts Two and Three, “Coming Home” and “Birthing a Practice,” take us into the inner and outer realms of our work with educators.

Part One

The Meadow Across the Creek

*It was not only the lilies. It was the singing of crickets and the woodlands
in the distance and the clouds in a clear sky.*

~ Thomas Berry

Part One

The Meadow Across the Creek: Introduction

by Peggy Whalen-Levitt

The Childhood Awareness of Thomas Berry

The work of the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World was formed within the last fourteen years of Thomas Berry's life when he returned to his birthplace of Greensboro, North Carolina, in the foothills of the Southern Appalachian Mountains. In many ways, these last years of Thomas' life mirrored the first fourteen years of his life in Greensboro before he left for boarding school in Maryland. Shortly after this homecoming at the age of 80, Thomas wrote a reflective autobiographical essay entitled "Goldenrod" in which he looks back over his life that spanned the twentieth century. He writes:

To understand my own life it is somewhat necessary to appreciate the city of my childhood, the city to which I have been profoundly dedicated throughout the course of my life. The city where I feel most myself. This city has fascinated me from my earliest days of consciousness. In a sense I am returning to this city in the things that I write now for, at the end of life, there seems to be a desire to return to our beginnings.¹

In this essay, Thomas reflects on his childhood awareness of a growing separation between the human and natural worlds—his awareness of the ways in which a prevailing sense of “progress” and a growing pervasiveness of consumerism and development were displacing the natural world as a context for meaning and value:

Already in childhood, in the mid-1920's, I knew that there were difficulties, not simply in the ordinary relation of humans with each other; there were sensitivities that the adult generation did not have. There were dimensions of the soul that were either paralyzed or atrophied. There were voices they could not hear. My awareness of this brought about an extensive isolation early in my life. I found my delight first by wandering in the nearby fields and along a tiny stream flowing through Douglas park and then through a meadow with willows along its banks and on eventually into South Buffalo Creek. Then later, after we moved across town, by roaming through the woodlands north of the city and camping out on occasion on the shores of a nearby lake. Meadows and creeks and woodlands, mockingbirds and red-winged blackbirds, and the sound of crickets in the fields were always nearby in summer; while in the winter there was the stillness of the land, only the sound of the wind flowing through the pines. There was an infinite distance between these realities and the realities that impinged on my awakening consciousness from the human world. I wondered why the mysterious attractions of the natural world were missing in the human world.

From the time I was nine years old I worked with my father in the small commercial concern that he ran at the time. I saw something of the conditions under which commercial transactions were carried out. I knew the stench and smoke of railway engines and the fumes of automobile engines, the grime and exhaustion of workingmen coming home from machine work. I knew the type of lives that people were living, the unrelieved hours of work, the limited time available for children and play and home living, the severity of a commercial world where money was the basic value

and where kindness was often seen more in its economic value than as authentic feeling...

There was no time for listening to the sound of wind in the pines. Development was taking over an increasing amount of farmland. I thought then that there must be a better way of interacting with the natural world. But for people generally there was seldom a question of anything other than survival in the business world.²

Thomas felt ever removed from this surrounding culture and even as a bright student he felt a lack in the schooling that was prevalent during his childhood:

For me geography was the most interesting course I had in elementary school. Yet what was taught did not provide any special knowledge of the local scene, the landscape that I saw and experienced about me, the world of dawn and sunset and rain and wind as we experience them in our particular Greensboro setting. Nor was there any indication of how as humans we fitted into such a world of movement and sound and feel and color and taste...

I needed to know that all these natural phenomena were the nourishment of our minds and souls as well as our bodies. To know that the human species and the natural world were present to each other as a single integral community. This would have given me something that I could only discover for myself in a fragmentary way. Only much later in life would I be able to put it all together in some meaningful way...³

In his childhood, Thomas Berry felt a deep disquiet concerning the course that American culture was taking:

In my earlier life I was having the experiences that revealed to me in a direct manner the difficulty. I awakened to the problem with my earliest consciousness. I think that children generally do awaken to the issue...⁴

While there were forces that would have silenced the disquiet that Thomas was feeling, he resisted becoming anesthetized to the troubling developments that he perceived in the world around him. Even as a child, Thomas had the inner capacity to pay attention to the suffering, death and destruction he observed in the world:

My generation has been an autistic generation, the generation that had no intimate rapport with the natural world. Most astounding to me as a child was the deliberate devastation of the most fascinating aspects of the natural surroundings.⁵

Thomas began to seek a unified view of the world, seeing a purpose on the horizon—a wholeness that lies in the future that we are called to bring forward. He accepted the call to look beyond the voices of collectivism and reorient himself to an evolving universe. Having recognized his calling, he was graced with an inestimable strength and was able to resist the comforts and allurements that would have led him elsewhere. Staying true to his questions, it is not surprising that Thomas entered a Passionist monastery at the age of eighteen—a place where he could enter the Silence and ponder these questions and the depths of their meaning.

Looking back over his life, Thomas wrote, “The account of how I became increasingly aware of cosmological and biological dimensions of existence is the story of my life. My quest for understanding this larger context of things conditioned all the decisions I made about my life. I saw life with its larger context, eventually within the context of the universe itself.”⁶

The Meadow Across the Creek

In *The Great Work*, Thomas offered a guiding image for this larger context in an account of a moment he experienced in a meadow when he was eleven years old, a moment that not only became an image for his deepest understandings but also became the primary image for our work with children during the last years of Thomas Berry’s life.

Here, in only three paragraphs, Thomas gave us a picture of how an intimate moment of communion with the natural world was the source of meaning and value in the life of a child:

My own understanding of the Great Work began when I was quite young. At the time I was some 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 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 pass 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.⁷

In his experience of the meadow as an eleven-year-old child, Thomas was following the deepest feelings of the human soul. This was a moment of wholeness, of fullness of voice, of mystical union, of qualities, of the profound and essential of life—an intuitive moment of sympathetic presence and affective intimacy, a moment of opening up an inner sense that allowed the natural world to be experienced in a foundational way.

For Thomas, the primordial dream of the earth still vibrates in all that lives in the meadow, a dream that is the primary impulse behind evolution. In this “magical moment” of union with the meadow, Thomas experienced the fullness of voice of the meadow that was entirely living. He experienced the meadow through a “sensitivity” that was intuitive, a sensitivity that moved him to a deeper reality beyond the mechanistic fixations of the human psyche that he perceived as a child.

This “magical moment” in the meadow was a moment of communion where the comprehensive and the particular came together, a subjective communion that Thomas described in an early essay entitled “Contemplation and the World Order:”

One of the great achievements of humanity during the early period of awakened consciousness was its capacity for subjective communion with the totality of things and with each particular thing. Each fragment of matter had its own subjectivity, its own interiority, its own spirit presence. It was to this spirit presence that humans addressed themselves. So with the trees and flowers, birds and animals, so with the wind and the sea and the stars, so with the sun and the moon. In all things there was a self, a subjectivity, a center; humans communed with this center with a profound intimacy.

That contemplation whereby humans sink deep into the subjectivity of their own beings is a primary way of experiencing the totality of things and of so constituting a truly functional world order. This is the order of interior communion, not the order of external manipulation or compulsion. Each aspect of reality is discovered in a mutual in-dwelling which is the supreme art of life. Nothing can be itself without being in communion with everything else, nor can anything truly be the other without first acquiring a capacity for interior presence to itself. These come together in some mysterious way. Thus the deepening of the personal center becomes the deepening of the capacity for communion. Since all things gravitate toward each other, a person has only to permit the inner movements of his own being to establish his universal presence to all the earth.⁸

In describing this magical moment in the meadow, Thomas was giving us a re-orientation for our lives, particularly for the lives of children. He was calling us to make a covenant with a sacred universe, so that all of our human efforts might emerge from the deepest place of our belonging. At the end of his essay, “The Meadow Across the Creek,” Thomas writes:

We might think of a viable future for the planet less as the result of some scientific insight or as dependent on some socioeconomic arrangement than as participation in a symphony or as renewed presence to some numinous presence manifested in the wonderworld about us. This was perhaps something I vaguely experienced in that first view of the lilies blooming in the meadow across the creek.⁹

“The meadow across the creek,” and all of its resonances, became the guiding image for our emergent work with children. How, we wondered, could we create a space to nurture children’s capacities for subjective communion? How might we put this mutual in-dwelling into practice? How might we create a context where the children could “sink deep into the subjectivity of their own beings” in order to be present with the meadows and woodlands, the creeks and ponds, the wind and sun, and all the creatures of Timberlake Earth Sanctuary, just eighteen miles from the meadow of Thomas Berry’s childhood?

In our continuing conversations with Thomas during the last nine years of his life, we deepened our understanding that “earth entire was born of divine love and will survive only through our human... love.”¹⁰ For Thomas, “love...is an inner presence to all things.”¹¹ To feel something as living in the fullness of its voice is to love. This capacity to feel something living in the fullness of its voice is neither a capacity for pragmatic use, academic understanding, nor aesthetic appreciation, as Thomas discerned:

Our relationship with the earth involves something more than pragmatic use, academic understanding, or aesthetic appreciation. A truly human intimacy with the earth and with the entire natural

world is needed. Our children should be properly introduced to the world in which they live, to the trees and grasses and flowers, to the birds and the insects and the various animals that roam over the land, to the entire range of natural phenomena.¹²

Thomas was calling us to an “affective intimacy” so little understood in our culture—an affective intimacy that enables us “to enter profoundly into the inner reality of the created world.”¹³ He was calling us to “inscendence” as a capacity to fully and deeply inhabit each moment of life by staying very close to lived experience.¹⁴ And he was calling us to embody a “sympathetic presence” as we worked with the children:

The long-term survival of our children will actually depend on a new relationship between the natural and the human worlds. 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 mutually enhancing relationship to it.

Parents need to say to the child, ‘Let’s go out into the sunset, let’s go wade in the creek, let’s go meet the trees.’ Children need to breathe, to inhale with the beauty, wonder and intimacy of the whole earth. A sense of the sacred begins here. As children learn to understand the sacred nature of the universe from adults they will reproduce that sacredness in their lives in individual ways.¹⁵

It was this primacy of affective intimacy that led Thomas to question the wisdom of the iconic photo of Earth taken from outer space:

It did not present the soul of the planet. It did not show the grasses, flowers, or meadows of the planet; it showed no deserts, rainforests, rivers, lakes, or vegetation. There were no trees, no soaring birds or

butterflies, and no animals moving about on the plains or through the woodlands. Instead it was a colorful marble hung in the sky, a small sphere such as we used to play with in childhood games...¹⁶

For Thomas, Earth was calling us to a bond of intimacy and was not something to be reduced to an abstraction.

These understandings from Thomas Berry, focused on “a truly human intimacy with the earth,” are the point of departure and the center of our work with the children. They are the understandings that led to the creation of the following visual symbol for our work:



Created by one of our first young interns, Elizabeth Levitt, the symbol invites contemplation of the inner life a child in communion with the beauty, wonder and intimacy of the universe. In this mutual indwelling, the child feels the numinous presence of the bird, the earth, the moon and cosmos as one sacred reality.

Through our conversations with Thomas Berry, we began to practice ways of working with children that foster:

~ a deep awareness of the sacred presence within each reality of the universe.

- ~ an attitude of awe, wonder and reverence.
- ~ a soul gesture of loving attention.
- ~ an imaginal capacity to feel a bond of intimacy with the natural world.

Through a “schooling of practices,” we began to make a shift from mental ways of knowing to intuitive ways of knowing at the heart of subjective communion. We were leaving the realms of objectification, quantity and spectator consciousness behind, and entering the realms of presence, quality, and subjective communion. We would not be conveying information to the children, but were inviting the children into a whole new way of knowing. In this we were embracing Thomas Berry’s recognition that “*knowing* is a communion of subjects rather than a simple subject-object relationship.”¹⁷

In one of his conversations with Carolyn Toben, Thomas spoke of this kind of intuitive consciousness that we began to cultivate in our programs:

We have the capacity to awaken to the inner life of things. It is about another way of knowing, an ‘origin-al’ way of knowing, you might say. It is a knowing that is connected as a tendril of the heart to the heart of the universe. It is a numinous awareness, an intuitive consciousness, a second voice, that resides beneath the rational faculties and is actually the approach to transformation.¹⁸

In a culture where education is primarily concerned with “learning about,” we began to create a space of relating in Silence that would bring with it a feeling quality; a sacred space where there is a sense of calm and quiet; a space where the children could begin to sense their surroundings as a sanctuary. Through our ways of relating with the children when they first arrived, we created a feeling that we were gathered together to honor this sanctuary throughout the day.

We asked the children to walk in silence from their buses to a fire circle where they gathered and were greeted by contemplative flute music, played and described here by Sandy Bisdee:

We begin our programs with music played on a Native American flute. The music sets a tone for the day and is intended to have a peaceful, relaxing and calming effect on the listeners. The music often gives people a chance to come into stillness, presence and to breathe more evenly. The music is not a performance and is always original, unless a particular song is sung. Any instrument, including the human voice can be substituted. The music is offered with a feeling of gratitude, love and appreciation for all of creation. It is dedicated to the sun, moon, earth, clouds, birds, trees, plants, stones and to all of the people that are with us on the day of the program. An image of this “communion of subjects” is held in the heart while the music is played. The musician does not have to be a professional to play this kind of music. The effect of the music comes from the intention and feeling in the heart of the musician.

Once the tone was established, we engaged in introductions around the circle where Center staff listened attentively to what each child offered. Sensing the ensouled nature of our opening circle, one child said, “You all talk different here.”

Over the years, we evolved many practices and program designs that brought children into moments of intimacy with the earth. What follows will be a journey through some of these moments, captured in staff field notes, that gives a sense of this way of working with children.

Silence

Silence is a practice for entering the hidden wholeness of the universe, a wholeness that is eclipsed by the fragmentation of our contemporary lives. Living most of our days in continuous partial attention, Silence is an invitation to sense the numinous that permeates the world. We invite children to enter the Silence as a way of bringing them closer to the depth of their being and the depth of the world. On one occasion, the children entered Silence with a profound sensitivity to all Silence can reveal. The moment that follows, described by Sandy Bisdee, occurred

at the beginning of an Awakening to Nature program on November 19, 2014 with a 3rd/4th grade class from a Title 1 public school:

It was a cold and sunny day in the middle of November. The coldest temperatures of autumn to date dipped into the twenties during the night and rose into the 30's during the day. The sky was a cloudless vivid blue and the air was dry and still. A thin film of ice had formed on the surface of the pond overnight and sparkled on the leaves. The mud and mulch near the treehouse was crunchy and frozen. A blazing fire roared inside the stone circle in the middle of the circular bench where we usually sit when the children arrive.

I was concerned about the warmth and wellbeing of the children in the 3rd/4th combination class from the Title 1 school that would be joining us on such a cold day. The wooden circular bench where we usually sit was cold and frozen and I wondered if the children would be dressed for an outdoor program. My backup plan was to start the day inside the treehouse in the cozy warm round room with lots of sharing time, stories and music, and then take shorter earth walks when it warmed up. This was the teacher's first visit to the earth sanctuary. Half of the class had come last year and the other half were new to our program. I always keep an extra supply of sweatshirts, gloves, hats and scarves in my car for the visiting children, but due to an outbreak of head lice, I was not able to share the hats and scarves this time.

One of our earth guides always hops on the bus with the children when they arrive and directs the bus driver where to park. Once parked, the earth guide involves the children in a fun plan to walk quietly down a path from the bus to the treehouse to "sneak up" quietly on the "unsuspecting" adults. It is a joyful beginning to their day with us and never ceases to amaze the adults who are sure they cannot do it. But they can! On this particular cold and frosty morning, the earth guides and chaperones were standing outside of the frosty bench with their backs to the approaching children and facing the blazing fire. The only sounds to be heard from the

approaching children were crunching sounds on the icy mulch and on the gravel of the driveway. When the big group of children was right behind us we turned around in great “surprise” at their quiet approach! I gave big thumbs up to the group. It was then that the children wordlessly formed a circle around the outside of the bench with us, facing the fire.

The whole group fell completely still and completely silent in the frosty morning air as they stood and stared at the fire for what seemed like a very long time. We could see our breath. I knew that something special was happening and I vowed to myself to allow it to unfold uninterrupted. Once in a while a child would ask a question. “Why does it pop?” I answered, “I wonder?” Silence. White ash rose with the smoke off of the burning logs. “It looks like snow!” one child exclaimed. It wasn’t just the children who were engulfed in the timeless moment; it was the teacher, the student teacher, the other adult chaperone and our earth guides, too. We all were entranced by our own stillness, the silence, the cold air, the flames leaping hot and high and the smoke twirling toward the sky.

Time slowly passed and I began to wonder what the teacher must be thinking about this start to our day as we allowed the quiet moment to enlarge. Things move quickly at school and each segment of the day is planned. Hurry, hurry, hurry is a frequent mantra that the children live with. I felt a need to defend the silence and I walked over to the new teacher and whispered in her ear with a smile, “We’re into silent and peaceful moments here!” She nodded in understanding and as she did so some of the children carefully stepped over the cold bench and sat down. Wordlessly, everyone joined in until we were all sitting on the icy cold bench, watching the fire.

We were united in the silence now. We were united with fire, the frosty air and each other. One of the children found a leaf at her feet that was covered with white frosty crystals. She handed it to me. I asked her if I could show it around the circle. Slowly I walked around the interior of the circle and each child beheld the leaf with wide-eyed wonder. After all 24 children had seen the icy leaf, the

student teacher discovered another one with more crystals on it. It sparkled like diamonds in the sunshine. She followed my lead and slowly showed it around the circle.

I became aware of the cold bench through my merino wool long underwear and thick denim pants and began to wonder if any of the children were cold. Not a single child had said anything about being cold or showed signs of it. These children had single layers, some without gloves or hats and thin socks. As much as I did not want to interrupt the silence, my concern for the comfort and wellbeing of the children overrode the hope of being present to the silence any longer. “Is anyone getting cold?” I asked? Hands went up. “Let’s go in to the warmth of the treehouse for our meeting circle.”

I have never had an experience quite like this with a large group of public school children, not one that lasted for a small eternity. We were touched and lightly held by Silence on that cold November day. My plan to usher the children inside upon arrival after their walk from the bus to the fire circle was interrupted by an unexpected guest. Silence.

Behold

Edgar Dacqué, in his book *Life as a Symbol*, speaks of Schopenhauer’s image of the child as “bathed in splendor,” a “splendor of inner reality entirely lost for man who has attained to the maturity of rational thought, when he comes out of the ‘childlike state’ of animated and living perception and is given over to the laws of pure abstraction.”¹⁹ In our practices with the children, their animated and living perception is fully engaged and appreciated. There follows a moment with a child from a school for immigrant and refugee children, a non-English speaking child, who became fully engaged with a mussel shell, recounted here by Sandy Bisdee from her field notes on an Awakening to Nature program that took place in the Spring of 2017:

Imer came with a notebook and a pencil and sketched everything that he saw, in his own simple way. He noticed the moss-covered tree with

reverence and with awe, the songs of birds singing all around, and the sweet aromas of spring on the breeze. Imer had a very loving presence. I found an old mussel shell in the shallow pond, rinsed it out, closed it and showed it to the children. Then I mimicked a bird coming down to pluck it open and eat what was inside. As I slowly opened the empty shell, revealing a pearly orange sherbet color, Imer gasped. He was visibly affected by the sight. I invited each child to smell the open shell. It smelled of water and sweetness and life. One little girl from Haiti told her teacher that her mother used to cook them in her homeland. Imer held on to the shell all day. Before lunch he adorned it with a few small flowers that poked through a small broken hole in the shell. After lunch he invited me to touch the soft white enamel between the dark outside of the mollusk and the peach colored inside. I closed my eyes and felt the smooth pearly shell. I hadn't realized how soft that part of the shell was, until Imer shared it with me. I wished that I spoke his language so that I could tell him the story of the freshwater mussel, a story that I tell the English-speaking children. It is a story about how the mussel paints the rainbow inside his shell every day and how the mussel carries the Water Dream. But I think he already knew that.

Empathetic Resonance

The practices of our Awakening to Nature program—Silence, Deep Noticing, Deep Listening, Beholding—move the children from a place of mental “knowing about” to a place of “empathetic resonance” with the world, beautifully described here by Robert Sardello:

In ordinary sensing, perceiving and thinking, everything around us exists “outside” and “over there.” We are spectators to ourselves and to the world. But in Silence everything displays its depth, and we find that we are part of everything around us...We discover that each thing of the world lives deeply within us. But more, we discover that each of us, in the region of the soul, lives deeply within the soul of the world and the crossing point is the centering heart.²⁰

In our Awakening to Nature program, the children become deeply present in their sensing and feel an intimacy with the world, as if they are within everything around them instead of looking at the world from a distance. We know this to be true from the way the children respond to these practices.

During the 2013-2014 school year, we offered three seasonal Awakening to Nature programs to a 5th grade class from a Title 1 public school. Most of these children had never been to an earth sanctuary before, but they moved readily and deeply into an experience of empathetic resonance during our programs.

In early December, one of these fifth grade children was brought into subjective communion with a raptor in flight. These are the words that came to her at the end of the day:

Peace Eagle

Soaring past the trees
Halting at its beautiful home
I hope you are protected, and if shot
there are fees. You did not make
much noise, but still amazed all
the girls and boys. I wanted to fly
up there with you but instead I stood
by and observed with my eye. But
afterward I hopped up on a rock and made
sounds just like the birds. Later on
complete silence crept on in and I
heard you remote and thin.
You are a beauty.
You are a Peace Eagle.

And on April 22, 2014, earth guide Marnie Weigel engaged a small group of these children in a solo walk, captured in her following description:

This was my third group, and the spring season. Everything was in bloom and budding. The earth sanctuary was alive with sounds of bird songs, crickets, and frogs. Tadpoles were hatching in the pond, and there were babies being born all over the earth sanctuary. My group walked along the Timberlake Trail. I decided to guide them on a solo walk on a moss-covered part of the trail. I invited the children to take their shoes off and carry them as they slowly walked on the soft moss. Most of the children took their shoes off with delight. I said, "Notice the sounds beneath your feet and all around you as you walk. Can you walk on the path in silence even beneath your feet? Notice the air on your arms and your face as you walk." I started down the trail first. Noticing, silence, and walking barefoot will slow you to walk at nature's pace. I noticed the coolness of the moss under my feet. Some parts of the trails were dry and some were really wet. I noticed the softness of the Earth. There was a comforting, calm, and balancing feeling I noticed as I walked along. I noticed the Bluet wildflowers growing out of the moss, delicately dancing along the path and defining it for me. When I reached the end of the moss on the path, I stopped and sat on the ground and waited to watch the children as they slowly made their way down the path. I love to see the expressions on their faces as they get closer to the end of the solo walk. There is a peaceful happiness in their expressions. Their teacher sent each child, one at a time, down the trail to me. When they each arrived they sat on the ground with me to put their shoes back on. I was making a sun mandala with pebbles on the moss to mark the end of solo walk for the day. The children were drawn in by the mandala and watched the mandala come to life. I invited them to add to the mandala. I remember looking up each time a child would approach and smiled to invite them to join us sitting along the path. I noticed Savon walking down the path with an interesting expression on his face as he approached the group. When he sat down, he had a look about him that was as if he was trying to put into words his experience on his solo walk. He shared, "I had a strange feeling come up from the Earth through my feet. It

was an energetic feeling.” He later described this to the Earth Walk group when I opened the moment for sharing and reflecting. He looked up to the sky and said, “It was like the spirit of the Earth moving up through my feet into my body. It was like a dream.”

These communion experiences return children to the origin and authenticity of their being and give deep hope for the future. Ultimately, they return us to Thomas Berry when he wrote: “The dream of the earth. Where else can we go for the guidance needed for the task that is before us.”²¹

The Poetry of Nature

In the earliest years of our work, Thomas Berry engaged in an ongoing conversation with our first intern, Jessie Towle, who was studying remotely at Prescott College while she worked with us at the Center. These conversations between an octogenarian and a young person were profound as a dialogue between the twentieth and the twenty-first century. In one of these conversations, they spoke together about the interplay between language and the natural world, beginning with thoughts from Thomas:

“The sacred and the profound are best expressed through analogous language...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."²²

Thomas recognized that "poets and artists help restore a sense of rapport with the natural world. It is this renewed sense of reciprocity with nature, in all of its complexity and remarkable beauty, that can help provide the psychic and spiritual energies necessary for the work ahead."²³ Poetry provides the analogous language that we need to give expression to the depth and intimacy of the human relationship with the natural world, much like the intimacy between mother and child. Poetry, for Thomas, is authentic when it springs from this relationship and is not detached from it:

We no longer hear the voice of the rivers, the mountains, or the sea. The trees and meadows are no longer intimate modes of spirit presence. The world about us has become an "it" rather than a "thou,"

as was noted by the distinguished archaeologist Henri Frankfort in *Before Philosophy*. We continue to make music, write poetry, and do our painting and sculpture and architecture, but these activities easily become aesthetic expressions simply of the human. They lose the intimacy and radiance and awesome qualities of the universe.²⁴

As we pondered the creation of a “Poetry of Nature” program for older children, our intention was to restore a sense of rapport with the natural world and to allow poetry to bring this intimate relationship into expression. Poetry is a language of deep sensing that reveals dimensions of the world inaccessible to discursive thought, and so it was to poetry that we turned for our programs for middle school and high school students. Our “Poetry of Nature” program was a passage through three landscapes in the natural world where students listened to a poem, were asked to be fully present to the place, the moment and the feelings and images that arose within them. At each site, students were invited to find a solo spot, enter into a practice of presence, and express their inner experiences through guided writing practices. The poems and landscapes were carefully chosen to resonate with one another. The day culminated in a poetry reading after lunch where each contribution was deeply connected to the student’s experience in nature and to their inner life. The students read poems, asked questions, and shared reflections on the day and on their sense of belonging to the natural world. This program tapped into a deep wellspring within young adults that rarely is accessed at school.

There follows a glimpse of one of these programs through the field notes of our Director of Children’s Programs, Sandy Bisdee. This particular program was offered to an eighth grade class of a Jewish Day School on March 27, 2007. Sandy provides a description of the day, co-led with Carolyn Toben, staying very close to experience:

Carolyn spoke eloquently and thoughtfully about the work of Mary Oliver, the poet whose work would be the focus of our day. She said that Mary Oliver has a way of seeing that reflects back worlds of understanding. I played my Native American flute. I told the students

that it would be a musical poem of sorts and that perhaps they could help me name it at the end. “The Rhythm of Nature” was one suggestion.

Carolyn read Mary Oliver’s poem “Spring.” *There is only one question: how to love this world.*²⁵ I followed with “Spring in the Classroom,”²⁶ a poem about students trapped inside a classroom in the springtime, longing to be outdoors. Many of these students have been together since kindergarten and there is a family-like feeling in the group, a sense that they know each other from many stages in life. And now their consciousness reflects both the depth of the young adult and the playfulness of the child.

The class was divided into two groups of seven. Their teacher came with my group.

We began by asking them to walk in silence on the trails, which they observed for the duration of the journey. We walked down the steps behind the treehouse and onto the green earthen dam by the pond. The redbud bloomed on the other side of the pond reflecting a pinkish purple glow in the pond. We took the trail to the left of the pond to a little waterfall and I stopped the group to help them awaken their sense of sight to the world around them. Many of us are so wrapped up in our thoughts or thinking about the next thing that we are going to do that we neglect to see the world around us. We began by looking for everything that was moving. There was a light wind that day and the newly birthing spring vista waved to us from every direction. Varying shades of green caught my eye as well as a multitude of colors that come with the early spring season. After a few more guided visual experiences, our perceptions were a little more awake to the day. We walked back up to the earthen dam and sat together. I read them “The Ponds.” *I want to believe that I am looking into the white fire of a great mystery.*²⁷ Sitting in the early morning sun, the students were very receptive to the spoken word. I invited them to spend some time taking in, drinking in the beauty of the place that they were in. I invited them to take out their journals and gave them three sentence stems to use as a beginning to their work. “I wonder,” “I imagine” and “In the silence.” They were welcome to use one, two

or all of them for inspiration. They separated on either side of the grassy area, some facing the pond and some facing the forest and the wild bamboo. After 20 minutes or so, and after it appeared that pen and paper had been put to rest, I invited them to come back together in the peace of the moment to listen to “Landscape.” *Every morning I walk like this around the pond, thinking: if the doors of my heart ever close, I am good as dead.*²⁸

It was time to stretch our limbs and move to the next pre-selected location for a Mary Oliver poem. We walked into the forest on the Creeping Cedar trail. Separating into partners, we took turns showing our partners something new from the spring season. We proceeded down to the bridge over the creek and sat on either side. This is a place of bird song and running water. I invited them to close their eyes and listen to all the sounds around them for several minutes. A soft whistle would signal the time for them to open their eyes. A multitude of sounds filled our ears and a deep peace settled over their faces. The sun filtered through the trees onto their faces and they looked so peaceful. When they opened their eyes, I read “The Sun.” *Have you ever seen anything in your life more wonderful.*²⁹ A deep silence and calm filled the moment. Relaxed and peaceful, we walked to our next destination of the day, an area further along the creek and the path. I invited them to each find a solo spot and write a haiku poem. The sound of a woodpecker in the distance, a rock splashing in the pond, various bird songs, were all that I heard as the students sat engrossed in their deep reflections. It seemed as if an eternity passed.

Quietly, happily, we gathered together and walked up the Creeping Cedar Trail, by the pond and up to the Council Circle, a circle of stones and logs by a teepee made of tall tree poles. I read “Wild Geese.” *Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, the world offers itself to your imagination, calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—over and over announcing your place in the family of things.*³⁰ Each poem selected thus far had spoken perfectly to the moment that we were sharing. I invited the students to read one of their poems in this woodland circle. One by one they shared the most amazing poems. I was

stunned and moved by the depth of their experience translated into words. The intimacy of the small group sharing in the woods left me very grateful that I departed from our original plan to share our poems for the first time after lunch in the larger group. Magically, Carolyn was doing the same thing in her group in a remote location. The poems wanted to be shared in a smaller circle, like baby birds on the edge of a nest, tentative, yet ready to fly. By the poetry reading of the afternoon, they would spread their wings and fly. The walk back to the treehouse was joyful. The pond had miraculously become more beautiful since we had last seen it.

After lunch, the students sang a beautiful Hebrew prayer, learned by heart over their lifetime. The tempo increased as they came to the end. Carolyn told them that they were participating in “*tikkun olam*,” which I have learned is the repair of the world.

We gathered together in a big ellipse on the back porch for the poetry reading. Each contribution was deeply connected to their experience in this beautiful place and to their inner life. They read poems, haikus, asked questions, and shared philosophical thoughts on the day and their connection to the world. The opportunity to be in silence had clearly deeply affected many of them. The love for the natural world, the dilemma of living in a fast-paced technological world, the meaning of life, imaginations of life cycles of plants, and deep questions of life and our future on this planet emerged in the tapestry of words. I felt as if I had gotten to know every single student on a deeper level and had been privy to the healing power of nature on very bright and receptive minds. We asked them if they would be willing to share their poems with us. I would like to read them again and again and share them with other students that visit the Center. Carolyn ended with “The Summer Day.” *“Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”*³¹

We were also privileged to offer our Poetry of Nature program to the eighth grade students of a Catholic Day School over a period of ten years. We could see that as the students entered Silence and became fully

present with the natural world, their inner lives were joined with the soul qualities of the world around them. One student, Sebastian Lucek, wrote a poem entitled “Bridge,” which gave expression to this meeting between inner and outer worlds:

Bridge

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

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

i want to leap
leap
into its arms

i leap
it catches me
holds me

i fall
deeper and deeper
until we are one

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

and i stay perfectly silent
under the stars
and the light of the sun³²

Sebastian's teacher, Lisa Saintsing, offered this view of her experience of the Poetry of Nature program with her students over many years:

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

Bond of Intimacy

On May 8, 2007, we created a "Bond of Intimacy" program for a group of 6th grade children from a Jewish Day School, described here by Sandy Bisdee:

The 6th graders had been here last year with the 2nd graders for a special design program. They were very happy to be back. They

said that the “atmosphere” was different at Timberlake than at a nature center they had visited recently. They tried to explain what they meant. They said that there was a peacefulness that they feel here. They feel a need for slowing down. They appreciate the silence. This was volunteered from them, not shared as a result of a question.

Our theme of a bond of intimacy within the web of life was introduced and illustrated throughout the day by quotes from Ecclesiastes, Chief Seattle, Deuteronomy, Black Elk, Gaia, Brachot, and Rabbi Nathan. Our fire circle conversation centered on our bodies, ourselves, and the natural world. Carolyn and I then led the students on a silent journey where they were invited to notice and experience the unity in the web of life through guided practices and encounters.

At the end of this journey, Carolyn’s group gathered in the loblolly pine circle to do an expanding circles practice. From there, the children were invited to go out and find a special place, create their own circle around them imaginatively and then write or draw what came to them in that moment. They were to imagine the relationships of everything they could see and the things that they could not see that were there as well. The children were then asked to reflect on and write about the following: “I see the relationship between _____ and _____. Take one of these away and what happens to everything else? All things share _____. I am grateful for _____. Compose your own brachot (blessing).

At the end of the day, one of these children shared that she didn’t understand how she could write differently, speak and think differently, when she was at Timberlake. She shared that the words seemed to come from “the deepest part of the lake in my heart.” What follows is Alina Gabitov’s remarkable reflection on the day, told in two voices of outer and inner experience:

My Thoughts in Timberlake

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.

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.

The Place of Our Belonging

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.

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.³³

Something happened that day for Alina as she entered into a bond of intimacy with the natural world. Thomas Berry would say that she came into union “with the deeper structures of the reality of the soul that allow us to be truly present to the natural world.”

The task in shaping a new future calls upon us to be in union, not just with our rational faculty, but also with the deeper structures of the reality of the soul that allow us to be truly present to the natural world...

What is being lost today in western civilization is the development of soul capacities, which can lead us to our primary source of understanding within the mind, the imagination, and the emotions. The human-earth relationship can teach us to recover these through our unique human ability to reflect on the magnificence of a sunrise, the miracle of a humming bird, the profusion of blossoming flowers,

the awesome sight of a waterfall, the lightning and thunder of the great storms. Through these outer experiences come our inner development and our creativity. There is a certain presence of the divine that is felt that must be practiced over time to establish unity; this sense of the sacred is the aim of the soul in a lifetime.³⁴

A Child and a Seed

Asked to write something about the meaning of our programs for children, Thomas Berry offered the following thoughts:

To be a sanctuary for the natural world has increasing significance in these opening years of the 21st century, especially for the children whose lives will be lived in this period of time. At the Center, children learn how to integrate their own lives with the sequence of the seasons, with the flow of the creeks and the calm of the lake, and with that immense number of flowers and trees, of birds and animals that share the Earth with us.

They experience here the deep joy in living that they will need throughout their careers, in whatever profession or occupation they choose. Particularly, in this commercial-industrial period of human history, they need such personal experiences for survival with a truly human fulfillment. They will experience sufficient seriousness in their business lives and all-too-much entertainment provided by the advertising industry for their leisure moments.

But these do not nourish their inner world. They need the sight of meadows and trees, the feel of the wind, the refreshing rain, the song of the birds, the sustaining presence of the dawn and sunset. These experiences are not simply moments of romantic feeling. These communicate to the child that they exist in a meaningful world, a world that will sustain them in their difficult moments, a world that evokes such poetry and dance and play as they find here, a world that inspires them to worthwhile deeds in spite of the difficulties and disappointments that they will inevitably experience.

To witness children at Timberlake as they roam through the fields and woodlands, to hear them express their excitement in this new environment as they plant seeds and watch the plants grow and then realize where their food comes from: to witness children in such settings and hear their laughter is to wish that all children could have such experiences, for these experiences will always be remembered as some of the happiest moments throughout their lives. The personal fulfillment they experience at this time will always be a sustaining presence deep within their souls...

We might also note that childhood disappointments in life require the comforting and healing presence of these other expressions of the natural world. The human world is simply not sufficient. The world of concrete and wires and wheels and mechanisms of our modern world, no matter how wonderful, cannot provide the inner support that the child needs.³⁵

All that Thomas has expressed here seemed to live deeply in the soul of one 4th grade child during an Awakening to Nature program in the autumn of 2014, described here by Sandy Bisdee:

October 8, 2014 presented itself with grey cloudy skies punctuated by sunshine throughout the day. Temperatures hovered in the 60's and 70's. A light wind stirred the air occasionally, revealing subtle smells from unseen places. Melodies from crickets and large grasshoppers formed a chorus in the background. A white heron stood very still in the pond while a family of mallard ducks swam across from him along the edge of the water. The 14 children in attendance were from a 4th/5th combination class of a Title 1 public elementary school and the majority of the children had experienced our Awakening to Nature program at least two, some three or four times before in past years. The principal had decided that the 5th grade would not attend with the combination class due to testing demands and so they were left behind. This saddened me deeply because I know how much these children have loved and looked forward to this program in

past years. We had grown close during their once a year reunion with nature and with our staff at the earth sanctuary. I recognized the faces of the children immediately as I boarded the bus to greet them and as I looked into each child's eyes, older now, I could see how much they had grown since last year. I told them that I was sure that they had grown on the inside too, growing in courage and in love. Once they were seated on the circular bench, years of vivid and dream-like memories from previous visits to the earth sanctuary kept pouring out during circle time. Names of critters that they had bonded with and christened during earlier visits rose to the surface of their minds. It was as if they had just been there the day before. Meetings with daddy longlegs, friendly bees, soaring birds and tadpoles filled the conversation. Following the conversation, we broke into small groups of 7 each and embarked on our earth walks. These 4th grade students were placed in the 4th/5th combination class because of their maturity and intelligence. One young boy stood out to me from past visits. He was smaller than the other children and wore oval wire rim glasses. His sandy brown hair was cut short and his tee shirt was oversized. He wore baggy gym shorts. His expression never seemed to change. He was quiet, serious, and observant and spoke little. The lines of his mouth were perpetually turned down into a little frown. His eyes looked sad to me. Somewhere during our earth walk he had picked up a rock about the size of an overgrown cucumber. It was heavy but he wanted to tote it with him the entire way. Walking up the hill at the end of our walk he noticed several little hitchhikers on his shorts, small seed burs from a withering plant. "What is this?" he quietly asked me while holding up one of the little burs. I explained to him that it was a seed pod and that they traveled to new places to grow by sticking onto people's clothes and on animal fur. I picked one off his shorts and threw it in the woods. He grew quiet again and we continued walking. My group sat on the circular bench waiting for the other group to return from their earth walk. The young boy removed himself from the group and

sat alone, about five feet away from the others, perched on a rock near the driveway. He had pulled his hood from his sweatshirt over this face and sat hunched over and very still. I could see his unchanged expression deepen with a look of dreaminess as he stared inward into the distance. After several moments I began to grow concerned about him. Was he OK? Was he depressed or sad? Had something happened? Some children need to be alone, but without the teacher to ask, what should I do? I walked over toward him and asked him if he was OK. He solemnly nodded and moved his hand slowly toward the hem of his baggy shorts. One of them was rolled up several times. He slowly unrolled the hem and there, tucked safely inside was a small brown bur. He looked up at me with the same expression etched on his little face and said “I live in an apartment. There is a yard behind it. I am going to plant this seed there.” He ceremoniously rolled up the hem of this shorts to protect the little seed for transport. At the end of the day, as he was lining up to board the bus, he quickly darted over to pick up the rock that he had secretly stashed by the woods. With a slight of hand and speed of a magician, he slid the large rock into his pocket and darted back in line. Treasures secured, he boarded the bus without a glance back.

This young boy moved with profound intention to bring a seed and rock home—home to the patch of earth behind his apartment where the seed would be planted, the rock would be placed, to create a sanctuary of his own. His own sanctuary, he seemed to know, would help him exist in a meaningful world, a world that would sustain him in the difficult moments of his life.

Thomas Berry’s Last Written Reflection on Our Work with the Children

In 2008, shortly before his death in 2009, Thomas Berry offered this last written reflection on our work with the children at Timberlake Earth Sanctuary:

Today, in this crucial moment of history, we are called to recover the inner vision of a society in harmony with nature, and the urgency of reciprocity of care between ourselves and our environment.

This newly recognized relationship between us and the surrounding natural world rests on our experience of its wonder, beauty, and call to intimacy. In preserving and augmenting these responses, we realize, perhaps never before so vividly, that, as the consciousness of that world, we have an indispensable role to play. More than just protection against pollution and extinction of life forms, that role calls us, further, to revere Earth as that community of which we are a part, the source of our life and livelihood, and, above all, the primary means of our recognition of and communication with the divine.

...The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World will be dedicated to the recovery of the inner vision of a society in harmony with nature. Nestled within a 165-acre earth sanctuary, the Center restores a relationship with the natural world based not on a view of other beings as objects to be used, but as subjects to be communed with in an integral and sacred society.

The Center is a perfect context for the continuity of this work with children and the sacred. It has brought joy in the last years of my life, for the children have always been closest to my heart.³⁶

Graced with the presence and mentorship of Thomas Berry during the last years of his life, we hope we have restored something of what Thomas knew when he was eleven years old in the meadow across the creek.

Program Designs

Thomas always spoke of a “grounded idealism,” and in this spirit we have included detailed descriptions of the rhythms and practices of our foundational programs for children in four appendices:

Appendix I: Awakening to Nature

Appendix II: Empathetic Listening

Appendix III: The Poetry of Nature

Appendix IV: Eco-contemplative Arts and Rituals with Children

Readings for Part One

When we work with children in the field, we are not only creating a context for *subjective communion*, we are both creating the context and beholding the experience at the same time. After our programs, we take notes on these experiences that provide a rich description of the “communion of subjects” that has been experienced on a given day. In all our note taking, we try to stay as close to the lived experiences of the children as possible. We are “beholding” the day’s experience, not unlike our beholding practice of bringing our full presence to the natural world.

What follow are three readings that stay very close to these lived experiences of the children. The first two readings are written by our Director of Children’s Programs, Sandy Bisdee. The third reading is written by Stephanie Kriner, a graduate of our Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice program, who closely shadowed our programs with immigrant and refugee children.

“Silence” by Sandy Bisdee

“Toward a Communion of Subjects: A Summer Journal” by Sandy Bisdee

“Belonging to Earth: Our Common Home” by Stephanie Kriner

Chapter One

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 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 would feel 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 bountiful source of our sensing our self and all creation with newfound clarity and intimacy.”³

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.”⁴

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.”⁵ 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.

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. Alizse 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

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 pond. 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.

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.”⁸

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. One student 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

Silence

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.”⁹

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.

Sandy Bisdee was a member of the Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice Cohort, 2006-2008 after she joined the Center staff in 2005. “Silence” was originally published in *Chrysalis* (Volume 7, Spring 2010), 12-15.

Chapter Two

Toward a Communion of Subjects: A Summer Journal

by Sandy Bisdee

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

Journal I:

Thomas Berry Summer Program for Children (8-11 years old)

June 10-13, 2013

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

The weather started off wet and mild in the 70's and 80's all week. There were periods of sun and clouds and brief showers throughout

the week. We were able to get outside every morning and afternoon for our earth walks.

June 10, 2013

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

Contemplative art, snack, circle time, earth walks, lunch and creek walks are the order of our days. But first, at our very first circle time together, after learning everyone's names and favorite animals, we explore the question, "What is an earth sanctuary?" "What does it mean to be a guest in an earth sanctuary?" I think of this as Sanctuary Etiquette. It sets the tone for the week, mostly generated from the children's thoughts and feelings about the loving care that we offer each and every person and living being around us. We always take time to remember our salient memories, those of us who have been together at the earth sanctuary during our programs in the past, sharing special memories that have stayed with us over the years. This always brings back an image of what was meaningful for them, a moment that has remained with them: a dragonfly staying on an arm for a long time, a mystery blob in the creek, garden goodies, tiny frogs, old friends and so many other things. This kind of recollecting helps the new children get a sense of the joy and comfort level of the children who have been at the earth sanctuary before and gives them a feeling for what might be coming our way in

the days to come. We also take time for the practicalities of Treehouse Etiquette, which includes safety considerations both inside and outside. And then it is time to be on our way for new adventures in the shady forest, small creeks, ponds, orchard and in the sunny meadows.

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

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

that surround the building site. It doesn't take Corey and me long to realize that we are the only ones interested in building today!

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

June 11, 2013

We began our papermaking today, a long process with several stages. There is a lot of time in between the stages for relaxing on the back porch of the treehouse and communing with old and new friends. Cara, our intern from Elon University, is helping Marnie with the papermaking process. I make sure that all of the children are accounted for, but more than that, I am making sure that all of them are feeling included in the group. Their mandalas are set out on the wooden tables on the back porch for them to finish as they please. Marnie has set out handmade and natural bowls full of shells, acorns and assorted nature objects for the children to glue to their mandalas. They turn out so beautifully that we need to cut out thirteen cardboard circles to support the weight of their Woodland Mandala Creations. One of the mothers is still at the treehouse and offers to cut out cardboard circles with Corey. When I come to the kitchen later, she is gone, but there is a cardboard sculpture of the Mud Monster next to thirteen circles!

Near the end of papermaking, the younger ones want to go back to the Woodland Home area. Having so many competent assistants this year makes it possible for the children to come and go as they please

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

We have begun to make new friends. And we are naming them. Some of them are familiar friends whom we have seen or met before. Some of them appear to be brand new species on the earth and questions like “What is it?” are as frequent as my usual answer of “I wonder!” There is plenty of time and space for wonder at the Thomas Berry Summer Program for Children. I am continually surprised by how much the children do not know about the tiny kingdoms and common creatures that surround us. For many of the children from our grant-funded public school groups, a simple acorn, a mushroom or fungus, or a half-decayed leaf are mysteries to behold. Pieces of quartz are precious jewels and a box turtle is an exotic species! The children in my summer program come from more affluent families and have had exposure to the natural world in varying degrees. But many of them still do not know the difference between a honeybee and a wasp, or a dragonfly and a butterfly. They have

never tasted a drop of honey from a honeysuckle flower or seen a fresh water mussel. They do not know that a harvestman, a daddy long-legs, is not a spider and that all spiders do not bite. So aside from answering their genuine curiosity with the response, “I wonder,” I also take the time to behold the subject in question with great attention and interest and then I ask them “What would you name it?”

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

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

The papermaking was a huge success and the pulp was mixed with dried flowers. The act of submerging the screen into the wet paper mash in the large tubs, and bringing it up and down again and again to get the right thickness of paper, took everyone’s strict focus and utmost

concentration. Doing it outside on the back porch, in the fresh air under a canopy of trees filled with tree frogs, butterflies and birds, brought us closer to the divine presence surrounding us. Bullfrogs, cricket frogs, wood frogs and green frogs serenaded us in intervals. Peace eagles (black vultures) glided in closer to get a better look. Blue lined skinks with reddish heads rested near our papermaking station. Joy permeated the air. The dried paper will become covers for the nature journals that we will string together tomorrow.

After lunch we visited one of my favorite places in the earth sanctuary, the big creek in the deep dark woods on the remote edge of the property. The path leading there had become so overgrown that it had to be weed-whacked and mowed before the children came, just to be able to walk up the hill to where the dark and inviting forest beckons; to where the grassy hillside trail ends and there is not a path anymore. Making our way down the steep hill toward the water, single file, we spot a deer trail that begins at the bottom of the hill alongside the woodland creek—a creek of memories from years past, of tiny silent salamanders and the peace that they bring when you hold them, of crayfish and swimming frogs, submerged box turtles like half-domed submarines, the mingling of light and dark, water and air, child and water. Memories of the deep hole, the place farther up the creek that had been carved out of soft slate into a 3 1/2 foot by 3 foot crevice in the dark rocky creek bed bottom. A place to go all the way under the cool water and become one with the creek. A kind of baptism for so many children who had never “gone under” before.

It is an art to walk in a creek with thirteen children and not muddy up the clear pools so that we can discover who is living there. This is the place where we become one. This is the place where the remnants of any tension fall away and new friends are easily made. For some it comes through holding the hand of a younger camper, for others it comes from spending long periods of time in one place looking for the elusive salamander and finding worlds in the searching in one spot. For others it comes from the bravery of going first into the unknown. For one child, it became a place where she was confident and steady-footed in the rocky and slippery creek bed. It was where I really met her, began

to see her subtle sense of humor and sense her deep intuition. Amused by my clumsiness at times while clinging onto my creek walking stick, she became my protector and guide amidst the mud and stones. I think that circle time and creek time are my two favorite times for the same reason. It is a time of a natural and safe intimacy. It is a time when we become one. One new family in the circle of life. One extended family with the heart of each other and with the heart of the earth. Creek time and circle time set the stage for this wonderful opportunity of harmony and intimacy.

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

The children love and remember the activity of Secret Pals. It is a way to help the children get to know each other's names and something special about each person. Inside an apple gourd bowl I have written each child's name and each counselor's name on a piece of paper. One of the adults

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

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

coming and going when the children are finished with their part. While all of this is going on, the children sit together on the porch and talk and laugh in a happy relaxed manner.

June 12, 2013

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

Corey, our program assistant this year, has been in our programs at the Center since he was six-years-old. He was in our "Make New Friends," "Exploring Secret Places" and "Earth, Air, Fire and Water" summer programs. He was also in our "Children of the Forest" after-school program and our "Families of the Forest" program on weekends. When he was in the fifth grade, Corey won a prize for a story that he wrote. It was a story that was full of imaginary characters that meet at a pond and become friends. Each creature in the story is very different from the other and they seek to find out what it is that they have in common. In Corey's story, it is nature and the color green that bonds his

characters. I asked Corey to read his story, handwritten and illustrated, to the group after lunch. We were comfortably spread out around him in the round room of the treehouse. It is such a kind and interesting story, a testament to the rich inner life of this young man. Corey told me that part of it was inspired by his carefree afternoons in the “Children of the Forest” program years ago. The children absolutely loved it and they all stayed very still and very quiet for the duration of the story.

June 13, 2013

The last day of camp is always a little bit sad. Our new and temporary family is about to disband. We spent some time talking about the rest of their summers, what camps they would be attending and where their families were going for vacations. We finished up art projects and visited the Star Child Pool, the Woodland Home and the Creeping Cedar Trail. On that last day, by the shallow Star Child Pool, one young boy waded in up to his calves and looked over at me, waiting for me to say stop. I could see it in his eyes. I said nothing and smiled at him. A little deeper he ventured, up to his knees, still glancing at me. I kept smiling. And then he went up to his thighs, getting his pants wet! How very happy he looked. It was an important moment, I knew. There was something different about him in that moment, a kind of confidence and joy in nature that I knew would stay with him. He talked to me spontaneously on the way back to the treehouse, really for the first time that week. The little boy who rarely went outside had met a brand new world.

On the last day, I ask each person what some of his or her favorite experiences were at the Thomas Berry Summer Program for Children. I write everything down. My notes, my photographs and time allow the week's experiences to settle inside of me. It helps to have the space and the distance to step back and take a new look, an after look, at the program that we so meticulously planned for. Looking back on our time together, one image comes to my mind: a girl in the creek, the frog handling teacher, trying to balance on the slippery rocks, rather than walk more easily in the water, sand, mud and stones in-between. I told her it would be safer to walk in the creek bed. She told me that she

was so afraid that she would step on something that was alive, like a crayfish or a salamander and that she would feel terrible if that were to happen and she were to kill anything. I was so deeply touched by the vigil that she held. I told her that the rocks were slippery and that I did not want her to get hurt, but that I understood why it was hard for her to walk in the creek. She showed a genuine compassion for the communion of subjects and her responsibility amidst it all. I stayed with her for the rest of the creek time, in a small area, where we carefully made our way meeting crayfish and elusive salamanders. I am reminded of an excerpt from Carolyn Toben's small book, *Seeds of the Future: Quotes by Thomas Berry*: "they will come to recognize they are companions with other humans on a universal pilgrimage, but also with companions who burrow in the soils, fly in the skies, swim in the waters. For the earth is a single community who lives or dies together..."¹

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

Journal II:

Thomas Berry Summer Program for Children (11-13 Years Old)

June 17-20, 2013

June 17, 2013

There were twelve children attending our second summer program this year, seven of them returning and five who were new to our programs. Sebastian Lucek, who had attended our "Poetry of Nature" program

when he was in the 8th grade and our summer programs as a participant and assistant, was our intern. I have known many of the returning children since they were five years old. They have attended our summer programs, “Children of the Forest” and “Families of the Forest” programs in the past.

Our days together had a similar rhythm as the first program. Sebastian set the tone for our contemplative art projects by sitting on the porch floor, legs crossed, playing music on his ornate sitar, guitar, kalimba (thumb piano) or dulcimer. The sitar music that he selected was morning music. He has learned music for all of the different times of day and night. On the first day, all of the children colored mandalas, which came out very beautifully. There was a natural silence that lasted for a very long time (much to Marnie’s and my surprise) during the duration of the coloring. I was surprised that no one wanted to take his or her mandala home at the end of the week. Like a Navajo sand painting, they were ready to let it go.

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

July 18, 2013

This group would take up the construction of the Woodland Home with great enthusiasm. They made walls and fancy windows, hand sewn curtains (and a back up pair) for the windows. They glued little shells on a piece of wood that said “Woodland Home.” They would come and go freely with Sebastian during down times, free times during our day. A small group spent hours trying to design a pulley system that would ferry a basket from the Woodland Home to the treehouse to transport

items of importance. It didn't work, but they gave it their all. They spread flower petals on the floor of the home when it was completed. It will be a joy to behold for all of the school groups that will come out this fall and spring to the earth sanctuary.

Mandalas gave way to papermaking, which then gave way to the making of Universe Flags, which was the central art endeavor of the week. Marnie, Sebastian and I had met 3 ½ weeks earlier for program planning. It was at that time that Marnie showed us three beautiful flags that she had made and told us what went into her process. Sebastian and I agreed to work on our own flags and bring them on the first day of the program to share with the children after Marnie gave the introduction to the creation of the Universe Flags. Sebastian and I each agreed to make just one, as Marnie is a master artist and her flags are so good that we were concerned that some of the children might think that they could not do one as well as hers. After Marnie, Sebastian and I shared our flags and the symbolism in them, the children were ready to get started on their own.

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

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

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

July 19, 2013

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

The memorial service was quite spontaneous. One of the boys had a special affinity for inchworms. He would always find them (or they would always find him) and delight in them. One day I spotted him sitting alone, looking somewhat sad. When I asked him what was wrong, he said, "I just buried inchy." He took me to a little area next to the steps below the treehouse where I saw a six-inch square in the dirt outlined in bark. "The headstone fell down," he said as he picked up a small piece of bark and stuck it back in the ground. His compassion was so compelling

that I told him that I thought that the other children would like to see the grave and that maybe we could all put a special flower on the gravesite together. He thought that would be nice, so I went up to the treehouse and told groups of children here and there about the plan. We each chose a beautiful dried flower from the large collection of flowers that I had brought for papermaking and walked quietly down the steps to the site. One by one, without a lot of fanfare, but with the utmost respect and seriousness, each child laid a flower on the grave and went back to their business. It sparked conversation later about loved pets that they had buried over the years.

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

July 20, 2013

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

It was the last day of the program. A day of low humidity and a light breeze with air temperature about 80 degrees. Taking the Timberlake Trail

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

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

Sebastian, sixteen years old, master guide of contemplation, sent me last. Thinking about the wonderful qualities of the young souls entrusted to us this week, I fell silent within, and at that moment a thought came streaming into my awareness. Unbeknownst to me, at that same moment,

the same thought burst like a ray of light into Sebastian's awareness: *interiority, differentiation, and communion*. The three binding principles of the universe shared with us through Thomas Berry's deep insight. I knew that I was meant to begin our sharing time in the outdoor chapel with these thoughts. As I approached the chapel—a wooden platform with railings and two wooden chairs, perched at the top of a steep rhododendron covered hillside meeting the calm lake below—the children sat happily waiting. I took a seat in one of the two chairs and waited for Sebastian. The statue of a kneeling Saint Francis was in the middle of the chapel on a wooden table laden with gifts of stone and plants from many pilgrims. Once Sebastian arrived and all were comfortable under a light green ceiling of leaves from an old beech tree, I began to share the three binding principles with the children.

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

That afternoon, after our solo walk to the outdoor chapel, a time was set aside after lunch to display their flags with the idea that they would

share their flags with their peers. The universe flags were all hung up in the round room on the wall. On the last day, I asked each child, during a free moment of the day, to tell me about his or her flag. I thought that this would help them remember the symbols that they chose and give them a little help in expressing their thoughts later with the group.

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

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

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

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

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

Laura's flag represented the microscopic organisms of life. It also spoke of the stars and the planets and the delicate balance of all of them in relationship with each other.

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

Lily's flag represented her deep love for the earth and all of the animals on it, the ocean and the beach, colors of yellow and purple representing happiness.

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

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

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

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

Ellie's flag represented laughter, peace and fun!

After all of the flags were shared, Carolyn was deeply touched and she began to speak from her heart to the group. She told them that through their flags they had touched their own souls, and that they had made the time to do this. She spoke of the earth missing the children, that she had heard it very clearly. She told them that their flags represented who they were and that the memory of their flags will live inside them and restore them. She encouraged them to remember what their symbols represented. She went on to speak about how glad she was that we are all part of this amazing life and about how Thomas Berry would have called each one of them a "seed of the future." She said that the love represented in their flags would radiate out to everywhere! Then she said, "Each one of you is unique in the unfolding of the times to come and each one of you has a cosmic assignment. Noticing is like a prayer. Remember to notice." The room was very quiet after the presentation of the flags and Carolyn's

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response to them. I lit a stick of sage incense and asked Sebastian to play his sitar. Sitting amidst so many expressions of our love for the universe and the experience of hearing Carolyn's words was an awe-inspiring moment for us all. After Carolyn finished, she gave each child a hug and a copy of her book, *Seeds of the Future: Quotes by Thomas Berry*, the same little book we had been reading earlier in the week.

Sandy Bisdee was a member of the Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice Cohort, 2006-2008 after she joined the Center staff in 2005. "Toward a Communion of Subjects: A Summer Journal" was originally published in *Chrysalis* (Volume 10, Fall 2013), 13-26.

Chapter Three

Belonging to Earth: Our Common Home

by Stephanie Kriner

(Stephanie Kriner graduated from the Center's Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice program in 2017. We asked Stephanie if she would be willing to shadow our programs for immigrant and refugee children from the Doris Henderson Newcomers School and write a piece that would bring our readers into the lived experience of these children.)

A heavy stillness embraced a class of third and fourth grade refugee and immigrant children stepping into the shadow of the forest. On that October morning, the clouds hung low and blanketed the sky, making the universe seem small and cozy. The sun did not shine, and a barely visible filtered morning light seeped into the woods with a yellow-gray tint, casting the land in a disorienting and magical mixture of dawn- and dusk-like shades. Boys who just minutes before were bouncing off trees, scrambling along downed trunks and dashing off to chase squirrels eased into soft, rhythmic steps behind Sandy Bisdee, the Director of Children's Programs at the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World.

Smiles of anticipation lit the children's faces as they delved into the mysteries of the woods. They walked with soft, deliberate steps and ducked beneath spider webs glittering with beads of water. For the

immigrant and refugee children who participate in the Awakening to Nature Program, a walk along the Creeping Cedar Trail—a path laden with bright green moss as thick as lush carpet; springy, joyful mushrooms dotted in yellows, pinks and oranges; twisted roots rolling out of the ground; fall leaves cascading to Earth in delightful dances; and pebbles sparkling with microscopic quartz crystals—inspires imagination, curiosity and, often, moments of connection with the natural world.

These children from the Doris Henderson Newcomers School, a Greensboro public school for newly arrived immigrant and refugee students, had not been in America for long; their visit to Timberlake Earth Sanctuary in Whitsett marked their first experience in an American forest. The sanctuary probably seemed like a world away from their homes, mostly in countries steeped in poverty, civil war, oppression and unimaginable hardships that most Americans only glimpse on the news.

Awakening to Nature for the Newcomers School is a specially designed program for refugee and immigrant children, part of the Center's commitment to an educational practice that embodies contemplative, intuitive and imaginal ways of knowing for children and adults. "Our deepest intention for this program is to give the children a sense of belonging to Earth, our common home, and to provide a gate of welcoming for those new to America," says Peggy Whalen-Levitt, Director of the Center, which has been offering this opportunity to the Newcomers School since 2015. Funded initially by the Congregation of St. Joseph Gift Committee, this year The Hummel Family Fund stepped in to keep it going for four classes of third through fifth graders in October.

On that particular October morning, an unusual quiet permeated the woods. Crows did not squawk, birds did not flutter about in the trees and squirrels did not rustle the fallen brown leaves. Yet the eagerness and energy of the children brought the forest alive. At first, as is often the case with school groups, the children could barely control their excitement. When one child stooped and reached his hand out to pick a wild mushroom, Sandy bent down beside him and uttered this soft reverence, enunciating carefully to be sure the child could understand her English, "These are wild mushrooms. We do not pick them. This is their home." Observing

quietly from a distance at first, Kenya, a thin energetic girl from Tanzania, shrieked in delight, “What? Yes!”—reacting as if dwelling in a place where mushrooms could grow freely touched her very soul.

Further up the trail, Lindel from Aruba beckoned Sandy in Spanish and pointed excitedly to the ground. “Aqui! Aqui!” he shouted. The children gathered around to witness tiny green cricket frogs hopping as high as their waists. “I can’t believe it! They are cricket frogs,” Sandy announced, and, sensing her joy, more children gathered, some bent to try and capture one in their tiny-cupped hands. But the frogs were too fast and unpredictable, and Sandy did not stop the children this time because she knew they were learning to be gentle despite their excitement.

For refugee and immigrant children, the opportunity to commune with the natural world in America can be especially impactful on their young lives. “Our staff will never know the hardships and horrors that many of these children have endured, and yet we have some inkling when we hear the names of countries that the children have come from: Congo, Miramar, Nigeria, Guatemala and El Salvador,” Sandy says. “Knowing what we do know, we feel overwhelmingly grateful to welcome these children to our program, to an earth sanctuary in the foothills of North Carolina.”

The Earth Guides have learned to take notice of each child from the moment they arrive, to understand what each one may need to fully experience their time at the Earth Sanctuary. There are those children who thrust themselves into the day’s music and nature practices with an excitement that is infectious to the others. Like Kenya who shouted “Woohoo!” during morning circle each time that Sandy introduced the name of a new animal living at Timberlake or 8-year-old Paulo (pronounced “Poe”) whose round cheeks swelled into a smile and whose body could not seem to stop swaying to the music as he shared a beat from his native Angola (“Boo boo bah! Boo boo bah bah!” he sang during circle time one morning).

There are also those who may seem tentative, reserved or even afraid at first, whose eyes and body language communicate a profound sadness. For one such child, Amelia, a quiet, tall girl from Mexico with a serious face, the sadness came out as she wept when her teacher

asked her to part with a rock she had found on a trail and carried lovingly throughout the woods.

For another child, a 9-year-old African boy named Elishafat, a shield seemed to separate him from the others. When he stepped off the bus one sunny morning, his eyes stared somewhere else and his senses did not appear to take in the new and unfamiliar surroundings: rays of sunlight casting patches of wiggly brightness amid shadows of branches on the ground; the smells of mud, dried leaves and fresh air; and the chattering of birds and squirrels. A small boy dressed in a hoodie with camouflage sleeves, Elishafat avoided eye contact, seemed to stumble along and veered from the group during the Earth Walk. His teachers said that he came from Tanzania, an eastern African country that hosts some 300,000 refugees (most of whom are fleeing violence and civil wars in Congo and Burundi). Throughout most of the morning, he seemed distant and rubbed his eyes in shy discomfort when asked to join in singing in his native tongue Swahili.

Witnessing his pained shyness, the way his eyes seemed to search for a different place, Sandy quickly took the spotlight off him by introducing her own song to the group. Sandy and the other Earth Guides know that each child will eventually find comfort in the visit, and they never push a child to participate.

Understanding that some of the children may feel uneasy in this new setting, and not knowing the details of past traumas they may have faced, the Earth Guides set a tone of acceptance and peace. “For me, creating a very welcoming experience right from the start is very important. That is why we begin our day with hearty and happy welcomes as they leave the bus and follow with songs to celebrate and welcome each child individually,” Sandy says.

Part of this expression of acceptance and love involves responding naturally to what the children both need and offer of themselves while at the earth sanctuary, not a pre-planned itinerary or curriculum. When a teacher from the first class of Newcomers to arrive this fall shared a song with the Earth Guides, it became a natural opening for each subsequent class that gathered outside in a circle after exiting the bus. Going around

this circle, each child, teacher and Earth Guide would sing the song to introduce himself or herself and where he or she was from, followed by a greeting from the group: “Hello, my name is Po and I am from Annngolllal!”...“Welcommme Po!” For each class, this song offered an opportunity for every child to be heard.

After more songs and sharing in the outside circle, the children enter the “Treehouse.” Then, inside a cozy room overlooking the forest and lake, they huddle on throw pillows in a circle around a small wooden table adorned with treasures from the natural world (shells, pebbles, animal bones, dried flowers and sticks) surrounding a burning candle

Here, Sandy takes special care to reach a group of children who may not understand English, using music and exploration to ease fears and create a sense of comfort and love, always singing from her heart. She teaches them songs about love, nature, friendship and celebration from a mix of languages and cultures. The children, even those who seem tentative or confused at first, enthusiastically respond to her invitations to sing and make music, echoing her intonations and notes with a pure, vibrant beauty.

“By singing songs from so many different traditions, including African and Native American, it is my hope that the children will feel comfortable with the wonderful repetitions of vowels and sounds, and I trust that they will sense the deeper meanings of the songs,” Sandy says. “The singing together lightens up our start and I believe it stays with us for the whole day as our voices blend together as one voice.”

When Sandy first introduces the gourds, an instrument chosen because it is played across many cultures, she pantomimes the planting of the seed before illustrating the plant’s growth cycle: showing them a tiny gourd, followed by a gourd with a stem, a green gourd and a dry brown gourd. Finally, she holds out the gourds that are painted in vibrant colors and beautiful designs, and the children’s faces lighten as it dawns on them that they have just witnessed the whole process from seed to rattle.

When they get to play the gourd instruments, the room erupts in a harmony of joy. “It is a powerful experience for children to clap, drum or rattle together at the same time and beat. And then when I add my flute onto the beat, we create a masterpiece of music together that is

different each time,” Sandy says. When she collects the gourds and plays her flute alone, they are mesmerized and settled in a new place of calm attention. Then they willingly play “listening games,” shutting their eyes to listen to a chime and raising their hands when they can no longer hear its reverberations.

Each class of children visibly grows more comfortable as the morning goes along, leading up to their Earth Walks into a forest that has been luring them through large sliding glass doors that reveal scampering squirrels pausing to peek curiously in at them, a placid lake and a deep, shadowy forest.

“There is such a healthy curiosity for the life of the forest, the dry creek beds, the ant life, the acorns, and the mushrooms. In all of our other programs we do not tell the children the names of things to enhance their wonderment, but with Newcomers, it is important for their English and connecting to the earth to learn the names, so we readily share them,” Sandy explains.

During their walks, the Newcomers students usually can’t seem to get enough of spotting, collecting and identifying their discoveries. As they start to see the world around them in a new way, the children in each Newcomers class inevitably begin to access the inner life of the imagination.

This shift in consciousness that the children experience is subtle but the Earth Guides are trained to notice when the children respond to “the beauty, wonder and intimacy of the universe.” Sometimes the change comes through when they begin to cradle clamshells or leaves in their hands, tuck gumballs and pebbles into their pockets or dig up tiny snails, then lovingly return them to the mud. During one Earth Walk this fall, Earth Guide Katie Kovach saw this shift when the children spontaneously and in silence worked together to create the image of the sun out of fallen yellow leaves. One by one, the children collected and placed their leaves upon the path to paint their image.

In another group, Fransine, a Congolese girl with watchful eyes that looked wise beyond her years, became the protector of the mushrooms. Each time she spotted one, she ordered the other children away while she brushed aside fallen, brown leaves that covered them and tenderly stroked their cool, spongy surfaces.

On another day, Kyaw, a boy from Myanmar who did not seem to understand a lot of English, crept out onto the jagged, tippy rocks of the Creeping Cedar Creek with the agility and grace of a cat. Balancing his weight just right, and never tipping, he gently and methodically turned over the stones, and he intuitively knew to set them back down gently to avoid clouding the water as he searched for his catch. Squatting with the grace of a yogi and focusing completely on his objective, he expertly caught a crayfish with his bare hands (“No easy feat,” says Sandy, “He has obviously done this before”). Holding up the tiny critter to share it with the group, he beamed to applause from his teacher and classmates. When it was time to go, he naturally took over for Sandy, leading the group back to the Treehouse. Although Kyaw did not seem to understand Sandy’s rule that she lead the group throughout the Earth Walk, she let him stay in the lead. Not in a hurry like most children who try to run up front, Kyaw had “awakened to the landscape” and Sandy felt comfortable allowing him to take her place.

“Once he took the lead after the creek, he was obviously in a flow of heightened attention. It was the rapidity with which he noticed details along the trail: frog, mushroom, this, that, pointing with great speed without missing a step or slowing down. He had done this before. He did not stop to commune. He pointed frequently with joy as he led us home to the Treehouse,” Sandy recalled. For Kyaw, Timberlake seemed to reawaken an inner longing, returning him to a place he knew.

The Newcomes teachers and faculty have noticed the program’s impact too. “It’s just beautiful and serene (here),” says Tiffany Hinton, the Newcomers School’s vice principal who recently attended the program at Timberlake Earth Sanctuary for the first time. Rachel McGoldrick, a Newcomers teacher who has brought her class to Timberlake since the program’s inception, adds, “It’s an opportunity for them to be in direct contact with nature and I don’t think that’s something they get to do often.” The experience, says McGoldrick, teaches them to see life around them “with new eyes.”

Seeing the world around them differently, learning to behold the natural world as they come into a deeper connection with plants and animals, is part of the experience that Sandy and the other Earth

Guides hope for all the children who come to the Center's programs at Timberlake. They allow the process to unfold by sharing their own joy and excitement over the subjects they encounter along the trail. But they know that each child's response will be as unique as the journeys that have inevitably helped to shape them before they arrived there.

Remarkable transformations unfold with each new group. Inside the forest of the Earth Sanctuary children who are naturally impulsive become more focused and careful, children who seem mournfully quiet begin to laugh, and children who are tentative start to experiment with the world around them.

On that overcast day, the most noticeable change seemed to happen for everybody at the same time, at the moment when the rain began tapping delicate melodies on the canopy overhead, the only sound in the woods aside from the children's shrieks of laughter and the faint rustle of the leaves in the gentle breeze. The trees provided a natural umbrella, and the rhythm of the raindrops added to the silence engulfing the passage of time. Children, teachers and Earth Guides felt a sense of peace and calm that became a part of them all, connecting them, the trees and the animals as one, united together in that moment. As the silence and raindrops enveloped them on that still day, the children grew especially present and attuned.

This kind of soulful experience and its potential impact for both the children and the planet are best captured in the words of the Center's mentor Thomas Berry: "There is a different way of knowing. The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World is about this other mode of consciousness. What you are doing at the Center is fundamental and deeply important at this time in history. The children of the twenty-first century will determine the fate of this planet. The twentieth century was a century of death and destruction. The twenty-first must be a century of life. The Center is giving children integral experiences, validating experiences to give immediacy to the natural world in the course of their own human development as an emerging consciousness in our time."¹

For most of the Newcomers students, immersion in the natural world is not accessible. In their new homes in Greensboro, it is unlikely that they have many opportunities to venture into natural settings.

Many of Greensboro's immigrant and refugee families live in apartment buildings surrounded by asphalt parking lots with few, if any, trees, let alone creeks or ponds. One Newcomers student, a boy from Guatemala, told Sandy he did not want to leave, that the sanctuary reminded him of his home. Others arrive with many questions about whether the woods at Timberlake are filled with lions, tigers, elephants and monkeys. For some children "knowing" comes through quite naturally, as if they have returned home, but for others, those who may be experiencing their first venture into the woods, the knowing can be quite dramatic, undoubtedly filtered through the experiences they have had before coming to America.

"We really have no idea what the children have been through to get here. I just know that I have them for one day. I can show my love and welcoming for one day. I can plant a seed of love and care for the "lowly" snail (welcome snail!), true respect and interest in them, for one day. And that becomes a part of them, I have no doubt," says Sandy.

Sandy and the other Earth Guides also have faith that the land possesses the ultimate connection point for the children. One of the favorite spots to visit for both students and teachers is the creek, where Bisdee remarks, "the healing presence of water always acts as a kind of equalizer and connecting point." After gauging whether a particular teacher will worry about wet feet, Sandy often lingers with the Newcomers students at one of Timberlake's creeks, where careful eyes can detect darting minnows, elusive crayfish and camouflaged snails.

This is where the knowing seemed to happen for one particularly detached child, mentioned at the beginning of this story. On that afternoon, Sandy helped a group of Newcomers children climb down a bank to search for crayfish while others, on their stomachs, dangled their heads over the Creeping Cedar bridge to spot the critters from above. Meanwhile, Elishafat, the small Tanzanian boy who had seemed so distant throughout his visit, wandered down the embankment alone, avoiding the group and not asking Sandy for help. As he neared the water, his eyes became more focused and his curiosity called him further. He set his gaze on a stepping-stone. Then he moved with a purpose, tentatively easing first one foot and then, with a surge of confidence, the other one

onto that rock. Now he knelt, drawing his face to the water's surface, as if being beckoned to search closer and deeper. When he looked back up (perched steadily on that wobbly rock), for the first time that day, his body loosened, his face lightened with budding confidence and his eyes came alive with a quiet satisfaction. He looked as if he had finally arrived home.

Stephanie Kriner was a member of the Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice Cohort, 2015-2017. "Belonging to Earth: Our Common Home" was originally published in *Chrysalis* (Volume 16, Spring 2019), 10-16.

Part Two

Coming Home

*Something greater than our individual identity draws us on,
something dim and uncertain, radiant with meaning.*

~ Thomas Berry

Part Two

Coming Home: Introduction

by Peggy Whalen-Levitt

Identity with an Emergent Universe

Our work with educators began on October 12, 2000 with “The Primordial Imperative: Nature, Education and Imagination” and evolved over time into a two-year program, “The Inner-Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice,” which has now been offered to eleven cohorts of educators. The following words from Thomas Berry give an orientation for this work that was to be transformative in nature:

We are part of the great community of life on earth evolving now from a context of personal identity to a sense of identity with an emergent universe. Only in the context of an emergent universe will the human project come to an integral understanding of itself. Something greater than our individual identity draws us on, something dim and uncertain, radiant with meaning. We have our personal identity, social identity, political identity, cultural identity, and now an earth identity and a cosmic identity. Everything exists in multiple dimensions. As we practice a presence to the natural world through our intuition we come to know ourselves, not simply

as physical beings, but as spiritual beings as well, two dimensions of the same thing.

We humans are modes of divine presence who have forgotten our identity with creation. The practice of remembering gives us a sense of identity that keeps us integral with ourselves and with the universe, and can steady us in stillness in this historic period of dissolution and disintegration.¹

Entrusted with the care of children, educators have a particular role to play in this practice of remembering as we begin to sense that “something greater than our individual identity draws us on, something dim and uncertain, radiant with meaning.” And this role, it became clear to us, must begin with the transformation of the educators themselves. Their readiness to enter into this deep psychic shift would require an inner journey that would gradually unfold not as a teaching, but rather as an inner attitude toward existence. We would need to create a program that would bring educators to a place of *dwelling* ever more deeply in the interiority and authenticity of their own beings, even as they *indwelt* ever more deeply with earth and cosmos. Together, we would be entering into a re-humanization of what it means to be human.

This was not to be a cognitive way of knowing, nor was it to be an activist way of willing. We were being called into the depths of the human soul, a place that Thomas called us to over and over again:

A sense of the sacred requires recovery of ourselves, a return to the depths of our own being. We must in some manner manage the whole existence in terms of the authenticity of our own deeper self.²

For subjectivity, one must first acquire a capacity of interior presence to oneself. Through contemplation one sinks deeply into the subjectivity of one’s own being to deepen one’s personal sacred center. This becomes the deepening of the capacity for communion with all things.³

Knowing that the lives of educators are often confined by institutional forms far removed from interiority and a sense of the sacred, we felt particularly blessed to be in a position to create a two-year program of retreats in the context of Timberlake Earth Sanctuary—an earth sanctuary where educators could return to the depths of their own being and deepen their capacity for communion with the Earth.

As these retreats formed, we paid particular attention to the way we brought educators together on the land. Our retreats began with flute music and with a meditation that established a sense of the sacred as we came together in the morning. Instead of the usual introductions where people say their name and something about their work, we shifted to asking them to say their name and offer an image of the natural world that was living for them. This request invited an image-consciousness to enter the circle, rather than a literal or discursive exchange. We asked that the images be shared without commentary or cross-talk, which also established pauses between offerings and brought us into more comfort with silence and deep listening. Solo walks on earth sanctuary trails became the deepening center of each retreat.

This recovery involved opening the following spaces for educators to enter during the first year of the program:

Opening a space for childhood memories

Opening a space for presence with living earth

Childhood Memories

Thomas often spoke of us entering a *second naïveté* at this moment in history, a place of recovering spontaneous experiences with the natural world, but now in a more conscious manner: “What must be sought for in the new hermeneutics is the recovery, through critical processes, of a second naïveté, an earlier interior experience of a harmonious and luminous universe...”²⁴

We found in our program for educators that recall of inner experiences with the natural world in childhood was one way to access the interior

depths that we now need to invoke as we move from personal identity to an identity with an emergent universe. The following memories take us to different dimensions of these inner childhood experiences.

First, a childhood memory from Elizabeth Carrington brings us close to some of Thomas Berry's own early memories where he became keenly aware of a mechanistic world juxtaposed to a living world:

It's been a long time coming
into this quiet place
Where no words linger
Nothing falls here or there
The quiet is formless
even beyond grace.
There are no words to describe her
No words, no place.

It was a simple request to go and be with Earth. It was a revelation. The word "with" spoken in these terms, turned the handle of a door I had never seen before. A new access point to my heart, to connection, to Earth. Over these months I have coupled the word WITH with the spaciousness of the wordless.

I lay here on an ivy covered floor, rich dark green winter hues. I am here to practice, not daily but often enough to know I have not forgotten my assignment. This is an empty lot, two doors down from my home. It can be a busy street at rush hour and the noise levels creep in but it's green, overgrown, a patch of wildness in the city where patch by patch is more often taken. Bears come through here and over there is a burrow of some kind. It is an access point for me to remember the vast horizons of the mountains just within arm's reach but so often too far away in a given workday.

Those mountains brimming with wildness hold this city, this hill and just over it the French Broad river flows as it did even before the mountains rose up. Looking over to the next lot I see there is a digger through the trees. The neon orange is hard to miss. It is not moving Earth though, it sits quietly. I nestle down now in my green circular clearing between trees, glad it is winter and no

bugs will bite me. This is surely a great time to enter silence but I find I am again struck by the orange digger, will it start just as I begin...

I remember, I was four years old, I began school early. Being the youngest of four girls, I was ever striving to not be left out nor behind. School seemed to be very important. In my small body I was not a bit equipped to find myself in the strict and formidable environment of a small, Catholic, rural school in the west of Ireland. My teacher's snarl is still clearly ingrained in my memory bank and the new rules of no corporal punishment had not reached West Clare. It was disappointing to say the least to find myself ousted from my farmland roaming to this strange timed world of learning. I fell in line soon enough.

After school I usually left the gates with my sisters. There was a small V shaped sty in the school wall for the children to cross, two steps and over the threshold. One cloudy day I came out across the concrete alone. My sisters had gone on ahead. I can feel the weight of my satchel on my back now, the feeling against my hands of the cotton lining inside the pockets of my brown corduroy coat. I remembered the game I had played over there at lunchtime and sang the rhyme that goes with it again.

I climb over the sty and am out on the gravel road. I look down towards where my Mother's car should be. It's not there. I look around and no one is behind me. I look again and see the car much further away now in the distance. It's a light steel blue color, similar to the sky, a station wagon. It looks so far away but I can just make out the shadows of Mother and my sisters contained in it.

As I focus my eyes I am suddenly horrified to see what stands between me and them. It is a huge and terrifying yellow monster with terrible teeth that would undoubtedly eat me up in a moment's breath. I am paralyzed with fear and rooted to the very spot. I have seen monsters like these on television eating women, plucking them from towers or whilst they walk along the street. This could be my last moment. Tá mo chroí i mo bhéal / my heart is in my mouth.

Oh thankfully I see my sisters coming out of the car. They will save me, or at least may know the language or nature of the beast better than I. But alas no. Instead, they call me in impatience to hurry along. In fact they taunt me to cross over the threshold of the beast. Saying 'It won't bite!' How could they? Not only is this monster sitting there in wait, he had clearly eaten half of the road up whilst I was in school. I was so confused by their calling me over, and why

they thought it was all so funny. Their laughing though, soothed me somewhat, perhaps it was a friendly beast. It could also be a joke. I would have to trust that or take my life into my own hands in this moment. With that I was then decided. I closed my eyes and ran as fast as I could and as straight as I could. I ran past the yellow monster and then opened my eyes and looked sideways. I had passed him and he had not stirred. I was all in one piece. He must be sleeping.

I then jumped wide over the broken road where he had feasted and ran on as fast as my tiny legs could go till I skidded into the car collapsing in tears of relief. I made it. Thank you God. The car then erupting with uncontrollable laughter. I didn't care nor understand. I was so glad to be alive.

Indeed, this is what it must it have been like to be alive before I knew what a digger was. When I roamed those fields tracking fairies and picking flowers, singing and dancing at the graves of pets in the orchard. What was it like then to be alive before I knew words at all. When lying in the green was my everyday. Lying belly down at grass and daisy level was my normal and when sounds and senses and silence intermingled like a stream into tapestries of hours and like the silvery trout that sparkled past in the brown river, I made points of memory that to this day come back like this.

Now I endeavor to enter into this place and watch my mind grasp words to describe it, grasping my thoughts, my feelings and I nudge myself back and further back again and again to the place where there are no words to describe the green. The trees just whisper then in their own language and that soothes me into silence. Just me with the Earth.

The Digger starts.⁵

And then this childhood memory of Katherine Ziff that brings us close to a moment of intimacy with violets blooming on a creekbank:

Old enough now to be allowed to go outside by myself, I headed to the creek in Latta Park across from my grandmother's home in Charlotte. Bent on gathering violets that were blooming on the creekbank, I wanted to surprise my grandmother with a

bouquet. This experience with violets growing by a creek created a lifelong memory of contentment and peace in the company of flowers. Walking carefully down the embankment, I could hear the creek trickling along and see the masses of purple and white violet blossoms nestled in their heart shaped leaves growing all along the creek. To my small person, it seemed a whole world of violets. Happy and full of contentment I moved up and down the creekbank, immersed in the experience of gathering violets until my hands could hold no more. The abundance of colorful, living beauty gathered with my own hands seemed a gift offered freely by nature, and these moments of the beauty and generosity of nature—freely and even joyously available for me to give to my grandmother—live as a memory within.⁶

And these childhood memories of Bill Wallenbeck, moments of intimacy with the primordial body, his essence one with Earth essence, one with Cosmic essence.

Life as mystery, a humbling reality. Zen Buddhism speaks of awakening as returning to your “original face, the face you were born with.” Might we consider this returning to one’s deepest self also a return home to our essence as Earth’s children, born with and of a most substantive and indelible likeness?

My early life held little institutional religion or the accompanying family tradition or piety. There was a mother’s love, great vulnerability, fear and uncertainty. And inspiration flowed from the wonder and imaginations of the wide and wild spaces of the Western landscape: the foothills of the Rocky Mountains of Colorado, the Sierra Madres and the high desert of Northern Nevada, the grasslands of the Sacramento Valley, California, the high prairies of southeastern Wyoming.

Roaming these sacred grounds I caught my breath, relaxed into my body-self, falling into an authenticity of being that surrounded me: horned toad, sage bush, blue belly fence lizard, arroyo, king

snake, wind, jack rabbit, cloud, grasshopper, rain, snow, tadpole, frog, feral cat—all easily only themselves. These wanderings were not a prescribed “practice,” of course, but in a military child’s life of constant dislocation were my most constant belonging, where I found solace, familiar friends, inspiring mystery...a sense of home.

The healing spirits released from sage after rain, the big sky providing an unending canvas for my imagination, more-than-human friends abounding, winter’s snowy frozen ridge tops, cliff side sledding, spring’s rush of water filling arroyos and ridge tops for a boy sailor’s voyaging—it’s hard to choose one seminal experience.

Here are two.

Wandering barefoot in a small creek in Reno, Nevada, feeling the tickle of wonder and of my five-year-old earthling body, as soft mud and small freshwater snails oozed between my toes. The scent of spring in the high desert, a refreshing impermanence, a savored, vibrant wet. It was for this Billy, an unforgettable pure joy!

Just west, through the Truckee Pass, across those same Sierra Madres, the Sacramento Valley: it was a warm spring evening, I sat atop a dump truck load of soil, after many a game of “king of the hill!” In our little trailer park in Vacaville, CA, with dusk and the calling home of the other children, I remained in the quiet, glowing in my grand victories.

As night fell, my awareness was drawn to an imposing newcomer. She was brilliant and enormous! In Super Moon phase, the Full Moon coming her closest, a perigee syzygy. Based on such a lunar calendar, the brightest and largest of that year was June 20, 1959, on the verge of Summer Solstice. I was about to turn nine.

I had known of her all my life, but this night we came face to face. I don’t remember the words, the conversation. I just remember Her, her presence. Enraptured, I sat as a very humbled king, soaking in her more than royal translucent beauty, taking notice of her nearness, her ever presence, her light, as if for the first time. I would never forget Her, and we have danced often, sometimes through the night, and increasingly so, since that first flame.

Despite what surrounded, threatened and vexed in the arena of human relationships, it was particularly in such moments, ‘times betwixt times,’ when invited into liminal communions of sweet aromas and living visions of the natural world, that I was lifted, infused and given shielding.

How is it we have been so removed from the blessed mud? It is as if we no longer have feet. Cut off, we float, disconnected, ungrounded, seldom our skin caressed by Mother’s skin.⁷

These childhood memories led educators deeply into the inner landscape of the new identity we are seeking beyond an autonomous self, into the homeland of the soul where we feel the natural world as a spiritual presence touching us. As children, these educators felt an intimacy with the natural world as if they were within everything around them and everything around them was within them. They sensed that they were part of a vast and mysterious world process that is living, creative and whole.

Presence with Living Earth

When educators are embedded in an adult world long removed from this kind of childhood experience, we attempt to create a context where intimacy with the Earth can be restored. During the first year of “The Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice” program, we invite educators to engage in a practice of presence with living earth and then to bring these moments of presence into reflection through journaling. These are the guiding words that we offer them:

Between now and when will we meet again, we invite you to begin a practice of presence with the natural world.

Our aim is to make ourselves deeply available to a sacred universe—to offer loving attention to the natural word—to bring ourselves into that deeper Presence that surrounds us.

We could think of this as bringing our human souls into relationship with the soul of the world. Unlike many mindfulness practices in which “attention” is a goal in itself, in our practice, the intention is “relationship” and “resonance.”

We are present with the natural world in a deeply listening and receptive way.

In this practice, we “hold at bay” our habitual ways of “knowing about” and accumulating information...

Through this practice, we are awakening the unitive imagination—that more subtle faculty which unifies and moves us beyond the dualism of an I-It relationship with the world.

We are discovering our own inner capacities to open to life in new ways—we are attuning ourselves to a sacred universe.

We invite you to keep a journal along the way, with this caveat from Arthur Zajonc:

“In order to discover authentic meaning in these experiences of the inner life, our thinking must become free and mobile in ways that are quite unfamiliar to us. For this reason it is extremely difficult to capture in thought and give expression in words to that which is within: Thoreau wrote, ‘We may easily multiply the forms of the outward; but to give the within outwardness, that is not easy.’ In his journals Thoreau struggled daily to capture in words what he had experienced so powerfully while tramping through field and swamp. He knew how to multiply the inward experiences of soul that he so prized, but to write them down required so much more. In every meditative moment, we meet the temptation to interpret what we experience with conventional logic and clichéd concepts, according to what Simone Weil calls the ‘laws of gravity.’ Deep meditative

experience, however, defies the laws of gravity and appears under the sign of grace. Only thinking that is free of the logic of gravity, and is itself graceful, can follow the movements of meditation.”⁸

Allow yourselves, therefore, to experience an image that lives deeply in your soul...to stay as close to your inner experience as possible...to make a drawing, perhaps, or a poem...or a jotting of words...to discover whatever language comes to you “under the sign of grace.” There is a gentleness in this way of journaling.

After her conversation with Thomas Berry about identity and presence, Carolyn Toben offered the following reflection, which can serve as a guiding meditation for educators as they begin a practice of presence with living earth:

I realized that evening that through each conversation Thomas and I were having, he was adding yet another layer of understanding to my shift in consciousness. Here in this conversation about identity and presence, I could see that in forgetting our relationship with the natural world we were also forgetting our relationship with the universe, the Divine, one another, and our own souls.

Thomas was calling us to a new sensitivity that went beyond aesthetic appreciation of the natural world to a deeper level of seeing and being in relationship with it.

Each day on my walks in the woods I practiced trying to remember my relationship with the natural world as I encountered amazing moments of presence: a tiny group of speckled bluebird eggs, the sound of a barred owl, a turtle laying her eggs in the middle of a walking trail. From these intimate moments and many others, I became aware of the ‘communion of subjects’ of which Thomas spoke; I began to feel an identification with the whole. I began to see for myself the deep truth that he was communicating: when we learn to see the natural world as sacred, reciprocity begins to develop between the natural world and ourselves in a mutually

enhancing relationship. In those stopping places, those moments of communion, I felt myself embedded in a sacred universe in which all opposites were reconciled. I had the feeling of being ‘home safe’ within the great community of life.

“Love is the inner presence to all things,” Thomas had said without further elaboration, saying only that love, given us in “germinal form” as Teilhard described it, “must be cultivated.”

He had spoken of interior communion as “contemplation whereby one sinks deep into the subjectivity of one’s own being to experience the totality of things.” To experience the totality of things in interior communion meant for me that I was to undertake a departure from my accustomed prayer life and journey inward to find reconnection with the Source of the universe that for billions of years has continued to create the conditions for life on earth. That journey would move me down past the chatter of the conditioned mind, the judgment of the intellect, the list of endless tasks, the sympathies and antipathies of the personality, the distractions of technological fascination, the fears and resentments of the dark subconscious, the bondage of the past, the heavy cultural overlay of the present historic period.

In that very deep place I discovered the contemplative dimension, the interiority that is part of the nature of being human and the unifying dimension within us all. There in the depths of the psyche I discovered the inner valley of the heart where all was still and all was holy. Over a period of time, I discovered that Love itself was both the source and the goal of the immense sacred journey of the universe and of each individual. As the Creator of all things, it is both the universal origin and the destiny to which all return. Love is the inner place where the soul is truly home safe.

As Thomas said, “Love is foundational.” In the midst of change, Love doesn’t change. It is stable and also fluid. It goes forth as the impulse in every living thing to create. It brings us into communion with all living things, into mutual presence with one another. It brings us into trust in an unknown future, into gratitude for the sacredness of life itself.

We are now being called by the universe to bring Love forth as an inner presence to all things, to bring a dimension to the human-earth relationship that will enable humans and non-humans to live in a ‘mutually enhancing’ way, to further life itself.

Thomas was returning us to our deeper identities...

He was guiding us home.⁹

To enter this practice of presence, educators have to move beyond their conceptual boundaries and beyond their spectator roles of seeing the world at a distance. We were actually asking them to discover lost realms that had once been available to them when they were children. We were asking them to stay very close to lived experience, to be present in their sensing—a sensing pervaded with the sacredness of the world. And then, in their journaling, we were asking them to engage in an inner practice of disclosing what is present. As they enter into this kind of subjective communion, they begin to feel that the kind of separation that has evolved between the human and the natural world is an illusion. Rather, they begin to perceive in such a way that what is within them and what is before them are not sharply divided, as in this moment that Renée Eli shared with a heron on Bald Head Island:

The heron. I hear him first. I say *him*, because the sound of him is deep, throaty, like the sound that comes from a bassoon. It is a rumbling sort of horn sound that drifts, much as he seems to, from a live oak at the blurred edge of dune with maritime forest. His body, motionless, seemingly weightless, glides afloat some current of air that takes him from tree to dune to water’s edge. He is quickly out of my sight, obscured by the tall grasses, the brush, (vegetation I have not yet come to know), and mounds of sand that make the high dunes here. I am looking for a beach access from the walking path that meanders along the backside of the dunes. I find my way to a boardwalk that leads over and across a high dune, empties to the surf side, and flattens across a vast expanse of empty beach. The tide is ebbing. He is standing there—at the water’s edge. He is motionless, again. And I am struck by the effortlessness

of his being. His essence seems buoyed on his long spindly legs. His head is 90 degrees to me, an offering of his profile. His beak, long and slender, seems to decrescendo to its point. And I understand now why he is the great *blue* heron, because the color of his head just above the angle of his beak is the same blue as the blue of the ocean behind him. He is magnificent. When he moves, his movement is stealth. Sometimes it is the quick shift of his head, sometimes the slow, methodical lift and lower of his long legs. He turns toward me—his head is so slender behind the point of his beak that it strangely disappears above the long S curve of his neck into the blue of the ocean.

I look to my left. In the sand I encounter a long slender feather such as I have never seen before. I'm quite certain it is the feather of a great blue heron. Perhaps this one. I hold this feather with all of me. For a moment, I am only with the feather. Perhaps this moment is several, because when I return my gaze to the heron, he has moved toward me, and he is still walking. His approach is rather obtuse, as he slowly saunters from an angle, half looking my way, half looking off down the beach. He seems to be pronouncing a sort of nonchalance to me. But this is my expression, not his. Still, I am taken by his curiosity. And something of my own energy shifts away from presence and more toward excitement. Though I don't move, it is a felt sense in me. And, apparent by his stopping his approach toward me, it is an obvious felt sense in the heron. He is so close I see the webbing of his feet and the array of colors and patterns on his feathers. A slight breeze ruffles some of the patterns on his back and then on his breast. We both stand in the gaze of the other, completely and utterly, for a period of time I cannot possibly estimate.¹⁰

Within this practice of presence is also the experience of being part of a world that is not static but rather a world in the process of coming into being; our subjective communion with the world around us enjoins us with the ongoing flow of the world. We begin to sense that we live in a world of fluidity rather than in a world of discreet entities, captured here in a journal entry by Cambria Storms of herself and a child with the river:

The sky is a wet blanket caught between rain and shine, and the child is so bright as they walk a little ahead of me. We go to the river first thing in the morning, we take ourselves into our own hands as we go down the side of the embankment and across the great big swinging bridge to get to the other side. We bring the child's small red bucket. The child says that we must both carry it to share the weight. I made sure that we brought it so that the child could move water around with it as they like to do. We find a long stick and pull it through the bucket's handle each taking an end, now we are a team like two horses, we can feel each other moving. The child says the bucket is for collecting leaves, rocks, and sand today, sometimes it is only for rocks but today it is for all these things. The child has collections of all these things at home that they place on the kitchen counter. I think how beautiful it is to bring the forest and the riverbank home and put it on your countertop where you make all the things that sustain your body. How do they know that all the tiny dust particles are what hold us all clinging on together? How do they know that all the bits of mountains rolling around for so many years that get under our fingernails are what is continuously holding us upright on our feet?

On the other side of the bridge we look for rocks to climb, and the child points to the very middle of the river at a group of great jumbling rocks, this is where they want to go. We make our own way down from the bank following the rocks. Everything is shallow and bright, we get our feet wet and scramble a little bit. The child climbs up the biggest rock, grasping the red bucket in one hand and lays down on the rock's great side. I watch over the child as they close their eyes and rest, completely relaxed with the rock holding them there. After a little while, we go further up the river a little ways to reach a small bounding waterfall between two rocks and sit on the rock beside where it pushes past us. The child places their hands and feet in the water not moving from this spot for a long time. Then the child makes a little "beatbox" song for the fast moving water as it gushes and gushes cupping two small hands splashed with water around their mouth. We talk about where the water is going and where it came from, how it is pulling

and tugging their dangling little legs, how it goes down, falling, and tripping over the rocks all the way up the river. The child can feel it pulling them and turning to me says, “water never stops.”¹¹

We have also asked the educators to be present with dawn and dusk for a period of time during the first year of the program as a way of cultivating cosmic identity. Here, Thomas calls us to renew this presence:

The dawn...speaks of the celebration of new beginnings, the sunset of the supreme moment of continuity. At one time, the natural world and the human world were two dimensions of mystical rapport. The world was seen as a great cosmic ritual and humans were integral within it. Humans saw themselves as part of a cosmology, knew themselves as part of the whole cosmological order. Psychically, life on earth couldn't be endured without this. Everything had meaning. Everything and everyone was participating in the numinous, which gives meaning...We have been taken out of our integral presence to the natural world, alienated from the universe by our participation in linear time only. We need to return to our experience of the human in the cosmological order. To recover cosmology is to recover a sense of the sacred in spacious moments in which time expands.

The universe has a sequence of such moments in the celebration of dawn and sunset and in the very rhythm of the cosmos, but we have forgotten it...The inner world of the soul needs to be activated by the experience of the outer world in all its grandeur. Our souls, our imaginations, our emotions, depend upon our immediate experience of the natural world. These moments wait for us to come into them. In present moments, we begin to get the smell of home. Now we are beginning to develop energies for homecoming. Now we have the smell of home. In these moments we sense the real world, the abiding world.¹²

This presence with dawn and dusk returns the educators to the great cosmic ritual during “spacious moments in which time expands,” as it does here for Mel DeJesus:

SUNRISE

I left behind the city glow, and drove the winding uphill route through an endless silhouette of trees. I left the car roadside, continuing on the trail until I found a clearing and settled onto the black ground and sleeping air. And even hidden there, I felt society's discomfiting gaze, and it didn't easily shrug off. But as the sky grew from violet into tints of blue and red mist, its light sharpened into view what lay around me: grounded leaves and tall gray trunks of trees that attended to the East, and as they did, I recalled Carlo Pietzner's description of the goddess Aurora "spreading dew all over the world in colors of red and orange." I imagined Aurora to be the size of the city, to be over the city, her consoling arms outstretched, her words heralding what might come.

But even with this, my bones soon felt the cold restless air, and to warm myself, I wandered and let my dazed eyes fall to the bright spots that ran along the tree tops, and soon I began to dream of sleep, when unexpectedly a patch of crackling flame spilled over the horizon, a flame that invoked and melted forgotten defenses so that there I stood, open to myself, wanting only to grow closer that I might better hear the words. And as I left the woods, I drifted between this fire and its peripheral haze, until the fire had dissipated into the clear blue day, a jet streaking contrails overhead. The next morning, I lay in bed and, through my window, the same light sought me out. This was a start.

SUNSET

The late afternoon clouds were a billowy blanket overhead, and we knew they would block our view of sunset. We also knew that we had no flashlight, and the new moon night would make difficult the return route. But from this ridge, I could see that the cloud-blanket ebbed at the horizon, and that between the blanket and the land's edge, there stretched a horizontal line of clear blue sky across which I knew the sun would pass. I sat hidden among the rocks and scraggly evergreen, and the wind drew attention to the taller pines,

which looked west with farewell: thank you goodbye, friend.

And then it passed—the molten sun lit up the stretch of blue as it slipped between one world and the next, leaving in its wake a contracting violet so that the world was left in shades of gray, and the contented trees, purple flowers, nodded off into a still sleep. In this encroaching dark, we had enough light to find our way back. As I stepped out of the woods, I recalled the stretch of blue before it was swallowed by darkness, how it momentarily appeared as a long living strip that absorbed and gushed forth currents of recycled ether, the very substance of our existing. As we walked, no flashlight was necessary, no obstruction even.¹³

In these spacious moments, educators are brought to the calm and silent domain of the depth of the soul, a domain penetrated by the numinous. Here, in the depths of soul, a space opens for a gentle flow of inspiration that infuses the practice that they will bring forth during the second year of the program.

Moments of mutual indwelling, of bonds of intimacy with the natural world, live deeply in the soul and become a constant orientation of consciousness toward a sacred universe. These moments allow educators to experience the source, flow and orientation of inner life and then to live and work in alignment with this orientation. It is within this alignment that inspiration comes, that living waters flow.

Through harmony of themselves with the earth and universe in moments of communion, educators begin to attune themselves to the vital forces of the world. They begin to move from what Thomas referred to as the death and destruction of the 20th century to the 21st century as a century of Life. As they enter into this harmony, the moorings of an autonomous personal identity become loosened. Habitual ways of knowing and being in the world begin to yield to *unknowing* with a gesture toward the future. Educators begin to feel themselves as part of an evolving sacred universe that proceeds from a sacred source and flows toward a future of sacred worth. As Thomas says, they begin to “develop energies for homecoming” in an abiding world.

This work is different from programs and plans and from the collectivism of a movement. It is a work of inner transformation and deep listening for what is calling to us from the future, which takes a unique form for each educator. Thomas knew that “we must learn to recognize the promptings that emerge from our own depths.”¹⁴ After a year of presence, we engage in a two-day retreat to midwife practices that will emerge from each educator. These practices take many creative forms and are published in a *Collection of Practices* for each cohort of The Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice program.

Readings for Part Two

What follow are writings by graduates of the Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice program of a threefold nature. The first piece is a choral reading composed of a synthesis of journal entries for dawn and dusk by the Inner Life of the Child in Nature cohort of 2014. The next two pieces by Joanne Rothstein and Andrew Levitt offer expressions of a deepening of presence with living earth over time. The final three pieces by John Shackelton, Eric McDuffie and Renée Eli are reflective in nature as they bring into contemplation the deep psychic shift that Thomas Berry has called for.

“Liturgy to Dawn and Dusk,” a Co-Creation of the Inner Life of the Child in Nature Cohort of 2014

“In Grandmother’s Presence” by Joanne Rothstein

“Words for the Silence Before Dawn” by Andrew Levitt

“Understanding Closer than Concepts” by John Shackelton

“Dialoguing with Earth” by Eric McDuffie

“Toward a Science that Re-enchants and Shepherds” by Renée Eli

Chapter Four

Liturgy to Dawn and Dusk

A Co-Creation of the Inner Life of the Child in Nature:
Presence and Practice Cohort, 2012-2014

Flute: A call to prayer

A Call to Prayer

Reader:

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

~ Thomas Berry

A Prayer of Awareness

Carol: I watch the horizon gleam with golden-pink, and life awakens to vibrant, mindful, activity all around me. The trees, the plants, birds, insects, squirrels, the woodpecker's tap, tap, tap, the rising sun—the Universe— seems to be throbbing with golden radiance and cadence that is reflected in the refrain of a famous song by Rod Stewart:

*The rhythm of my heart is beating like a drum
With the words "I love You" rolling off my tongue.
Never will I roam, for I know my precious home.
Where the ocean meets the sky, I'll be sailing.²*

With all its mindless busyness, numbing mundane tasks, worries, disappointments, foolish mistakes, dreams, politics, failures, angry words, jealousies, human constructs, selfishness, movies, video games and other fluff—from each gilded branch, twig, leaf and needle rings out a living song from the Divine—if I would but accept it, in the dawning of each day. *The rhythm of my heart...*

Reader: We recover our awareness.

Jessica: A busy, beautiful, challenging, life-affirming day weighs heavily on my shoulders as I walk through the park. As the sun begins to set people are picking up their paces, heading back to cars, homes, families, dinner, bed. I am on foot and I know that each step I take is another one I will have to take back. Busy mind keeps calculating time: how long I have been walking plus equal time back plus an hour for dinner, then reading and bed time with my daughter, 30 minutes at least, then an hour answering emails, 30 minutes finalizing lesson plans for tomorrow, maybe 5 minutes for a shower, 10 minutes to talk to my husband about our day, I should be in bed by 11:00, but it will probably be more like 1:00 a.m. If I turn back now I could get a few more minutes of sleep. Or, I could be here now, with the sounds of my own footsteps and breath, crows in

the trees waiting for some unseen signal to all suddenly fall silent and lift into the sky, outside of any time other than the slow turning of the earth. And in that instant the busy mind evaporates, powerless to keep up the pretense of its own importance in the face of such compelling evidence that right now is everything.

Reader: We recover our awareness.

Susie: The dusk comes wrapping me in its comfort of soft hues that melt along the horizon. It is a peaceful time for me, because it is the moment when I know there is nothing I have to do except appreciate the gifts of that day. I long to create a ritual of savoring the twilight, but I know that tomorrow may bring distraction. Instead of mourning the loss of a custom I am not yet able to keep, I hold on to this instant, and appreciate it with every element of my being. I see the stars beginning to twinkle on a background of Mother Nature's evening rainbow. I hear the wrestling of squirrels bounding between branches, and feel the chill of night settling on my fingers and face. I cherish this moment. I cherish this earth. I cherish all that blesses me today and every day.

Reader: We recover our awareness.

Kim: As I sit here at 6:50 am, trying not to think about my "to do" list today, how cold I am, or how I wish I had a cup of coffee, I am struck by the beautiful symphony that has started to play. It is as if all of the birds just woke up too and are beginning their day in the same way I often do—very fast, lots of noise! However their "noise" is a harmonic and eloquent symphony while mine is a chaotic and frantic cacophony. There is much to be learned from these birds this morning: slow down, get in the rhythm, pay attention, make beautiful noise!

Reader: We recover our awareness.

Flute: We recover our awareness.

An Invocation of Dawn:

Reader:

Giver of Morning

We arise with you...

May we be one with the life
of the Universe in every breath we take.³

Mary: I'm always up early enough and prepare to leave for work as the dawn announces a new beginning. Over the last several weeks, I was fortunate enough to contemplate dawn under the coldest, cloudiest, and even the brightest of days. Certainly the brightest of days where the moon is setting and the sun is rising created a different experience. However, through the heart, the afterimage was the same. I recognized that I took a deep breath as I entered my heart and stillness came over my body as I dissolved the barriers between my individuality and the dimensions of the timeless heart.

Reader: Giver of morning, we arise with you.

Barbara: My Dawn beholding invites me to my backyard cityscape. Brightening skies are shades of gray. Birdsongs are frequent, loud, and varied. The air feels thin and cold as I step across the deck and move to the steps. Sheltered by my thick red deep-pocketed bathrobe with steaming coffee as my shield, I wonder at first if I am intruding. But the singing, calling, and fluttering does not abate. I am still, quiet, present, and not a disturbance or distraction. I belong here too.

Reader: Giver of morning, we arise with you.

Amy: The sky is a wash of soft pink. The horizon begins to glow bright and fiery orange. Trees outlined in the foreground take center stage against the brilliant display of light in the background. Unlike a still painting, though, the background is in perpetual motion—intense and

alive. The once pink wash of clouds shows greater depth as purple tones more clearly define its form. Then slowly, almost imperceptibly, the darkness recedes. Objects, once merely dark outlines, take on a myriad of colors. The intimacy of the moment fades and another day begins.

Reader: Giver of morning, we arise with you.

Brigid: Watching in the East, the sky begins to lighten very slowly but shapes are coming into focus. It is so silent, so cold. There are gusts of wind that make the trees wave, then it dies down. Only thin, tall trees seem not to lose the harmonic vibration. More light and as I look across the sky, it is monochromatic—one shade of grey-blue. The trees begin to reflect the light and I see the white bark. In the east however, all remain black, wearing their own shadow, until the yellow begins and I see green, soft and grey. It is still very quiet except for the wind.

Reader: Giver of morning, we arise with you.

Rosemary: All is silent around me as I walk with no intention of getting anywhere. Tiny snowflakes touch my face as the west winds blow. Gradually the birds begin to signal dawnlight's arrival. First a single bird sound and with each moment the birdsongs increase until there is a virtual symphony of melodies. I yearn to sing with the birds so I reach for my flute and welcome the day with my own melody. The sounds of the flute are in harmony with the growing light and sounds. The birds seem to welcome my contribution in celebrating this new day.

Reader: Giver of morning, we arise with you.

Pamela: Through the dark trees and dripping Spanish moss the crescent lake glints. It is placid, a glassy calm, reflecting deep grey, the greens of oaks and surrounding pines. Mirrored is the watery white of an awakening sky. A squirrel rustles in the leaves. The chickadee chirps and jabbbers from tree to tree. The tapping of a woodpecker echoes through

the canopy. Three deer there, just there in a perfect shaft of light, the ray of dawn piercing the leaves. Gracefully they pick their way through the underbrush, slowly, methodically listening with twitching ears, holding necks still when my exhale sounds. This stillness of dawn is alive with the hunt for food, restless with searching. The soft brown eyes gaze at me from the bush. I am still on this porch holding their gaze, feeling the tension. Thin legs crunch as they turn in unison and walk past me, not looking up again. Breathing in deeply, I watch them leave me. Crisp air fills me with awakening. The deer are a balancing force that centers me. Sharing their wandering, feeling the song ripple the quietude of this morning, a deep purpose and simple presence fills me with a peace.

Reader: Giver of morning, we arise with you.

Mac: The day has broken, softly, like a young feline, padding, silently, through a forest of Loblolly Pines. Gray cloud-puffs fill the early morning sky, as my feral tom-cat, Ash, crunch-crunch-crunches on his breakfast. I am immersed—both within and without—in surround sound. A hum of insects creates an air of expectation, a gathering crescendo. The orchestra is striking up its instruments. The Day unfolds.

A gentle breeze in the treetops adds its soft voice and two pines, supporting one another, play a long, quavering, violin note. “Tap, tap, tap,” joins the percussion section—a Downey Woodpecker—checking a knot-hole on a dead Virginia Pine as a potential nesting site. A distant hound bawls his throaty song. The interface between me and not-me has suddenly vanished. The mysterious, ever-transforming body I’ve been inhabiting these past 63 years is mere vapor, as I dissolve into the Oneness.

I bow with thanksgiving to the Sun and Sun-Maker, to the swirling-balm breeze, to insects, to trees, to ticks and mosquitoes and leeches and fleas, to all in the earth, to all in the seas. I sing with thanksgiving, for we are all One, transforming together along with the Sun.

Reader: Giver of morning, we arise with you.

Flute: Giver of morning, we arise with you.

A Poem for the Dance of the Three:

Bill: Night and Day require DuskDawn...each must surrender to the other, let go, risk its life to the other, time and time again to create the living, vibrant, creative ecosphere of Earth. The shadow times are the birthing way into the other; a narrow but critical time of transition and transformation. The power of the “times betwixt times”...is the surrender of one INTO the other and the flow back again. The Celts believed the twilight hours to be mystical times where the risk of touching the eternal was mightily increased.

But it is a dance of the three; dark, shadows and light that matters most. The “Holy, Holy, Holy” cry of the Earth Herself in the eternal rhythm of daily life. These elements of life’s dance, all three, are always present.

A Love Affair

Night pinches Dawn,
She stirs beneath his cover.
Her curves of light
Come close around.
Surrendering he turns
Enveloped by a rising heat.
A wild passionate duo
Love
 rising
 birthing
 living
 dying . . .
Cooling, she winks at Dusk and
Lying down upon an evening breeze
He carries her back
With sweet dark kisses
Into deep midnight dreams
Of warming seeds and new horizons.

Flute. A Poem for the Dance of the Three

An Invocation of Dusk:

Reader:

Turner of the World, we rejoice in the blessing of your presence. You have been with us during the day even as the stars have been in the sky, obscured by the daylight; although we have not remembered you, you have remembered us. May the peace of your silent blessing enfold us as we enter the companionship of night.⁴

Tom: The shadows are long, so long that I can't see where they end. The shadows of the trees stretch across my path into the next clump of trees. The sun is growing weaker and weaker. The light no longer warms my face. The air becomes cooler and cooler. Birds are chirping. The trees sway, energetically at their tops, a windiness that I don't feel on the shadowy ground. A band of gold stretches along the horizon. Bands of light light up the tops of the trees behind. Their dusk comes later than mine. Now just a few spots of sun, no longer the shafts of light cutting through the trees. The clear sky, cloudless, dry, retains its pale blue. Geese call in the distance. At least four different birdcalls sound out. More yellow than the dawn's red, the sun lights just a narrow band at the horizon. A new bird sounds its call, a raspy sound like a whirling noisemaker. Birds dart back and forth across the face of the setting sun. Daffodils hang their heads, mostly away from the sun...anticipating the dawn? Now the sun, just peeking over the peak of the common house roof, gives one last flash and hides. A faint orange blends with the yellow. Smaller branches in the trees now stand out in this pale light. The sun is not withdrawing to a point, not yet. The light lingers much longer than in my memory of dusk. The air chills me. I go inside.

Reader: We enter the companionship of night.

Erin: These days, dusk dawdles in. It creeps up so gradually that sometimes it's hard to tell if dusk is here or perhaps a large cloud is blanketing us.

It's not like the winter dusk that would sit down heavily and abruptly, interrupting the last few chores that just moments ago seemed reasonable, before one was left standing in the dark. No, dusk seems to be on toddler time right now. Exploring this new feeling of being up later, and in no hurry to get where it's going. The warmth of the day has left with the sunshine and as soon as those beams are gone the air carries the spring chill. It is the chill that brings sugar snap peas, and fiddleheads.

Reader: We enter the companionship of night.

Jim: Sitting on the dock by the lake at dusk there is a peaceful calm that is transforming this moment into the memories of this day. The water is very still with the reflection of the trees and clear sky as if they have been painted on the surface. Frogs are beginning to fill the air with their shrill sounds of one great chorus. The water has a slight wave of disturbance on the surface as two ducks fly away. I hear a flock of geese in the distance. They have decided to fly by this evening for another resting place. As the darkness continues to come, this time of quiet and stillness provides me with an opportunity for reflection. In these peaceful moments, I go within myself and remember that the natural world has shared its message that each dusk will be different.

Reader: We enter the companionship of night.

Doreen: A cloudy day. Not quite damp. Not quite cold. Gray sky, pale light. Waiting quietly. The birds have returned to the feeders, accepting that I am not leaving, at least not anytime soon. Squirrels scamper about. The neighbor's cat stays away, but watches.

A shift in the breeze, or a new awareness of it. I shiver, feeling colder now.

The sound of cars going up and down the hill in front of my house enters my consciousness. The birds seem more active, louder—their songs more beautiful.

Waiting. Nothing dramatic is happening. The sky remains gray, no hint of brilliant colors or even subtle hues. Just gray. The light is perhaps paler. Just waiting. I shiver again...

I behold gray sky, dimmer now. I behold pale light, paler still. I behold that I no longer hear any cars or feel any breeze. A moment of complete silence. No. The birds are still singing. They don't seem as enthusiastic and the squirrels have wandered off. So has the neighbor's cat...

Dusk is passing into night. I'm cold, so I go inside.

Reader: We enter the companionship of night.

Lisa: I walk west toward the remnants of the day, the sun out of sight but illuminating the sky ahead. The light brightens the horizon, and I can imagine again the day that has been: hardwood trees still stripped for winter, rising dark against blue sky; pines, clumped in groves more full and dense, impose themselves on the skyline and block a greater portion of my view. These trees are but silhouettes—flat lines and planes of blackness, they stand in stark two-dimensional contrast to the light erupting from beneath the horizon. Still, I can see that the low sky ahead is rich in greens and blues, rising aqua into turquoise then robin's egg blue. I turn to look at the sky behind me; it is already opaque, a heavy blue gray, smudged with streaks of lavender. Night is closing in behind me. I turn back to the openness of the fading day. Although the source of light can no longer be seen, its final brightness seems to tower overhead and open the sky, a contrast to the impending darkness descending in a thick blanket behind me. Inevitably, I have to turn south and round the block. I am sorry to turn away from the uplifting radiance before me. I stand reluctantly for a moment, taking in one last view of the gradation of blues. I turn and resume walking. What I have lost in turning from the sun's final illumination of the evening sky gives way to the sudden glimmer of a star and then another and another. More than likely they have been there, already visible for several moments, but my eyes were trained on the light reflected in the last colors rising up

from the horizon. I could not notice their twinkling presence in the deeper blue sky until my eyes adjust to a darker heaven. Another block or two and all of Orion comes into view, and the upturned sliver of the moon illuminates the rest of itself, a translucent disk now semi-visible like the Cheshire's hidden countenance above its gleaming grin.

Reader: We enter the companionship of night.

Allison: Stepping out of my car, I walk to the house after another long day at work. The first thing I notice is the sound of the spring peepers. They are a chorus to my restless mind. The music that plays at the end of my day. It's still very cool at night and I wonder how they stay warm at night? Do they have to peep so often in order to stay warm or is the call to a mate a warning signal or just noise for the sake of living and being able to make a noise at all? These questions pull my mind out of its doldrums. The sounds of nature are fascinating and wonderful and full of so many unanswered questions for me. The sounds make me look up and take notice of other things around me. It is a time for waking up for many animals and a feeling of nocturnal anticipation hangs in the air. The stars are beginning to show and the moon is rising in the sky. The smells from the day still linger in the air and I wonder what animals will be out tonight around my home. Will I hear the barred owls calling to each other again tonight? It is a time that I am not a part of. The time for the animals to take care of their needs. Their time to awaken, and my time to repair.

Reader: We enter the companionship of night.

Kelly: I can feel the cool, night wind on my face, quickly replaced with a warm glow from the fire. The sun is going away. I will eventually have to break this moment. My son Gray will have to go in, nighttime routine will begin, and after a quick burst of noise and hustle and bustle, I will be able to return to quiet. A different quiet. One of only one world, not of both.

Reader: We enter the companionship of night.

Sonia: Dusk is the most silent time of day for me. I spend dusk on most days walking around the pond, observing the light, the sky and the nature of the water, finding stillness. Dusk is inclusive and expansive. I feel seen by a universal presence at dusk, my spirit is less distracted than at any other time in my day. I can breathe. My senses are not overwhelmed.

The sky envelops me at dusk. The stars reveal the true nature of my view of things, allowing me to sense the heaven's celestial hug. I feel a silent, immense presence. The dusk invites this meeting between the universe and me. The dusk is quiet. It is a moment for settling. It stills my leaking mind and beating heart by cloaking me in its revealing, diminished light.

Reader: We enter the companionship of night.

A Prayer at Day's End

Reader:

We refresh our souls at the threshold of welcome,
loving rest,
life-giving nurture,
light-bestowing unity,
be upon our hearts, our minds,
our bodies...
May the soul of all beings be peacefully
preserved
from veil of night
to crown of light.⁵

Flute: We enter the companionship of night.

“Liturgy to Dawn and Dusk: A Co-Creation of the Inner Life of the Child in Nature Class of 2014” was originally published in *Chrysalis* (Volume 12, Spring 2015), 4-10.

Chapter Five

In Grandmother's Presence

by Joanne Rothstein

The Practice

My practice is a simple one: to sit early morning by the lake near my home. The lake, in the midst of a densely populated suburb, collects the water of a seventy square mile watershed and shepherds it, via a connecting river, to the harbor. I call the lake Grandmother. At the lake, I focus with love and attention on what calls to me there and so much does: pairs of heron in aerial dance with each other, the haunting sound of swans in flight, grandfather fish tugging systematically at weeds growing on the beach ropes, the wind, the shift of a songbird from its loud every day chirp to a melody of rare sweetness, the evergreen amidst the brilliance of fall colored leaves, the wind-ruffled patterns on the water's surface, the smell of rot and decay, the smell of cold—unending abundance. A not-so-solitary, solitary practice.

I approach the lake before the activity of dawn. The darkness makes it easier to settle into the silence. The darkness invites receptivity and is helpful to someone whose sense of sight is quick to spark the mind and the world of manufacture. I sit quietly to behold. The silence itself offers space for this conversation, this deep listening. In the present moment, I bring my awareness to the sounds, the smells, the touch, the sights.

There is always someone or something that calls me to go deeper. The communion begins with my senses. These are the portals to the outer world, the portals of connection that take the messages offered in never-ending abundance from the Universe inward. Messages that merge with my heart's ancient memories evoke a recognition and a response: a tear, a laugh, a sigh, a fear, a longing—each a child of my heart to be given back to the world. The birds sing their sweet songs, the fish arch and thrust with power above the water, but we speak with our hearts. Our heart's song is our answering reply to the Divine. So begins an exchange of intimacy, and rounds of unending verse.

The Experience

At the start, I find myself very conscious of the practice. I “behold” the practice itself and describe my experiences as follows.

- ~ Delighting in sights and sounds of early morning at the water's edge.
- ~ Paying attention, noticing so many exquisitely beautiful aspects and noticing heart-wrenching ones.
- ~ Notice while I am beholding, in the course of my loving attention, I am also trying to “capture” these moments. I take what my eyes see and want to find the right word to describe it, the right association to remember it. I watch the clouds and muse over their shapes. I smell an odor and try to discriminate its content. I hear a bird's beautiful melody and want to know its identifying features for future reference. I glimpse a perfect moment of sunrise and want the moment captured with my camera.
- ~ I feel I am veering from being present, that my mind and my ego are taking me off course. Although I delight in these diversions, I am starting to understand the writings of the blind French author

Jacques Lusseyran and see that this is a defense of mine, a way of protecting myself. It's safe when I define the experience and hold nature at arm's length.

~ I begin to sense as fully as I can, remaining open, receptive and present. No commenting, no editorializing. Nothing more. Thinking in terms of the energetics of it. Staying open allows me to receive vibrations, as Lusseyran describes it, like opening all the channels.¹ So I begin to "listen" inwardly and outwardly. And if I feel an emotion arising, I pay attention to that as well and to how my body responds. I enter into what phenomenologist Robert Sardello refers to as "the inner discipline of disclosing what is present."²

~ I start to understand that a "proper exchange" applies to listening too. It is a question of balance. I am always more active than passive. Dawn at the beach is a flurry of activity as darkness passes its baton and that suited me fine. I know now that this outward tendency of mine deters deep relationship. I'm practicing being open to receive. It is a very uncomfortable posture for me probably because I feel vulnerable. But it is communion after all and it is these very moments of vulnerability and intimacy that define the experience.

The Experience of Clouds

After closing my eyes for a while I open them to look back at the clouds. There is an immediate recognition of the cloud as a living entity and an acknowledgement in return, the cloud's recognition of me! I experience the sense of being seen on a deep level, touched, bared and embraced. It feels both painful and perfect as I simultaneously experience longing and belonging. It is an instantaneous and familiar knowing. This is not an inert cloud swiftly drifting past but a consciousness I have connected to, have a relationship with. This moment of intimacy opens a floodgate of emotions—feelings of immense joy, gratitude and unworthiness.

The Experience of Vapor

In the early morning, light, sky and lake commune together. They often mirror each other, speak to the world in one voice. One morning as I behold their sharp, clear, reflective images an immense thick white vapor silently appears. Moving with some speed it engulfs all that it meets, flowing into the area like some ethereal molten, filling the landscape from heaven to earth. Filling me with fear. Sniffing deeply I struggle to determine if it is smoke and an approaching fire. With each breath I discern the faintest memory of pine. The thickness continues to pour into the area. Facing an absolutely new experience, fear engages my mind with imaginings of toxic gas and impending cyanotic convulsions, even the possible arrival of some queer creature. Grandmother has completely disappeared from sight.

Courage or stupidity, it couldn't be named, but I stay. The animals and birds remain quiet. Just the sound of falling leaves, but it was late November and the trees mostly bare—the sound of swollen rain drops one hears just prior to a downpour, but the downpour never arrives. I settle back in my chair. Still alive. That's a good sign. No foaming from the mouth, no attackers from the thick.

Is *this* thick fog? My earlier fear dissolves, supplanted now by another, this one very old. It feels like the dread of my seafaring ancestors who experienced this fog under different circumstances. This ancient fear harbored in the port of my cells rushes for release. It leaves me space to be with this rare moistness. The land firmly under my feet, I lift my face toward the mist in welcome. Enveloped now in a cloak of rare beauty, content to be a part of the mystery. Feelings of gratitude lay bare shame and embarrassment as I face my disconnect and grieve that my first responses to this gift of early morn are fear, suspicion and distorted perceptions. But are they not a part of the mystery too?

What do I behold, if not rarefied air and a rare communion of sky and water. Perhaps the clouds so pine for Grandmother that on this occasion they descend secretly in the stillness and dark to touch her. Have I not heard their tears at their joyous reunion? And smelled their

perfumed bouquet gathered from the pines they caressed along their quiet journey to this meeting?

The Experience of Heavenly Passage

Sometimes I see the souls. Just when morning's first light begins to color the sky with the palest blue and reflects on the lake's quiet surface. The water's edges smudged to a vague softness. That's the time I see them, when the wind's a mere gentle caress. That's when I see the legions of souls. The procession is endless. Determined hordes of ghostly wisps lean with the wind in the direction of the water's flow. They prepare to leave the sanctuary of the lake, hovering, gliding on her surface. And then, as if responding to some wordless cue, they leap courageously from water to air. In silence, in agony or ecstasy they're torn apart, violently twisting and turning for a moment as they transfigure and then vanish. In this sacred moment water rejoins air, returning to the sky, the Heavenly Father. The legions continue to come. I feel a deep gratitude and honor their courage, feeling at the same time my own fear in embracing transformation. I witness a ritual that has happened since the beginning of time. This air I breathe is an ancient air. My body, an ancient body. This is what I am remembering. And then I notice my own cold breath drift off toward the water, to join the legions. It is our transformation. I behold in silence and joy this holy moment.

The Experience of Small Bird

My senses are assaulted by the putrid smell of garbage and sewer, an oil slick on the shoreline and wide bands of sludge hovering on the water's surface, lingering heavy and thick. My senses take it in. I'm aware of my anger, my sadness and fear. I'm aware where I hold it in the body. I'm aware how my mind wants to assign blame, wants to initiate action. I try to let it go, feeling how it pulls me away from acceptance. But my senses continue to birth these feelings. My inclination is to distract myself with a more selected embrace of nature but my heart says otherwise.

How do I let go my resistance, lay myself bare to this reality and to my mind's fear that there is no coming out of it?

I observe the blue sheen of oil on the beach's edge. Little sparrows hop close by, all in a flutter, pecking for breakfast on the debris beached by the waves. How is it I see misfortune but this delicate being blessing? With an old terry towel I pat up the oil, feeling so much tenderness in this ministration. A dark heron flies silently by. Can I tenderly pat up my sense of violation, hopelessness, powerlessness? How do I wash away the resentment, the outrage, the grief, the fear? Is it even mine? I feel disconnected from Grandmother, mired in my mind and overwhelming emotions. It isn't easy to behold Grandmother. And I don't know how but I know that listening to her, responding to her will be both our salvations. In spite of my mind's attempts, my heart calls me back to be in the present moment, even in all its ugliness.

Day after day returning to the lake, I steel myself for what I expect to see. Yet in the practice of beholding it, the flow of emotions seems to soften my armor and I yield, little by little, to listen to the voice of the earth rather than the voice of the mind. My own heart's voice is asking me simply to trust. Over time I begin to feel the comfort in doing this. It becomes profoundly freeing to trust that my heart will open wide enough to receive the wisdom and guidance of the Universe, to see the situation as the small bird—a gift.

With time, the waters and the beach regain vitality. The scum and oily residue gradually leave, but the foul odor persists and so does my awareness of it. Close to the water's edge from fall to spring a raft is moored. As I go deeper with my observing in the dim early light, I occasionally notice different water wave patterns radiating outward from the edge of the raft. One morning when the odor is particularly offensive I catch a glimpse of these waves again and this time, the dark brown head and furry body of a muskrat purposely swimming away from the underside of the raft to the nearby shore. MUSKrat, of course! That's the odor—authentic musk odor! A great joke on me! I have to laugh at myself—how removed from nature am I? It is so amazing to me how one tiny observation can, in a split second, shift one's whole

perspective, and subsequently one's relationships. The odor no longer offends me. In fact my heart lightens when I now detect it, because it forecasts a welcomed visit. This hardworking little critter built a nest in one of the empty metal drums underneath the raft, which provides the raft's buoyancy. When the odor disappears with the colder weather, I become attuned to muskrat presence just by the subtle movement of the water by the raft's edges. When the snows come I rarely see one, but if I listen very carefully, on occasion, I hear a yawn and a stretch or a quick plop as they enter the water from their hidden nest.

The Understanding

I come to realize that my interaction with the muskrat is a metaphor for that deep listening, for being present to what the world offers, not what I think it should offer. The situation at the lakefront is not a call to attend to environmental advocacy but to attend to exactly what is present to me, muskrat and all. *The true nature of things is not revealed by their first appearance.*³ I listened and the Universe responded. Spending mornings in silence and intimacy with the lake and the living world I have learned that to listen deeply, to honor, to give witness, to behold the Divine in the presence of the moment is the purpose of existence. Being and beholding brings us to that place of gratitude, opening the heart to participate fully in life, to offer our own gifts. When the heart is open, imagination and creativity burst forth like the ghostly wisps leaping to rejoin the sky. The heart acknowledges, give thanks, and mirrors the Divine just as the sky mirrors the lake and the bird returns the call. Imagination then celebrates the wonder, the unending beauty and possibilities of the world.

There are times, sitting with the lake, that I long for a particular presence—the fox to once again visit and dance past my chair. There are times when I miss seeing the hooded mergansers bob their heads enticingly toward their partners. But I've come to trust that what presents is exactly what will nourish me. I've come to see my purpose in being present, in listening deeply, in witnessing and in expressing gratitude. It is the beholding (manifesting the longing) that brings the belonging

described by John O'Donohue in *Eternal Echoes: Exploring Our Yearning to Belong*. This mutual embrace with the living world is our experience of the sacred. The Iroquois understand the Divine as the summation of all life in the Universe. I believe that to be held in that embrace is all that we ever really long for.

I continue to visit Grandmother and to listen. A beautiful Hopi Indian Prophecy says: *When the Grandmothers speak, the Earth will heal.*

Joanne Rothstein was a member of the Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice Cohort, 2010-2012. "In Grandmother's Presence" was originally published in *Chrysalis* (Volume 9, Fall 2012), 22-26.

Chapter Six

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 Hopes' *A Sense of the Morning*¹ 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.

~

The Place of Our Belonging

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.

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

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.

The Place of Our Belonging

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
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 herons 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 Place of Our Belonging

The dogwood-whitened morning whistled clucked
chirruped and tattled on itself so I was ill prepared
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 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
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

Andrew Levitt was a member of the Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice Cohort, 2006-2008. “Words for the Silence Before Dawn” was originally published in *Chrysalis* (Volume 8, Spring 2011), 8-13.

Chapter Seven

Understanding Closer Than Concepts

by John Shackelton

Four years after the events of 2006 that I recorded in “Languages Closer than Words,”¹ I found myself wondering about our human capacity for concepts, for that orderly kind of thinking only we can do. Where does it Belong?

This seemed like an important question. Given our long history of the destructive use of this ability, could it be that Earth’s evolutionary Learning made a cosmically fatal mistake? And if not, then what happened to this gift? What do we not see? I remembered that in 2006, I was prevented from conceptualizing my experience in abstraction. Did that moment of Recognition of the knowing in a mountain and the concurrent constraint of the Silence rejecting words speak to my question? In a morning meditation, feeling held in the Silence, I asked.

Of course, the Mystery holding us would not explain itself; the Silence would not offer understanding of the manageable kind we prefer. Within the sacredness of our Belonging, an understanding of the human capacity for conceptualization would not arrive conceptually. The Living response to my question began, as Real answers always do, in stillness in the Silence, the intimate touch of an awareness that forms only there.

I was sitting on our porch that August Saturday morning in 2010, looking out at the density of woods behind our home. In the stillness of those moments, I felt Earth's Life in me bodily, a physical sensation of relationship to all I beheld, to flowers newly blooming and trees older than I am (rather old, then). This echoed for me experiences in Ireland a month earlier where I had repeatedly felt Life rise up into my body from the earth beneath my feet. But now at home, the green of the trees in the light and shadow of early morning touched me, knew me into the intimacy of our Belonging. It was then, in the hush of this being-known, that the question formed in simpler words: *Where does conscious thought Belong?*

Then, from the engendering body-intimacy of the Natural World, a second Recognition: My wife Ruth and I were to return to Cashel Kilty the following summer (2011). This time, we were not invited to receive a gift but to be present in gratitude-of-reverence. We were to return to the place where I had been known into letting go of control-by-language. We were to be there in thankfulness-of-body, to present ourselves to Earth in that hallowed place.

June of 2011 found us on the Beara Peninsula on the coast of west Ireland, and we again hiked up to Cashel Kilty. It was again a rare Irish day—blue sky with wispy white clouds and a soft summer breeze. And I did not carry a notebook and pen.

Ruth and I stood together on the bluff, the precise spot where I had received the meditation stones in 2006. She stood to my left, our arms pressing against each other, facing east. There we acknowledged that we are not our own and offered thanksgiving for our Belonging to Earth. Then we “formally” offered body thankfulness—presented ourselves bodily, in totality, to Earth to be known into participation in the mystery of our humanness for the rest of our life journey.

It was a “moment” of utter simplicity, a graced absence of personal ambition, of spiritual objectives—no request to be initiated into lofty mysteries, no pursuit of transcendent escape from the limitations of body and time. No agenda at all. We had been graced to offer *body* thankfulness in awareness of not-knowing.

The answer to the question, *Where does conscious thought belong?* was not a conceptual explanation but an ecological injunction: *Present your bodies to Earth and be thankful for them.*

Well, then . . .

The Holding of our Human Learning

*In the Belonging are numerous languages, and they live in our bodies
and in the Earth and in Silence.²*

Our communion in these languages forms in a place of no agitations, a sacrament of stillness. This is a living expression in the body of earthen humility, of inner reverence before the mystery of our clay. In 2006 I was known by the Wisdom of Earth in a mountain “calling to ancient knowing within me, wordless memory resident in bones and blood, in organs and muscle tissue, in neurons and dendrites and the gathered complexity of their long evolutionary history and ineffable emergence as repository of hidden treasure living in kinship with the forest mosses and velvet foxglove and sap of oak and flight of lark—and the depths of earthen mountain and rock with its story of fire and water and air and sacred emergence of Life.”³ This was not a revelation to be absorbed and put to use. Instead, being given a profound seeing, a living Recognition, without the means to write it down, was my introduction to the essential primal constraints that hold our human Learning and gift us intimacy with Mystery.

The Recognition to offer body thankfulness was a continuation and actualization of those primal constraints. Being known into a knowing without words is not a condition nor even a state of being but an experience of a primal relationship.

*The body is a sacred threshold...the sensuous is sacred in the deepest sense.⁴
To spend time in silence before the mystery of your body brings you toward wisdom
and holiness.⁵*

~ John O'Donahue

What if the mystery of the human body is intimate to the Knowing of Earth? Earth intelligence is not abstract-conceptual but physical-ecological. So then, what if ontological understanding for the human is held within participation in Earth intelligence, is the potentially resonate presence to that Intelligence? What if we cannot be intelligent on our own, outside eco-participation? And what if this mysterious inclusion of us bodily into Earth's story is how Earth informs our journey in the Belonging, how she tells each of us her story of who we are? And what if this sacramental forming of us in our journey is that new birth we've heard tell of and the forming of non-derivative understanding? What if an egoistic attachment to conceptual "truth" is avoided only in the sacramentality of our clay?

And why would that last thought be important?

David Abram helps us here:

"Ecologically considered, it is not primarily our verbal statements that are "true" or "false," but rather the kind of relations that we sustain with the rest of nature. A human community that lives in a mutually beneficial relation with the surrounding earth is a community, we might say, that lives in truth. The ways of speaking common to that community—the claims and beliefs that enable such reciprocity to perpetuate itself—are, in this important sense, *true*. They are in accord with a right relation between these people and their world. Statements and beliefs, meanwhile, that foster violence toward the land, ways of speaking that enable the impairment or ruination of the surrounding field of beings, can be described as *false* ways of speaking...A civilization that relentlessly destroys the living land it inhabits is not well acquainted with *truth*, regardless of how many supposed facts it has amassed regarding the calculable properties of its world.

Hence I am less concerned with the "literal" truth of the assertions that I have made in this work than I am concerned with the kind of relationships that they make possible."⁶

Living human knowing is relational and actualizes the practicalities of our Belonging. If the word *truth* has any ontological reference, it is to this. Conceptual truth on this level exists only in our derivative imaginings. Conceptual expression is not of the nature of truth in the sense that Abram speaks of. My original experience at Cashel Kilty embodied detachment from conceptual knowing in its correctness and incorrectness as understanding. This is contextual to the locating of our capacity for conceptualization within its evolutionary Belonging.

*When [the human] mind was separated from the structure in which it is immanent ...
humanity embarked on fundamental error, which in the end will surely hurt us.⁷*

~ Gregory Bateson

On the surface of the land and within the layered earth among the strata, memory awaits of primal events that formed the Holding of Life. Our tiny memories cannot receive this Presence of indelible recollection in the stones and ancient rock, markings and forms that await our awareness. These cannot be known by digging, excavating, not by any invasive force of analysis, for all such obstructs our awareness of the Memory.

Though the stones do not live in the biological sense, they do hold marks of the Mystery of Origin and of Life—the upheavals and planetary shifts no living creature could have endured, but once settled into form became the matrix of life, the Holding where birth could be born. Rather than separating living creatures from the “nonliving” rock and earthen surface, we can Learn presence to the stones and the soil and its innumerable tiny worlds, which presence can open us to the Mystery of our own being. Those who call to the “elementals” evoke an ancient mythos that Recognized our inviolable Belonging to the earthen. The lifeforms closest to the roots and the rocks and to the markings of memory in the stones live intimately with the Origin Mystery and invite us to become still and leave behind our claims to superior knowledge. They ask us to allow ourselves *to be known* in Listening to Earth, to the song of first-births breathing in the ground beneath our feet, births emergent

from the primal womb of the Mystery that echoes the beginning of the universe, of being from non-being. This interface between life and the “inanimate” earth is one of the places the Silence dwells. This interface is a teacher of humans. It holds the sacrament of our humanness: there is no Knowing without being known into the embodiment of the landscape. Authentic human intelligence lives within the body within the landscape; when we separate these, we lose real Learning and fall back on insistent claims to know “truth.”

The Wisdom of Life and Living Beings

The Reality is that we live not only within the topography of landscape but also with the multitude of beings related to us in the sacred limitations of clay.

The birds
and all the creatures of the earth
are unutterably themselves.
Everything is waiting for you.⁸

~ David Whyte

In the sense that David Abram spoke of, all the non-human creatures of Earth live in truth. They are unutterably themselves in eco-participation with their environment. In this sense, might we learn to recognize identity as eco-location? Where does one belong within the Intelligence of Earth? As the climate suffers and the planet warms, all the creatures of Earth wait for us to Recognize our place and thus become who we really are. And...we cannot do that without them. Taxonomically, we are all human beings, but becoming unutterably our original human self requires a journey.

As in our evolutionary history, we could not have become human apart from the earlier long journey of the Others, our coming to see is also inseparable from them. We must cease to use them

as a component of our purposeful *means* of seeing (knowing); it is imperative now that we learn to see *with* them, within the totality of seeing in the Belonging. Outside of that intimacy we only think we see. Even the soul of our humanness depends on this embodied Belonging together. John O'Donohue said, "It is in and through your body that your soul becomes visible."⁹ Our humanness is real only within the total embodiment of Life and living beings in the complexity of all our eco-relationships.

In that same biological Integrity of the Living Earth, our minds are situated within the Greater Mind of Earth. My personal knowledge—in so far as it is Real from being known—lives in a wider habitat, or region, of Earthmind in which Learning occurs ongoingly. A mistake of our acculturation is to assume we own knowledge, that we can "have" knowing of our own apart from our Belonging to Earth. We believe we can obtain and store up knowledge in personal possession for personal use. We can indeed do something that has that appearance, but it is what the Buddhists call "maya," illusion. All such "knowing" is derivative. In Reality, we cannot take hold of ontological knowing and own it. To believe we have done so is the great illusion, now become a global delusion. This touches intimately the human intellect in the process of learning.

The mechanisms of conceptualization as means for explanation and explanation as understanding have infused and organized human thought processes so thoroughly that even our approaches to the ineffable—the spiritual, the sacred—reach for clarity of explanation and defined steps for applying that explanatory knowledge in order to achieve spiritual "goals." The entirety of this imposed control of mental process is civilization's enterprise for escaping the ecological intimacy of being known.

Intellect in isolation from bodymind tends to act in ways narrowly purposeful. Typically, the acculturated intellect serves the acculturated egoic self with all its insecurities, but perhaps the authentic service of the human intellect is to our human presence within Earthmind, and perhaps that service is not as source and means of comprehension but as one avenue of *expression* of understanding brought to us otherwise.

Within our Belonging to Earth, the intellect is not limited to probing; it can rejoice in our Innermost experience of being known into Recognition and revere that sacred encounter and—sometimes—serve the expression of it within bodymind and, occasionally, to others. Within the Belonging and our life in the Ancient Knowing, the human intellect is not a master of concepts and correctness but a servant of expression in Recognition.

Images of Truth

(There has been) . . . a destructive mismatch between human behavior and the characteristics of the biosphere within which human beings live and on which they depend. This mismatch is rooted... in the human capacity to think about the natural systems and act on that knowledge.¹⁰

~ Gregory Bateson

We have been acculturated to assume that if we have enough accurate information and we are committed to truth and have a clear perception of it, then we can know how to arrange human society effectively and act individually to make things better. That assumption, along with all that follows from it, is the territory of human judgment, for presented with all the information available, we select what to use. We judge what constitutes truth, and we act on those judgments. Furthermore, we make those selective judgments based on our intentions, rarely questioning the source of those intentions.

All this is contrary to the ecological life processes of the biosphere in which we evolved and in which we inseparably remain. The instrumental essence of our selected discursive knowledge gravitates against the complex intimacies of Living ecologies. The portal of return to ecological participation is the letting go of judgments about truth as necessary for human conceptualization.

The human capacity for conceptualization comes to us from within Earth's long Learning, the evolutionary forming of us. The problems and

ruin we have caused did not originate from a defect in that capacity but from our assuming management of it and particularly from our construction of the mechanisms of conceptualization as management toolbox. That development made conceptualization subject to self-conscious and self-determined purposes, thus engendering a humanly controlled, derivative understanding infused with the impulse to dominance.

But even where we've managed to exile the impulse to dominance from our thinking and embraced concepts of ecological behavior, we have not thereby rendered our bodies intimate to the Knowing of Earth.

Who among us is fully aware of our condition? The massiveness and cognitive complications and presumed reality of civilized human occupation of the planet deeply imprint the modern psyche. We are all infused with the mental constructs of a manipulation vast enough to contain the entirety of modern civilization. We carry in our bodies the illusion of right and wrong conceptualizations as light and darkness.

Furthermore, we are now making our "reality" more and more efficiently virtual, thereby engulfing the entire world in conversations constructed from the conceptual mechanisms of human dominance. But the dominance of human civilization over the Earth has always been an illusion—a virtual reality. The control-by-knowledge programmed into cyberspace promotes our historical error and seems now the inevitable cul-de-sac to which we have been rushing. Seen in the context of the Ancient Knowing, the constructions of civilization are merely artifacts of ecological absence and the virtual reality of computers merely the ultimate technological artifact of that absence.

What, then, can we do within the overwhelm of civilization's claims to know on its own and the incursion that has made into each individual psyche?

Attachment to conceptual beliefs, to "truth," and consequent accumulation of "learning" held in the head exacerbate fragmentation of the human psyche. In being known in the natural world, a Recognition resonates the fragmented psyche as though it were whole, thus touching each element of the psyche in its Real need. Seasons of such being-known can bring the psyche into actual wholeness.

Yet, in the Belonging we are not asked to self-cure, to find a system for fixing ourselves. John O'Donohue again:

*At this depth there can be no ideology or programme. The idiom of control does not reach this order of being.*¹¹

~ John O'Donohue

What then?

What else is there if not the quest for truth, the promulgation and defense of it, and the application of it to human affairs? Perhaps the Recognition that we are all held in a vast Mystery, the nature of which we cannot comprehend but into which we may see just a little. That little is so wondrous and fills the heart with such reverence that the pains and constant difficulties of being human lose the power to shrivel the soul.

There comes to us the earthen sacredness of our human Belonging-to-Life so fulfilling that, even in the midst of our struggles and often bewilderment, it is enough.

Our Journey within Civilization

In the Mystery holding us, seeing is not at all what our civilizational perception of vision has taught us. Vision is neither a seeing into the future prophetically nor a forming of the future instrumentally. *Vision is seeing in the present.* The details, all the particulars of now, know us and can still us in the present so that we are not agitated into corrective action. In the sacrament of stillness in the sacred Dark, the circumstantial details we want to resolve or fix know us into the sacrament of emergence—the wisdom of Light from the Dark of our ancient knowing...and we see.

The Living relationship to the current state of things in the world is not one of problem solving and correction but of being-known. Only as the details of our (individual and collective) circumstances know us can we see our Living response to them; only then can we see actual conditions as they Really are.

There is a wondrous mystery of Life at work in the Belonging, and the amazing Grace of it is that civilization cannot prevent its reach into the depths of us. In the very fragmentation of the psyche imposed in our acculturation, we are constantly being offered the grace of return to wholeness in the midst of our brokenness. Thus, the Gospel of Thomas: “Blessed are those who have been persecuted within themselves” (v. 69a). The Samsara experience of being known in our brokenness feels like a desolation of our efforts to do well, to be well, to deploy available resources to work our betterment. The fragmented psyche feels persecuted. The knowing-from-being-known emerges slowly from hidden depths, and Understanding seeps in through the cracks in our defenses.

The wonder of this Learning is the sacramental being-known moving us away from our illusions of possessing truth toward a letting go of “knowledge,” a living perception of its non-reality and an embodied (sacramental) experience of Understanding-in-the-Belonging. This sacrament of Learning comes to us as an unimaginable surprise. The Gospel of Thomas again:

*The seeker should not stop until he finds. When he does find, he will be disturbed.
After having been disturbed, he will be astonished. (V. 2)*

The entire hope for the human race lies in this astonishment at the sacred limitations that hold our human Learning.

Blessed Constraints

*There was a muddy center before we breathed.
There was a myth before the myth began,
Venerable and articulate and complete.¹²*

~ Wallace Stevens

The myth that “began” consists of all the stories we’ve been telling ourselves about our place of superiority and knowledge and ability

to control things for the better. This would include some of what we normally think of as myth as well as what we think of as science, all the instances in which our articulation is managed by the discursive intellect. But prior to that, according to the poet, was a primal myth of a different nature, articulate in a different way, venerable and complete at a “muddy center,” occasion of our coming to breathe.

In terms of talk, of words as thoughts, the myth before the myth began was silent, its venerableness a non-verbal articulation at the muddy center, a sacrament of the Silence. The venerable myth in its embodiment was emergence of a Living Context-of-Place in which our humanness could draw its birthing breaths and continue to breathe thereafter. At our muddy center lies the ancient Knowing of our humanness, the myth before talk, articulate in its form as embodiment of our original humanness. This is the venerably complete which alone is capable of Recognizing in its surroundings all that corresponds to it, and each such Recognition manifests as a sacramental resonance—embodied knowing articulating itself without words.

The myth before the myth began includes all of Earth and the Web of Life within which our muddy center emerged, so our resonance of Recognition is first of all and originally a sacramental response to the landscape, to forms in the Natural World as they locate the individual human within the Belonging. This is the opening of our muddy center to its ecological articulation.

The myth before the myth began is present in the silent (no talk) forms of Earth and the Living complexity of their relationships as original (non-verbal) Story. The venerable and complete myth articulates our human participation in its Living Story, knowing us into Recognitions that render conscious mind silent, empty of discursive thought, the Emptiness of being known into stillness. At the moment of Recognition, the conscious mind harbors no words; *bodymind articulates its ancient Knowing as resonance*. The places where words move about are silent. Later, these silent places become the receiving matrix for articulations emerging from the inner-knowing from being known into Recognition. All this lies at the center of our capacity for contemplative presence to the Natural World and to words.

Contemplative reading has been a human practice for a very long time. Reading a work not limited to discursive language (poetry, lyrical prose, writing inviting heart presence (such as *Anam Cara*) may still the conscious mental operations that analyze and evaluate and read for mastery. What happens when we do not read to take in ideas and assimilate them into the existing schemas of the mind but read to Recognize articulation of the ancient knowing within us? This *presence* to the written word tends to calm our usual ideational mental traffic and, moving it aside, bring ideas of a different nature.

Unlike our formally acculturated systems of thought and explanation, these ideas do not obstruct emergent awareness of the ancient Knowing embodied within our original humanness. Thoughts from contemplative presence to poetry and other reflective writings often inform in the conscious mind the emergence of a pattern of thought welcoming to the articulation of what we knew but didn't know we knew:

*That giving oneself permission is very close to...things like art and things like
poetry and rhythmic prayer
[which]...are discoveries in the literal etymological sense of the word. They are
uncoversies of that which
one knew before. Then sacredness has something to do with this covering and
uncovering...*¹²

~ Gregory Bateson

*Things you know before you hear them.
Those are you.
Those are why you are in the world.*¹³

~ William Stafford

Why you are in the world is not a question under the purview of the conceptualizations of metaphysics, theology, and philosophy. This *why*?

emerges from our evolutionary history, and its answer must of necessity be ecological. Furthermore, its ecological nature is precisely what invites us into the ancient and deeply sacramental working of contemplation living within us. Dudley Young in *Origins of the Sacred* wrote: "...the way to make breathings is to stop talking, and if you do *that*...the words may come of themselves, unbidden, unforced, and deposit themselves as real presences in the silent spaces you have cleared for them."¹⁴

Whence the origin of those non-discursive words?

When we are being known in the Natural World, we feel the Silence in the presence of all non-derivative form, whether geological or biological, touching the depths of our Innermost awareness. In ecological mutuality of presence to such earthen forms, we may feel the stirring of Understanding not as something to hold onto but a *mystery in which we are Held*. As Earth tells us her story of who we are in the Belonging, we find ourselves letting go of the tendency to traffic in good ideas. The Voice of the Silence relieves us from those and welcomes us into the mystery of Unknowing.

*One day, I stopped telling myself
all the things I'd been telling myself,
and I stopped needing to know
all the things I'd been needing to know.*

~ David Whyte

In the Sanctuary of Ancient Knowing, we Learn to understand that we cannot know.

The language of Silence does not explain. It knows us. Words born of the Silence, formed in the sacred Dark, even when they emerge into voice as expression in idea form, do not directly address the rational faculty but rather touch the capacity for resonance. They emerge into consciousness as Silence-in-form. When spoken, such words can "enter" the hearer as Silence in words, invoking inner stillness and resonance. What occurs is not conceptualization but Recognition. The words

resonate in the entire bodymind, not just the conscious, manipulating brain. In the Recognition of the hearer, the words live as potential sacrament; they *know* the hearer.

Speaking the words that were born in the Silence and eventually emerged into conscious awareness can bring the hearer to a place of inner resonance, a moment of being known. However, in print, the immediacy of living encounter is lost. Nevertheless, for readers open to being known (whether conscious of their openness or not), inner knowing may respond in resonance, recognizing expression of itself. So, the expression in print of authentic seeing does not invite mastery of content, knowledge as power. Instead, in its tone of shared humanness and absence of persuasive pressure, it *asks* the reader to be present to the words in Silence, in a state of inner waiting for Recognition. Whatever is there in print that corresponds to where the reader is on his journey will know him. He will recognize himself there—an articulation of the Ancient Knowing within him. A young woman who experienced this while reading a book offered in this way wrote these very telling words:

When reading or hearing something that you truly connect deeply with, it is like someone is reading from your book at the same moment you are reading from theirs. As if someone is reading, or reminding you of, an excerpt from the ancient text of your soul.¹⁵

This is eco-knowing, the ancient Life of sacred communion, and reflects the eco-place of words, of conscious thought and the sacramental nature of human Understanding.

The Silence Knows

When we are bodily aware of the Natural World from within the depths of our humanness, we feel the Silence in the presence of all Learned forms, whether geological or biological. In ecological mutuality of presence to such earthen forms, we may sense the presence of Understanding. As Earth tells us her story of who we are in the Belonging,

the Silence inhabits our stillness, and we find we no longer need to traffic in good ideas and pursue corrective projects.

Ontological Silence is the ultimate environment, the Great Container, in which we live and learn and in which Earth has lived and Learned.

For us then, humans living on and evolved from Earth's long Learning, knowing is ontologically planetary and not individual. No one *knows* but only "knows" apart from the vast accumulated knowing of Earth. Our minds live within that greater Mind. In this sense, it is impossible to have knowledge of our own located in personal possession to use as we will. Instead, we must breathe in our kinship to the larger Knowing held in the Silence.

Understanding our human Presence

*Those who distinguish between samsara and nirvana are in samsara.
Those who no longer do are in nirvana.*

A Buddhist sutra

Although it is necessary to see civilization's claimspace of dominance as the territory of the loss of our humanness, it also comprises the actualities of our journey *of return to* humanness. This is "why" we learn to see the illness of culturemind while also being known into reverencing the circumstances within civilization's machination wherein we are being known. The grace of non-judgment comes to us as this twofold seeing in which we are no longer blind to our foolish claims of superiority and the harm we've done to the planet and our own humanness, yet we see the Grace of the Belonging holding and knowing us as we struggle and breathe in that very territory.

The intimacy of the belonging together of the ancient knowing in the depths of our humanness *and* our journey within civilization's claims is the matrix of emergent Understanding. Our being known in that journey opens the depths of us. From the sacred Dark of not knowing comes living Understanding, embodied and unexplainable. In the mystery of our humanness we are not instructed; we are known.

The attachment to an image of how the world should be blinds us to what we need to see in how the world is.

The corrective impulse plunges us into illusions about ourselves and our place in the world. No matter how noble our purpose and lofty our projects, the images of correction generate a sense of rightness that obstructs our seeing actual conditions as they Really are.

The sacramental Reality holding us invites neither purposeful alteration of actual circumstances nor transcendence of them, but an awakening to Presence as human relation to what is. Escape is not Real; there is only Presence. To this the Voice of the Silence calls our Remembering. It is not possible to see actual conditions as they Really are, nor our human failures as they Really are, as long as we hug the narrow intention to fix things. When we fight our failings and those of others we obstruct awareness of the Sanctuary of our Belonging. As we are known into the opening up of the ancient knowing within us, the head becomes re-centered in the heart, and the Sanctuary of original participation in the Belonging opens our awareness to the Mystery of presence-to-others, even (especially?) within the precincts of civilization.

What is being called for now is not an enlightened movement to correct civilization's errors but localized restorations of Intelligence. The return of human presence to participation in Earth's Intelligence can occur without separating ourselves from our fellow humans who work to fix things. In fact, our presence to being known in Earth's Intelligence quickens our presence to our neighbors in the midst of their ambitious projects and saves us from the illusions of trying to correct them. The intimacy of the belonging together of our journey within civilization and the ancient knowing in the depths of our humanness becomes the matrix of Understanding. From the sacred Dark of not knowing, of not needing to be right, comes living Understanding, embodied and free from the need to control.

This is critical to our human presence on Earth now because of the inherited burden of our long, civilized history and assumption of rights over the planet. We all feel the overshadowing reality of our collective error as the climate worsens and Earth's irreversible illness

becomes undeniable. Now, in the 21st century, we feel the terrible weight of a Recognition too vast in scope and too horrifying to be held within the scaffolding of human concepts. We cannot fix it. There can be no humanly managed correction of the mess we have made. Enclaves of sacred communities as mini-cultures of healthier social-environment structures, as noble as they are, remain places of managed correction, lovely but derivative forms.

However, we can be brought to awaken to authentic Intelligence.

Localized restorations of Intelligence may form within circles of Unknowing, gatherings of openness to being-known. As such gatherings are known into eco-intelligence, a matrix of Understanding may emerge—a birthplace for breathings. What we may be graced to see then is beyond any imagination we can conjure now. Our humanness was born within the unfolding Intelligence of Earth, so as we are given to return there, our claims to truth are revealed as nothing compared to the order of the seasons and the movement of water and the call of birds—the Ancient Knowing.

Such localized restorations of Intelligence do not separate themselves from our fellows in civilization's claimspace. In fact, our presence to Earth's Intelligence quickens presence to our neighbors in the midst of their corrective projects and saves us from the illusions of trying to correct them. Localized restoration of Intelligence in the Belonging is present to all without rightness, without the pressing of claims to truth.

When we contemplatively revisit previous moments of being-known in the Natural World, intimately touched by Earth, the inner Recognition resonant in that original intimacy may be quickened again, and sometimes the Living work it has been doing in us further integrates the psyche in quickening sacrament, and we may become aware of some of this, which sometimes emerges into our conscious minds as words. Such words are not explanation, not maps-of-how-to we can keep for ourselves. They are living and integrative, whole-making, bringing the head into its place in the wholeness of bodymind. Such words are not really concepts as we think of ideas conceptually useful, but their emergent life from the body brings the head into the heart while the person utters them, in inner voice

or in whispers, and continues the longer sacralization work of bringing the conscious mind into bodymind in the fullness of our humanness. In the fullness of sacramental consciousness—embodied Knowing-from-being-known—the human is brought into an Understanding that current human awareness and cognition is incapable of imagining. Intelligence is neither disembodied nor abstract but lives in the complexity and communions of clay—our clay and all the clay beings of Earth, the Whispers of the Ancient Knowing held in the Silence.

Held even in the 21st century with all its voices and confusions and endless demands.

How demanding are the days
 noisy with words and worries,
spoken and unspoken fears of the pending,
 uncontrollable tomorrows
casting their shadows over fevered preparations.

When all the questions today
 are about tomorrow,
Who can listen?
Who can hear the Whispers in the days of inner noise?

Yet always the Whispers breathe upon us,
 felt on surface days as a sense of something
 forgotten,
a stirring of sleeping memory.

In small seasons of stillness
 felt more deeply as invitation to Listen
to the Silence in its ancient articulations
 not to be translated, not to be used,
but surely to be breathed in.

John Shackelton was a member of The Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice Cohort, 2006-2008. “Understanding Closer than Concepts” was published posthumously in *Chrysalis* (Volume 19, Fall 2022), 5-19. John was a founding member of the Educator Council.

Chapter Eight

Dialoguing with Earth

by Eric McDuffie

I recall the first day I ever held a fly rod as if it was yesterday. It was my third birthday, April 3, 1969. My grandfather walked up beside me and handed me a shiny red Sears and Roebuck fly rod and reel and said, “Let’s go fly fishing!” I didn’t know it then, but that initial invitation—one that was offered again and again—would have a profound impact on me. Throughout my childhood, almost every weekend was spent fly fishing with my grandfather on the pristine lakes and rivers of central North Carolina. Sitting together in our sixteen-foot aluminum johnboat, the trolling motor slowly moving us forward down tree-lined banks, we would cast our lines again and again along overhanging bushes, fallen trees, and sandy flats in search of monster bluegills, pumpkinseeds and shellcrackers. Sometimes we got a bite, other times we didn’t. But, regardless of our productivity, we always had nature unfurling there before us, as if in a time lapse.

It was during these quiet reflective moments with my grandfather, fishing our local lakes and streams, that I began to feel a gravitational pull to the natural world. It was no surprise, then, that eighteen years later I started my undergraduate studies in Biology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the very school that my grandfather had dreamed

would one day be my alma mater. But now that I have all those years behind me and can call upon the wisdom of hindsight, I am beginning to understand why my grandfather and I kept returning so faithfully to those lakes and rivers. I believe there was a communion taking place between ourselves and the natural world, and fly fishing had served as the medium. Standing there with the line zipping over our heads, we were in the act of dialoguing with the earth and her various elements—be they water, air, fish or soil. And, although this communion may have been unconscious at the time, it nonetheless had a profound impact on my current understanding of how crucial it is that just such a dialogue be made available to others. This communion becomes increasingly imperative when considering the health of our planet today.

Throughout the course of his writings and lectures, the most influential writer I have ever known—cultural historian Thomas Berry—spoke of the Earth and universe as a “communion of subjects”:

...qualities that we identify with the human are also qualities that we observe throughout the natural world. Even at the level of the elements we observe self-organizing capacities, also the capacity for intimate relationships. These reveal astounding psychic abilities. These are so impressive that we must consider that modes of consciousness exist throughout the universe in a vast number of qualitatively diverse manifestations. Above all we discover that every being has its own spontaneities that arise from the depths of its own being. These spontaneities express the inner value of each being in such a manner that we must say of the universe that it is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects.

Precisely in this intimate relationship with the entire universe we overcome the mental fixation of our times expressed in the radical division we make between the human and the other-than-human. This fixation that I have described as the unfeeling relation of the human to the natural world is healed at its deepest roots as soon as we perceive that the entire universe is composed of subjects to be communed with, not primarily objects to be exploited. This

communion experience is, I believe, universal. It can be observed in the immediate reaction of almost anyone who simply looks at the ocean or sunset or at the heavens at night with all the stars ablaze, or who enters a wilderness area with its foreboding as well as its entrancing aspects.¹

As a child I was blessed with this inter-subjective communion experience through the sacred art of fly fishing with my grandfather, which lives deeply in my memory. On October 11, 2015, I wrote a retrospective piece addressed to my grandfather after he died. The setting is the Cow Pasture where he and I spent so many hours in communion with the natural world when I was a child:

Good morning Granddaddy. It feels wonderful being here with you right now while those stiff northern gusts of October wind push us along our favorite spot on Lake Holt. You know where I am. Yes, I look across the Cow Pasture where we fly fished together every Saturday morning. In my mind's eye I feel the tug of those big bream on the end of my fly rod and smell the musky odor of creation unfolding beneath me in those clear shallow bluegill spawning beds of yesteryear. It seems like it was just a few seconds ago when we stumbled upon this sacred and happy patch of water together. All those times we drove by this bank where we started our early Saturday morning over there on the other side of the lake. Isn't it ironic how our favorite spot where we always started off our fly fishing Saturdays together in my childhood days would always begin with you and me at the right hand corner of the bank just across the way, within hollering distance from where we are right now? Don't worry, Granddaddy. You know I will head over there next. I can see those big bream right now lurking under those wild thorny rose bushes and purple mountain laurel just waiting for their favorite yellow popping bug and black gnat to sink into their strike zone.

Well Gramps, we both know why I am here today. It's all about the bream; those colorful strong swimming butterbeans that gave us thousands of hours of pure fly fishing pleasure during my childhood years. I have a burning question I must get answered as part of the work I am currently doing in my two fall classes at Antioch University, New England. The central question I am investigating here

from my capstone Ecology Lab class asks: "Is the current population of bream in our favorite lake at, below, or above the North American Standard for bluegill species?" I suspect they will be either at or above the North American Standard, as we both know how big and beautiful all those bream used to be. I do hope the times have not changed. And we also know the bream never got any bigger than when they were spawning on those hundreds of bream beds here along the Cow Pasture.

Finally, I've got one! She is much smaller than what I am used to catching here in the Cow Pasture, Granddaddy, even though they are not on the spawn right now. Let's see here little girl. Let's get your length, weight, and a couple of scales behind your operculum. There you go. See you again in the spring when you are guarding your eggs right here below me. I wonder why the fishing in the Cow Pasture is so slow today! I guess it must be this high pressure system blowing those sharp northerly winds and me down the Cow Pasture too fast. We both know how stiff wind gusts belly up the fly line and make the presentation not nearly as natural as when she is lying down more gently. I also think the big bull bream are now lying along the secondary shelf running down the length of the Cow Pasture. Plus, all that rain we got last weekend must also be affecting the bite. That's okay. You know I will still find them Granddaddy. You definitely taught me to stay patient and persistent in the pursuit of the bluegill until I find them. There he is! Man, he hit that yellow popping bug hard! Come here buddy! I knew you would not let me down, beautiful Cow Pasture. You never have before. Thanks again, Granddaddy, for all you taught me. I sure do miss you and love you a lot. He sure is beautiful Granddaddy, just like it is with you here with me right now.

This living experience of a "communion of subjects" between myself, my grandfather, and the piscatorial subjects dwelling in the watery world affirms what Thomas Berry said: "The unfeeling relation of the human to the natural world is healed at its deepest roots as soon as we perceive that the entire universe is composed of subjects to be communed with, not primarily objects to be exploited."² From my own life experiences, I recognize the sacred art of fly fishing as a pathway to healing "the unfeeling relation of the human to the natural world."

Aligned with Thomas Berry's acknowledgement of "the inner value of each being" is the work of phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty,

“that places essences back within existence.”³ Merleau-Ponty, working in the lineage of phenomenologists coming before him like Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, wrote that phenomenology “in the end is nothing more than making explicit the *Lebenswelt* (life-world) that Husserl, toward the end of his life, presented as the fundamental theme of phenomenology.”⁴ For Merleau-Ponty, “phenomenology involves describing, and not explaining or analyzing,” saying that to “return to the things themselves...is first and foremost the disavowal of science.”⁵

Merleau-Ponty did not want to fall into the trap of science explaining the whole of the world, as he knew that before science could even enter the picture as a “second-order expression,”⁶ everything one comes to know about the world through lived experience comes before scientific thought or expressions: “Science neither has nor will have the same ontological sense as the perceived world for the simple reason that science is a determination or explanation of that world.”⁷ Therefore, according to Merleau-Ponty:

I am the one who brings into being for myself—and thus into being in the only sense that the world could have for me—this tradition that I choose to take up or this horizon whose distance from me would collapse were I not there to sustain it with my gaze... To return to the things themselves is to return to this world prior to knowledge, this world of which knowledge always speaks, and this world with regard to which every scientific determination is abstract, signitive, and dependent, just like geography with regard to the landscape where we first learned what a forest, a meadow, or a river is.⁸

Fly fishers are natural phenomenologists. With silence and attentiveness, they enter the piscatorial life-world and unite themselves with the “essence” or “inner value of the world.” For fly fishers, as for Merleau-Ponty, “every perception is a communication or a communion...a coupling of our body with the things.”⁹

Fly fishing has the capacity to produce oral and written stories as a cultural phrasing of our lived experiences. Our perceptions capture the

moments we wish to express with others and never lose. First, “we must live the things in order to perceive them.”¹⁰ Second, “the miracle of the real world is that in it sense and existence are one, and that we see sense take its place in existence.”¹¹ And, third, “the real stands out against fictions because in the real sense surrounds matter and penetrates it deeply,”¹² deep enough to capture our real stories as a product of our perceptual awareness.

The first written account of reciprocal and reflective fly fishing ever produced was written in 1653 by Sir Izaak Walton. He wrote *The Compleat Angler—or The Contemplative Man’s Recreation*. A literary masterpiece, *The Compleat Angler* is widely recognized as the “Fly Fisher’s Bible,” serving as the second most published book in the English speaking language following the *Holy Bible*. It provides the first encounter of deeply held nature connections through acts of reflective angling and serves as a structural marker to begin understanding how fly fishers might engage in a unifying practice. Walton wrote, “Rivers and the inhabitants of the watery element were made for wise men to contemplate, and fools to pass by without consideration.”¹³

Two centuries later, fly fishing as a reflective practice continued to hold ground and found expression in Genio C. Scott’s *Fishing in American Waters*.¹⁴ In a section titled “Antiquity of the Gentle Art,” Scott invites the reader to contemplate his or her surroundings when angling in any type of water:

But who can catalogue the pleasures which cluster around the angler’s pursuit? He pursues his avocations amid scenes of beauty. It is he who follows the windings of the silver river, and becomes acquainted with its course. He knows the joyous leaps it takes down the bold cascade, and how it bubbles rejoicingly in its career over the rapids. He knows the solitude of its silent depths, and the brilliancy of its shallows. He is confined to no season. He can salute Nature when she laughs with the budding flowers, and when her breath is the glorious breath of spring. The rustling sedges make music in his ear when the mist has rolled off the surface of the water, or the dew been kissed from the grass by the sun’s rays.¹⁵

Scott conveys to his reader his thoughts about the beauty we can see as we spend time alone within the watery world, flying fishing the flowing rivers. The majestic sound heard through the rushing water and the calm wind heard moving through the surrounding forest is felt when it flutters across the angler's face. Freedom in solitude enters the fly fisher's mind, ushering in a healthy look back at nature surrounding him when fly fishing the streams in hopes of connecting with his piscatorial companion.

This living tradition continues in the twentieth century. In 1930, distinguished literary scholar and fly fisherman, Odell Shepard, graced us with *Thy Rod and the Thy Creel*, one of the most elegant musings ever to honor the angling community. In his writing, Shepard tacitly recognizes the principles of differentiation, subjectivity and communion that are intrinsic to what anglers might experience while fly fishing. For example, Shepard wrote, "What can we desire more when standing knee-deep in a mountain river, fly rod in hand, with trout on the rise? Here he has earth and air and sky before him, strangely interfused and woven into one element. The brook runs over the bones of the planet and carries the sky on its back, so that it is a complete world, and one who gazes into the crystal long and steadily will find there not food and drink but work and play, patience and excitement, knowledge and wisdom, fact and dream."¹⁶ Here, Shepard insightfully recounted a small piece of the universe he sensually valued, felt and reflected upon while fly fishing; perhaps not even realizing that his lived experience embodied the three principles that Thomas Berry recognized as "the reality, the values and the directions in which the universe is proceeding."

Later in the century, R. Palmer Baker published *The Sweet of the Year* in 1965.¹⁷ "The Sweet of the Year" is a phrase many fly fishers have used over the centuries to evoke the beginning of the spring, when hungry fish begin to come out of winter dormancy. This is a time when the breath of life along the streams, rivers, and lakes transforms from a slow moving and quiet hibernating winter to an explosion of aquatic life forces saturating spring's waterways with movement, bright color changes bursting with new life, frenzied fish feeding activity, and hurried

reproductive spawning. The author's love and connection with nature's sublime beauty is perfectly expressed in the following excerpt:

On an April evening the wind comes softly from the south. The angler reaches the countryside with his friends. Stepping from the car, he smells the damp earth and feels the wind. Then suddenly the sweetness is upon him. From the pools and swamp meadow across the road he hears the peepers, the little frogs of spring, singing as though their lungs and hearts would break.¹⁸

As Baker steps out of his car to suddenly hear a chorus song of melodic sounds emanating from multitudinous aquatic species surrounding the watershed, he breathes the living Earth's moist soils encapsulating those inter-subjective life forces coming into his olfactory awareness in all directions. This moment touches his conscious awareness and flows through his consciousness before he even has time to think. Merleau-Ponty would have situated this sensual inter-subjective scene within a field of presence as Baker's flow of consciousness permeated outward into the subjective world surrounding and enveloping his sensual nature.

The impact of this kind of dialogue with Earth on the life of a child is nowhere more finely described than in Harry Middleton's *The Earth is Enough—Growing Up in a World of Flyfishing, Trout, and Old Men*, published in 1989.¹⁹ Although the characters' names are changed, the story is a true account of Middleton's childhood growing up through the Vietnam era of the 1960s. Just before the war broke out, Harry's Army father sent him away from Okinawa, Japan and back home to the Ozark Mountains of Arkansas to live out his childhood years with his Grandfather Emerson, Uncle Albert and their Native American friend, Elias Wonder. Technological changes swept across the land like locusts all around them, but these three determined men were somehow able to salvage the simple life for themselves as they passed their fly fishing experiences on to Middleton.

They lived off the land as simple farmers, grew and sold crops to their township to make ends meet, hunted on their sprawling mountainous countryside, and above all, fly fished every nook and cranny of their heavenly

stream, Starlight Creek. This cold running mountain stream meandered down and across crystal clear plunge pools throughout their deciduous forested land. They constantly gave thanks in their own profound ways for how nature's beauty and bounties constantly entwined their lives.

Emerson and Albert were simple men. Their entire lives were spent living on this piece of backwoods mountain terrain, taking care of it like two lone shepherds tending their flock of sheep—in this case their wild mountain trout. Middleton recalls watching the men at night lose themselves in memory, which they called “journeying.”²⁰ As a boy, Middleton began to understand “that when they had lived with the land as long as they had, there came a point in time when the land became a part of them as much as they had become a part of it. The union, if not perfect, was inexorable.”²¹

A primordial silence constantly weaved its way throughout the story for Middleton and his elders as he wrote, “They wanted only the solitude the land freely gave. The solitude of Starlight Creek soothed them; it was not a self-imposed prison but a natural sanctuary, real and boundless along the shadowy banks of the swift-moving creek.”²² And then there was another profound statement written like this: “The old men fished for many reasons, I suppose, but angling gave them no greater reward than solitude, the priceless pleasure of spending unencumbered time along a cold stream in the presence of trout. No other bounty they had known matched these moments of quiet during which they desperately tried to smuggle themselves, in spirit if not in body, back into the natural world, the place where they were most at ease, truly at home.”²³ Even going so far as describing the primordial silence as their place of worship, Middleton wrote, “like anxious, spiritually ravenous pilgrims, they travelled to the creek each day, in every season, as much in pursuit of solace as trout. It was their presbytery, their mosque, their basilica, their bethel, their sacrarium.”²⁴ Here is where the artistic fly fishing realm became sacred in its own right.

Emerson and Albert lived their entire lives in this hallowed sanctuary they called home, but they constantly needed to understand more and more deeply what the land was saying to them, calling them

forward to constantly listen and witness its intimate connections. The land never ceased to teach them newer and deeper meanings of their purpose with it through each passing day, pulling them forward into their surroundings. For example, Middleton wrote, “Albert and Emerson had lived on the creek all of their lives and yet neither man professed to know it, understood its moods. Instead, they thrived on the creek’s limitless ability to astonish, beguile, enrapture, startle. It heated their blood, filled them with anticipation. Each day on the creek meant new journeys, fresh introductions, different discoveries, one heaven lost and another found.”²⁵

Middleton recalled a dark night he fly fished in Starlight Creek, “casting nymphs into the soothing darkness, the interminable blackness where flashed the eyes of bobcats and raccoons, where the owls in the deep woods howled like dogs, where the deer moved through the high country...I did not give in, but stayed in the creek cast after cast, each one an act of faith, a communion between me and the cold and the night and stream’s great trout.”²⁶ Earth’s communion of rhythms constantly beat into his conscious soul. This universally reciprocal rhythm was spoken and taught to Middleton by Elias Wonder:

In the moonlight, I studied the deep wrinkles in (his) face. The light softened his hard features. In a voice as faint as a feathering breeze, he began to talk, still working the rod, the rod length of line he had worked out. “You can feel it can’t you?” he said, and the words lingered on the wind. He waited for a moment, not wanting to interrupt the chattering whippoorwills on the hillside or the groaning frogs on the banks. “Rhythm,” he said, drawing out the word. He moved deeper into shadow, became, for a time, ephemeral, a bodiless but soothing voice. “Ever notice how everything out here has rhythm to it? Creek got a rhythm all its own, just as the trout have one they move to, a rhythm in the blood.” Rhythm. The word echoed in my head, drilled into my blood, and I watched the old Indian and knew, finally, he was teaching me, sharing a secret: rhythm. The blending motions of stream, trout, rod, line, drifting fly, and man...I lost all sense of

time, of place, of everything. Concentration absorbed me. Never had I felt such a consoling aloneness...Even though I was but a boy, I knew standing there in the stream that, from then on, things would be different. It was not that the world changed, but that I had changed in some fundamental way that I could not understand or undo. I felt, too, a sense of actually becoming, belonging. If my life as a refugee was not over, at least it had changed in both direction and purpose.²⁷

The lived experiences of fly fishers, especially the experiences of a child, bear witness to Merleau-Ponty's recognition that "every perception is a communication or a communion" and to Thomas Berry's understanding that "the entire universe is composed of subjects to be communed with..." Fly fishing is a pathway for healing the separation between human beings and the Earth. It serves as an experiential portal for us to connect more intimately, mutually, and inter-subjectively with the natural world.

Eric McDuffie was a member of The Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice Cohort, 2014-2016. "Dialoguing with Earth" was originally published in *Chrysalis* (Volume 18, Spring 2021), 4-12.

Chapter Nine

Toward a Science that Re-enchants and Shepherds

by Renée Eli

In these opening years of the twenty-first century, as the human community experiences a rather difficult situation in its relation with the natural world, we might reflect that a fourfold wisdom is available to guide us into the future: the wisdom of indigenous peoples, the wisdom of women, the wisdom of the classical traditions, and the wisdom of science. We need to consider these wisdom traditions in terms of their distinctive functioning, in the historical periods of their florescence, and in their common support for the emerging age when humans will be a mutually enhancing presence on the Earth.¹

~ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*

Over a period of months, I have contemplated the possibility of science as a wisdom tradition. A certain doubt, perhaps, is what found me steeping in the waters of reflections that poured through cultural historian and visionary Thomas Berry, among others. It was not until I sat down to write this essay that a question appeared: *What kind of science re-enchants and shepherds humanity toward the promise of a future?* I would not understand the question until I began to explore it, recognizing all the while that this question concerns not only the promise of a human future. This question concerns as much the future of all life on Earth.

Even if human interests are singularly human-focused, we cannot escape pressing concern for the totality of life on Earth. It is the largess of life as the “creative interpenetration of sentient beings” that makes possible our very existence.² This interpenetration makes itself apparent in manifold ways: as the countless single-celled organisms teeming beyond what the naked eye can see, breathing life as they do into an Earth surface wholly endowed over millennia with carbon, out of which plants emerge and flower and bear fruit on land and in the seas and become the cellular matrices of our bodies and those of trillions more microbes that inter-exist as each of us; it is apparent as the vast web of roots intertwined with an equally vast network of fungi that circulate the Earth’s waters and innervate the “biologically excited layer” of the Earth’s outermost crust;³ it is apparent as every bodied creature making way through air and water and upon land that, too, become our flesh and feeling and carry forth the voice of life in communion with our own; it is apparent by the revelations of science, made possible by the people who do science, struck with wonder, perhaps, at the astounding glory of all these as one magnificent whole that ushers meaning into our existence and keeps us from the overwhelming despair that would overtake us were we to find ourselves here alone.⁴

Yet we find ourselves alone in our capacity to desecrate. And we find ourselves alone in the uncompromising need to make urgent our response at an ever-pressing threshold. Over the past four hundred years, through technologies conceived and carried out at the hand of science, the human being has managed to make so toxic the air and water on which all existence is dependent that we have catalyzed a loss of planetary life we are only beginning to glimpse. We might find ourselves arrested by an impulse to look away. Let us not. Doing so will neither save the planet nor our own species. We cannot escape the deleterious effects of poisoning the Earth so. We have only to peek inside the homes and hospitals of our immediate communities besieged with the burgeoning of chronic diseases from the Western way of life to perceive that something is awfully awry.

We know this story of devastation. We not only hear it in a growing clamor of urgent warnings. We feel it inside our own skin. Human technologies are

stressing the planet to the brink and in the process, making humans sick the world over as peoples take on evermore the Western way. Once, medicine sought principally to overcome the plight of famine and pestilence—neither of which are any less concerning now.⁵ Even so, today our healthcare systems are besieged principally by ailments from failing immune and endocrine systems that cannot stay apace the biological endeavor to adapt to the stress of environmental defilement.⁶ The pandemic that began at the close of 2019 has exposed—dreadfully so—the vulnerability of the body at the hands of human ingenuity gone beyond the bounds of biology. It has given us a glimpse at the indignity of civilization’s seemingly limitless thrust into the wilds of nature only to sacrifice the creatures whose blameless existence we humans have encroached upon. It has unveiled the morass of an immediacy of being elsewhere by aero-flight that at the same time brings us ever closer to one another in ways that dissolve geographical and political boundaries and unite humanity as one. It has intimated reasonable doubt about the soldiering on of human progress in ways that seem to bring forth a question of conscience. By conscience, I mean not an externally imposed morality dictating the rights and wrongs of peoples. By conscience, I mean the open-and-tender-heartedness to “meet all those inner sufferings” of existence.⁷

Unambiguously, what the climate crisis and devastation of the Earth reveal, and what the pandemic makes unmistakably lucid, if we may be so brave as to look with an open and tender heart, is that all of humanity is at the abiding mercy of all of humanity. All of life as one whole self-creating corpus is at our mercy. In the words of Thomas Merton, “We are members of one another and everything that is given to one member is given for the whole body.”⁸ That this is so has always been so. My life and your life pass through and into and open upon one another and all others as close as the touch of two hands; the distance the eye travels to meet the words on this page; the waking birdsong that caresses my ear, and yours; a cloud formation over a field of flowers brushed by honeybees who thirst for rain made sweet by the dance of sunshine, soil, and the divine spark of florescence; as close as the cry of a child wanting to be held safely at the farthest reaches of this, our great blue planet. Our interpenetration is the living permeation of being. That this is so is a revelation of science.

Even so, an amplifying “disenchantment with science”⁹ can be heard today echoing in every hall and corner of Western civilization. I have been among those who have decried science as we have come to know it, even as one with a background in science. And still, Thomas was quite convinced that science is not only necessary for the promise of a future. For Thomas, there is wisdom to be found in this tradition that has made possible the technologies we have come to both rely on and assail.¹⁰ Wisdom is a possibility offered by science as a revelatory mode of the universe itself. Wisdom comes through understanding and acting in accordance with that understanding. It is Thomas’ conviction regarding this wisdom that inspired my inquiry about a science that *re-enchants* and *shepherds* humanity toward the promise of a future.

In this essay, I circle round, wander, and wonder through the writing in what might be termed a ‘hermeneutic spiral’, never quite sure where the process of inquiry is taking me, and therefore, you, Dear Reader, trusting nevertheless a presence to the formed question itself and the spiral of interpretation that is at once deepening and opening on these pages. We meander in conversation with Thomas, among others, drawing intentionally upon their words as a mode of communion. We wind along currents of the human experiment of science, inviting further inquiry at every apparent turn. In this way, we become participants in the human unfolding of scientific revelation.

Science Birthed of the Modern Age Becomes A Reflection of Enfoldment

*Science as a wisdom tradition is only in its beginning phase, even though scientific knowledge has advanced with amazing success ever since the sixteenth century.*¹¹

~ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*

Thomas professed a careful critique of the ethos and technologies borne out of the Modern Age, the fullness of which paved the way for humans to “manipulate our environment to our own advantage.”¹² The

West would come to bear a scientific attitude resting on dualistic notions of mind and matter, mechanism, reductionism, and empirical objectivity. These are ideas I unfold here in ways I hope reflect how it is that we have lost faith in the promise of science. If it is so that science is still in its infancy, as Thomas suggests, we might refrain from losing hope in its prospect to re-enchant and shepherd us. We may come to recognize that science reflects the human psyche. The unfolding of the human *informs* the science that may deliver us to the promise of a future. *We* are the science of the future. To orient us toward such a future, we must necessarily trace and understand where we have been so that we may act in accordance with what we now see.

The psyche of the early human was imbued with a sense of everywhere flickering aliveness, an aliveness primordial and sacred, the human experience awash with reverie.¹³ This diaphanous way of experiencing the world came into being with the coming into being of the human. Albeit modified, the divine vision voyaged into Western civilization and endured through the medieval period, manifested through “revelatory experiences of a spiritual realm both transcendent and imminent in the visible world about us.”¹⁴ Nicolaus Copernicus’ (1473–1545) revelation in 1543 that the Earth moves around the sun changed all that, wholly tilting the Western orientation about our place in the cosmos. We would become “cosmologically estranged,” unmoored from our unmoving place in the center, untethered from the heart of the universe as we then knew it.¹⁵ This stupefying shift was the dawn of the Modern Age. Science, as we would come to know it, was given its first breath. And world without purpose would become our very own.

Copernicus unearthed a cascade that would forever alter human perception and set course for a new order, an order that spawned “denial of the spiritual realm.”¹⁶ Francis Bacon (1561–1626) “proposed that through experiments with nature, we could learn about just how nature functions and through this knowledge we could control nature rather than be controlled by nature.”¹⁷ René Descartes (1596–1650) effectively “desouled the Earth with his division of reality between mind and extension.”¹⁸ We were left with a human body and more-than-human

world wholly separate and divided from, indeed, void of mind. That which is not mind is akin to machine, for Descartes. The split of mind from matter brought forth dualism, mechanism, and reductionism. Dualism severs reality and as such, annihilates the experience of wholeness. Mechanism gave us a worldview that life is the effect of extrinsic cause, void of intrinsic basis, meaning, and purpose.¹⁹ Reductionism holds that the ground of reality can be explained if we but ultimately find the final, common irreducible part.

Galilei Galileo (1564–1642) and Isaac Newton (1643–1727) were concerned with the physical forces governing the universe. Galileo insisted that all of nature can be understood mathematically. From him, we inherited an empirical method of experimentation that remains the measure by which all ‘good science’ is judged today. Newton pushed Cartesian mechanism to new degrees, issuing an “explanation of the universe simply by mechanistic forces acting in a random fashion.”²⁰ The West came to exist in an “objective world, . . . a world clearly distinct from ourselves and available not as a means of divine communion, but as a vast realm of natural resources for exploitation and consumption.”²¹ This was a “‘solid world’ way of seeing.”²² Such a way of seeing is akin to bringing “the living present out of the past, *life out of death*.”²³

The new experience was a reflection not only of *what* was revealed. The new experience birthed an entirely novel *way* of seeing the world and developing knowledge. A scientific attitude emerged, shifting radically the Western understanding of how knowledge comes to be and what constitutes ‘truth’. A new science would overturn the extant “mystical vision of divine reality.”²⁴ It would override an undergirding impulse toward “sympathetic evocation of natural and spiritual forces by ritual and prayerful invocation.”²⁵ The new scientific story and with it a crescendo of technologies that followed to our own time would make possible the human “capacity to determine on an extensive scale whether the basic life systems of the earth will live or die.”²⁶

The experimental method is the foundation of modern science. This method relies on testing what is not yet understood to be true to see if it is. Science does this by observation. Evidence of what is observed then

proves or disproves what the scientist set out to establish as true or not true. From their conclusions, new ideas and knowledge are issued in the form of theories. The trouble is we have a tendency to hold theories as *fact* and so we believe them to be unshakably true. We might, instead, come to recognize theories as *new ways of seeing* that emerge inside the eye-mind of the observer and make it possible, once articulated, for others to see the world as such. A theory, then, is “primarily a form of *insight*.”²⁷ It is “not a form of *knowledge* of how the world is.”²⁸ Understood in this way, we recognize that new ways of seeing continue as an ever-unfolding story of the universe itself through the human.

The scientific method of today still rests on the notion that quantifiable observations are ‘value-free’. The word observation comes from the Latin *observare*, meaning, ‘to attend to’, ‘to look at’ or ‘watch’. To observe, then, is to step outside of, making no room for participation *with*. A scientist endeavors to eliminate the human element from experimentation. The scientist, in this scenario, is an onlooker, a bystander.²⁹ The resulting conclusions are believed to be objective. As such, the scientific method supposes to bring certainty. But the hope of avoiding bias can never bear fruit, because every touch of evidence is interpreted by a human being who had an originating “organizing idea” in the first place.³⁰ Which means, every touch of evidence stirs inner feeling. No analysis is without human interpretation. The empirical scientist is not a passive bystander. The empirical scientist is an active participant in the inquiry, method, and conclusions, and therefore, any perceived knowledge borne of science. Refusing the human element in the ‘good science’ of the Modern Age refuses what we now understand about the nature of reality, that the observer interpenetrates the observed. The observed comes into being by the fact of participation by an observer. The past one hundred years or so of science have given us this insight into science itself.

This next revelatory phase of science restores a psychic dimension to the universe reflecting upon itself through the unfolding of human consciousness. Quantum and relativity theories, and the Heisenberg uncertainty principle have given a “sense of a self-organizing universe,”³¹

ever-unfolding through which, by which, and in which, the human comes to be as a “special mode of conscious reflection”³² that “activate[s] one of the deepest dimensions of the universe.”³³ *All that is* arises from inwardness.³⁴

Science, once again, reveals an entirely novel way of seeing and experiencing. That the observed needs an observer restores human participation in the wonders of the universe and life. Science becomes not only revelatory, not only participant, but in dialogue with what science beholds. This is a science that enfolds the human with the phenomena themselves enfolding the human. This is a science that asks for a new way of doing science. This is a science not yet sure of itself, seeing anew, albeit clinging still to an old pair of spectacles, which is to say, spectating rather than participating with and being seen as an act of seeing.³⁵

Out of Stillness: Wonder
Out of Wonder: Revelation

What do you see? What do you see when you look up at the sky at night at the blazing stars against the midnight heavens? What do you see when the dawn breaks over the eastern horizon? What are your thoughts in the fading days of summer as the birds depart on their southward journey, or in the autumn when the leaves turn brown and are blown away? What are your thoughts when you look out over the ocean in the evening? What do you see? ³⁶

~ Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe*

The far ancient Greeks of the Near East, long before the days of Socrates, practiced techniques that would bring them to utter stillness, *hesychia*, a practice that continues in contemplative traditions today. The purpose of *hesychia*, of stillness, was to “free people’s attention from distractions, to turn it in another direction so their awareness could start operating in an entirely different way.”³⁷ The point was to “create an opening into a world unlike anything we’re used to.”³⁸ This world unlike any other is not the run-of-the-mill buzz and hum of daily existence, the rushing and worrying ourselves from place to place, task to task. This

world unlike any other is a world that opens upon us by the enlivening of our presence to it in wonder, a world wherein we find ourselves suffused with awe by the sheer magnitude of mystery, the shimmering numinous presence ever in our midst. This is a world that awakens *insight*, a world so unlike any other that in it, we wake to understanding what we see and acting in accordance with that insight. We wake to wisdom.

The earlier human abided in this numinous world not as ephemera but through the indwelling totality of their being. Theirs was a world “imaged forth in the wonders of the sun and clouds by day and the stars and planets by night, a world that enfolded the human in some profound manner.”³⁹ The “world unlike any other” flashed forth through *besychia* is a world to behold in its wholeness by the very wholeness of our being.

We witness wonder as an abiding sense in the young child. Theirs is a life still fresh with feeling, fully embodied. Children take in the world not with their eyes alone as the sense organ for seeing but with the whole of their being. When we, as adults, are captivated suddenly by the fresh sense of wonder, we have returned, in that moment, to the fullness of feeling, living in and through the entirety of our bodies no longer veiled by the limitations of mentation, of conditioned thought.

We have a deep longing for the experience of wonder. Wonder awakens in us the “excitement of life” tasted inside the quivering aliveness of our cells.⁴⁰ In wonder, we behold what we might not otherwise see, swept away as we might otherwise be in thought, which is itself always inclined toward manifesting as memory, toward taking flight in fantasy. In beholding mystery, we encounter the numinous and bring meaning to our existence. “The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious,” wrote Einstein. “It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed.”⁴¹

We might suppose that it was through persistent states of wonder that the universe came forth in celebratory effulgence through Einstein’s practice of science and the science of countless others who came before and after Einstein. In wonder, human intelligence opens to the flux of the universe as a quality of unconditioned perception. “Such perception

is a flash of very penetrating insight, which is basically *poetic*,” offers David Bohm, who continues: “Indeed, the root of the word ‘poetry’ is the Greek ‘poiein’, meaning ‘to make’ or ‘to create’. Thus, in its most original aspects, science takes on a quality of poetic communication of creative perception of new order of magnitude, a new way of seeing.”⁴² In Einstein, in Bohm, we encounter science surrendering the old spectacles of ideas and consenting to the desire of the universe to make known what the wonder of quiet stillness permits. This is science that consciously participates as “a synergistic condition in which humanity and nature work together in such a way that each becomes more fully itself through the other.”⁴³ Such is a science in conversation with *all that is* as an ever-unfolding creative process. A science in conversation allows for the “entanglement of matter with inward experience.”⁴⁴ A science in conversation is a science in communion, a “science of heart.”⁴⁵

Murmurations of the Mystical

*It is a mystical venture, for its ultimate purpose is to achieve a final communion with the ultimate reality whence all things come into being.*⁴⁶

~Thomas Berry

In North America, in the autumn sky, especially in the late afternoon when the sun is descending upon the Western horizon, if they happen to roost where we happen to be, hundreds, if not thousands of starlings rise into the sky in one sudden unified, seemingly weightless lift, as if carried into air by air itself. There, starlings shower all who behold them with the experience of their murmuration. They swoop and dive in complete unison, dancing across an expanse of sky in dramatic ameboid forms that arch and turn and fold in upon themselves and then open out again and spiral into arrays of glorious dynamic configurations. They texture the evening sky as a single dynamic installation of artful play. Schooling fish glide in like manner through vast expanses of water as one extended whole, their bodies flickering crystalline dispersions of light when the

sun catches them just so. The experience of being mesmerized by the unitive flow of these bodies—our kin—is like none other and invokes the yearning and cellular memory of being bodied thus.

Quietly but with a quivering keenness of our flesh, we recognize in them what an emerging science is inspiring us to not only understand but to consciously participate in: the recognition that “every living being is fundamentally connected to reality through the irreducible experience of being alive.”⁴⁷ To be alive is to body forth the creative energies of the universe as but one ever-expressive arising of the unceasing flux of the vast plenum, that “immense ‘sea’ of energy” enfolding a universe unfolding itself into being and awareness.⁴⁸ There is no separate body divided from the whole; there is only the coming into being of the multiplicity of bodies as the unfolding expressiveness of *all that is*.⁴⁹

To be one body is to be wholly embodied. Such wholly embodied moments are those when we avail ourselves—unwittingly quite often—to the ever-flowing, “undivided wholeness” of *all that is*.⁵⁰ These moments are the suspension of conditioned thought. Mind enjoins *Mind*. Being becomes *Being*. These are moments that alight in us the mystical, the direct experience of being one with the flux of *all that is*. They are moments of communion.

A science in communion, a science *shared by* and *belonging to* more than one, which is to say, *all*, is a science whereby the phenomena are not so much observed as *felt*. Phenomena are felt so immensely, indeed *loved* so much that science “persist(s) in attending to them” in such a way that it “resist(s) sacrificing them to ‘beautiful thoughts’.”⁵¹ Such a science becomes a dedication, a “sacred quest for understanding and participation in the mystery of things.”⁵²

This is a science of “feeling and expression” that “builds on relations and unfolds as mutual transformations.”⁵³ It is a science of “poetic ecology” that makes possible an understanding that matter follows “a principle of plenitude” and brings forth “subjectivity from its center.” Life, not a world of solid bodies moving at random by some extrinsic causal factor—*Life*—“is the original animating power of the cosmos.”⁵⁴

In this science, we find ourselves, if we have the heart to play, disclosing “our *sacred* story” through scientific revelation.⁵⁵

Revelation is not a thing sought but an unveiling given as direct experience enlivened with wonder in communion with “the ultimate mystery whence all things come into being.”⁵⁶ Revelation is psyche at one with Psyche, a momentary tilt toward mystical unitive experience with the ultimate mysteries of reality, of life, and of the Earth we call our home. A science of this mode of experience is a science that recognizes itself as reflective *intervening* between all of humanity and *all that is*—a science in communion. *This* science has the power to enchant us toward its evocative disclosures, its invocations of the mysteries that at once compel us and keep an obscurity. We touch the heart of meaning when the meaning of all maintains a quality of concealment. When mystery is alive, we are drawn toward the numinous. Here, “we are given to each other in that larger celebration of existence in which all things attain their highest expression.”⁵⁷

A science that permits mystery is a science that activates enchantment. A science that enchants is a science that portends of shepherding humanity—we, the people, as conscious, dedicated participants in communion, without which our “world will truly slip away,” and we with it.⁵⁸ A science in communion is a sacred science that carries hope, carries the goodness of the universe into every revelatory insight, carries a promise for a future to be possible.

Renée Eli was a member of The Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice Cohort, 2010-2012. “Toward a Science that Re-enchants and Shepherds” was originally published in *Chrysalis* (Volume 18, Spring 2021), 13-22.

Part Three

Birthing a Practice

*We must learn to recognize the promptings that emerge
from our own depths.*

~ Thomas Berry

Part Three

Birthing a Practice: Introduction

by Peggy Whalen-Levitt

“We discover the Earth in the depths of our being through participation, not through isolation or exploitation. We are most ourselves when we are most intimate with the rivers and mountains and woodlands, with the sun and the moon and the stars in the heavens; when we are most intimate with the air we breathe, the Earth that supports us, the soil that grows our food, with the meadows in bloom. We belong here. Our home is here. The excitement and fulfillment of our lives is here. However we think of eternity, it can only be an aspect of the present. The urgency of this psychic identity with the larger universe about us can hardly be exaggerated. Just as we are fulfilled in our communion with the larger community to which we belong, so too the universe itself and every being in the universe is fulfilled in us.”^a

~ Thomas Berry

In the Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice program we begin with these moments of intimacy with the Earth, our home, our place of belonging. We then reflect on these moments so that we might bring them into deeper awareness and consciousness. From this place of deeper awareness, we give birth to a work that might live

in the world. And, finally, we bring all of this into expression so that it might be shared with others. A sense of the sacred is weakened if we limit ourselves to just one of these dimensions. We are engaged in an integral process that we hope will continue beyond the life of the program.

As Thomas said, “In present moments, we begin to get the smell of home. Now we are beginning to develop energies for homecoming. Now we have the smell of home. In these moments we sense the real world, the abiding world.”²² Coming home, we are also beginning to develop new energies for birthing a work in the world. From the depths of our being, individual practices flow and flourish during the second year of the program. Thomas Berry used the word *flourishing* “as something that pointed toward a vibrant future that humans could create,”²³ and it is in this sense of flourishing that the work of these educators radiates out into the world.

Midway through the Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice program, we create a vessel in the form of a two-day retreat within which individual practices are born. The birth of a practice is neither an act of will nor an act of intention, but rather is a *listening* for what is living within each educator that wants to be birthed in the world. It is within this two-day retreat, in a place of belonging, that educators begin to discern more deeply their identities, destinies and practices. They begin to sense the possibilities of their presence here on Earth. Our two days together include solo walks on earth sanctuary trails that gift educators with a homecoming to their deepest belonging. We work in “I and Thou” dyads of empathetic listening that assist in the birthing process. We engage in a process of “letting go, letting come” to make space for newness and creativity. And, we create a circle of warmth and trust for group sharing of these evolving practices. We are also inspired by the ways in which Thomas Berry stayed true to his deepest identity and calling through a reading based on excerpts from “Goldenrod,” the reflective essay Thomas wrote near the end of his life. We speak of Frederick Buechner’s view of vocation as “the place where your deep gladness meets the world’s deep need,”²⁴ which becomes a guiding image for the birthing process. We end with a closing ritual, honoring the practices that have been birthed. Throughout the second year, we meet to share how these practices are changing and evolving in a circle of support.

The places of birthing and the practices birthed during the second year of the program are as diverse as the universe itself. Some educators continue with a practice of presence to further deepen and cultivate a capacity for presence with living earth. Some are moved to make significant changes in their lives through the transformative nature of the program. Some, who are artists, therapists and parents, bring their work into intimate settings. And some work within school settings to deepen ways of working with children.

Here, in Part Three, we will focus the readings on this last group of practices, practices that are birthed within educational settings. This work is part of a living tradition that infuses the educational realm with the breath of Life and a sense of the sacred through the inspiration of individual educators. It is a living tradition, emanating from the depth of each participant, and not something that can be placed in a “toolkit” or offered in a “workshop.” These practices are not meant to be divorced from the threefold process of presencing, reflecting and giving birth. With this understanding, they offer deep inspiration for new forms of flourishing in the care and schooling of children.

Readings for Part Three

“A Sacred Journey” by Susie Robidoux

“A Gentle, Creative Adventure: Using the Senses as Portals to Presence” by Jennifer Armodica

“Re-imagining Montessori’s Great Lessons in the Light of Thomas Berry: A Message of Hope” by Heather Koch and Andrea Reed

“Giving Voice to Love: Speaking to Schoolchildren through Poetry”
by Lisa Saintsing

“Where the Sense of Space Thickened” by Andrew Levitt

“We Are Earth” by Elizabeth Porritt Carrington

Chapter Ten

A Sacred Journey

by Susie Robidoux

Sacred Journey

The sky is on fire in a blaze of vibrant hues

Pause

Appreciate

Open this day and every day with a sense of reverence

This is a sacred journey

Embrace the quiet and gain strength

Settling into the noise is not reflection enough

Obligation will fade and love will prevail if given the space

This is a sacred journey

Devotion to stillness

Slow down

Behold and honor the divinity in nature

Growth blooms from this practice

This is a sacred journey

Inner knowing deepens with every step
You will be found
This is my sacred journey

Arriving at the Earth Sanctuary for the first time, I felt summoned by the energy of the surroundings and the possibility of what this program would bring to me, and my students. It is nearly two years later, and I am still only on the brink of honoring all that has been awakened in me. The small stirrings that have defined my path to date have created residual effects that have been seamlessly passed down to my students. Yet, my work is not done. As I look ahead to the journey that opens before me, I am hopeful that I will continue to foster this deep knowing that defines my innermost being, and resonates with all that is sacred in my teaching.

Looking back...

Busting through the door, determined to make up for lost time, I am halted. The sky is on fire in a blaze of vibrant hues. I am suddenly so grateful for my delay as I behold the magnificence of the sunrise unfolding before me. In this instant I am reminded to pause, appreciate, and open this day and every day with a sense of reverence for all the beauty—natural, spiritual, and communal—that surrounds me.

This excerpt from my first reflection brings me back to those first delicate moments when I was learning to hold those instants of wonder. While appreciating nature was by no means a new practice, seeing it through the words, thoughts and perspectives of Thomas Berry was something that brought new eyes to an old love.

I find my ability to embrace the quiet is gaining strength over my natural inclination to settle into the noise and call it reflection.

Such a beautiful thought, but such a hard reality for me. This sentiment has since been lost to overcommitment, life's uninvited challenges, and exhaustion. However, this intention is exactly that deep inner knowing that I am hoping to embody as this journey continues beyond the constructs of the Inner Life Program.

In that moment obligation will fade and love will prevail.

This sentiment fills me up every day. It is an essential truth for me.

My devotion as I continue with this process is to hold onto that drive but with a

sense of stillness. Allowing and encouraging my mind, heart, and body to slow down. Practicing the art of beholding, truly honoring the divinity in nature, and the wealth of spiritual growth and understanding that blooms from this sacred practice.

In retrospect, I realize this devotion began with ease. Forming my ritual of walking to school seemed to capture the simplicity I craved while also birthing the meditative space I was seeking. Each morning was something different, and nature was simply bursting around me.

I can proudly say that my practice is truly taking form and finding me more than I am crafting it.

To suggest I was beholding seemed almost presumptuous, since it was virtually impossible in those mornings to avoid the invigoration of the natural world. I am not sure when the exact tipping point came, be it the slowing slumber of winter or the added obligations of commitments above and beyond a taxing school day, but my practice seemed to fall into a deep hibernation.

I found myself returning to the words of my devotion, to help reground my intentions, and bring a sense of direction to a journey that was lost to the seasonal darkness.

As is often the case in my life, the students were the ones who helped me realize that while I was so intently looking for the best way to proceed with my devotion, I was engaging in it all along. The joy of watching snow fall outside our classroom window in silence...catching snowflakes on our tongues and breathing the fresh cleansing air of the bitter cold. These simplicities were exactly what was needed to guide my way.

I can proudly say that my practice is truly taking form and finding me more than I am crafting it.

It is now Spring, and the earth is teeming once again with the promise of life, warmth, and light. A natural intoxication has taken over, whispering for me to put aside obligation in favor of dancing in the rain, listening to the birds, and honoring the rebirth of the earth. I am listening. I am beholding. I am continuing on my sacred journey, with a heart filled with gratitude, for I feel that inner knowing deepening with every step.

Susie Robidoux was a member of 'The Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice Cohort, 2012-2014. "A Sacred Journey" was originally published in *The Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice, 2012-2014* (Greensboro, NC: The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World, 2014), 50-52. At the time of this writing, Susie taught 4th grade at Rainbow Community School in Asheville, NC.

Chapter Eleven

A Gentle, Creative Adventure: Using the Senses as Portals to Presence

by Jennifer Armocida

If you can learn to look at yourself and your life in a gentle, creative and adventurous way, you will be eternally surprised at what you find...Each of us needs to learn the unique language of our own soul. In that distinctive language, we will discover a lens of thought to brighten and illuminate our inner world.'

The foundations of my practice this year were two simple practices to create the time and space to listen to the “unique language of my soul,” as poet and philosopher John O’Donohue puts it. I committed to writing daily in a journal upon waking up, and also to spending time being present in nature each day.

The first practice, journaling, allows me to hear with more clarity the “distinctive language” of my soul. I have kept diaries and journals since I learned how to write, and often I don’t truly know what I’m thinking until I’ve written it down. Throughout this year, I maintained my routine of writing in a journal each morning, with a deepening emphasis on really listening to my innermost emotions, desires and questions. Paradoxically, this intensified focus and renewed dedication to journaling also required more of a “letting go” in my journaling practice. My writing became more about listening to what was arising for me, rather than dictating and

transcribing my thoughts from an analytical, intellectual place. Whether I have ten minutes or an hour to write in the morning, I try to meet myself where I am on any given day. Many versions of myself appear on my pages—questions, wise guidance, plans, worries, half-buried memories, wishes and flights of fancy. I keep my pen moving through it all.

Another practice I've engaged in throughout the year is the act of spending some moments outside each day, just being present to the sights, sounds, smells and sensations of the passing seasons. A spot that I return to each day is the creek by my house. It's a shallow creek lined with rocks on either side, home to a small flock of ducks who have improbably made their home in the widest part of the stream. Now that spring has come, the willow trees that line the bank are dripping with long strands of newly green leaves. When I spend time at this spot, often at the end of a long workday, I feel a sense of peace and freshness. Through the soles of my shoes, I try to contact the earth with my feet. Usually my dog is with me, and she rolls herself back and forth on the grass, bathing in smells invisible to my nose.

Being in the soul, the body makes the senses thresholds of the soul. When your senses open out to the world, the first presence they encounter is the presence of your soul... Your senses link you intimately within you and around you.²

I teach sixth grade, and spend my weekdays in a busy classroom of 11- and 12-year-olds. My intention for this year was to create a space in our days for my students to contact a sense of stillness and spaciousness within themselves and their environment. I used the senses as the anchor for our exploration and communication with nature. I was inspired by John O'Donahue's writings about the senses to view the senses as links both to a greater intimacy with self, as well as the world around us. For these practices, I would take my students outdoors to places on the school campus. At times we spread out along the flat green lawn outside our classroom; while at other times, we went up the hill to a line of trees at the edge of the property.

If we could look at the world in a loving way, then the world would rise up before us full of invitation, possibility and depth.³

As we focused on the sense of sight, I invited students to spend time in silence outdoors, using their eyes to really see and notice the world around them. We discussed the difference between looking and really seeing something deeply. At times, I asked them to find an object they were drawn to and focus on that exclusively, such as a leaf, stone, patch of grass or bit of tree bark. We also used the “beholding beauty” exercise I learned from Sandy Bisdee, Director of the Center’s Children’s Programs, in which students walked in pairs, pointing out elements of nature to each other as they walked. Upon returning to our circle in the classroom, students shared about their experiences. Often what arose was a deeper appreciation for the miraculous complexity of a natural element such as a leaf or blade of grass. Students also expressed delight in noticing the tiny and often-overlooked life teeming just outside our classroom, from birds carrying bits of straw to a nest, to insects scurrying to become at once softer and more observant with their gaze.

When you listen with your soul, you come into rhythm and unity with the music of the universe.⁴

We practiced listening in much the same way we approached our engagement with seeing. We discussed the difference between hearing and listening deeply. Students ventured outside in silence, with open ears to hear the world around them. Upon returning to the classroom and sharing our experiences, students always marveled at the vast array of sounds available when one stops to listen. From natural sounds like the singing of birds and the rustle of the breeze, to the motors of the cars that rush past our busy street, tuning in to all the sounds of the environment brings the students in direct contact with the present moment and all the life that resides there.

*Touch is such an immediate sense. It can bring you in from the false world, the famine world of exile and image. Rediscovering the sense of touch returns you to the hearth of your own spirit.*⁵

Before venturing outside our classroom, we talked about what it means to have a gentle, loving touch. We are all aware of times when gentle touch is not present, such as when we slam a book down on a table, or carelessly bump into a classmate while lost in thought. Students ventured outside, in silence, to engage their sense of touch with the elements of the natural world. The smooth, waxy surface of a leaf, the uneven ridges of tree bark, and cold, smooth stones all announce themselves through touch. This direct contact with the textures of nature brings students back to direct contact with their own bodies and all the objects and people populating their world.

I continually feel as though I'm just beginning on this path to a more loving, present, centered and connected way of being in the world. I plan to continue to grow and explore, both in my personal practice and with my students. I'm grateful to have shared this journey with a group of "fellow travelers" through the Inner Life of the Child in Nature program.

Jennifer Armocida was a member of 'The Inner Life of the Child In Nature: Presence and Practice Cohort, 2014-2016. "A Gentle, Creative Adventure: Using the Senses as Portals to Presence" was originally published in *The Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice, 2014-2016* (Greensboro, NC: The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World, 2016), 1-3. At the time of this writing, Jennifer taught 6th grade at Rainbow Community School in Asheville, NC.

Chapter Twelve

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

by Heather Koch and Andrea Reed

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

In 2013, we were introduced to the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World (CEINW) at the South Carolina Montessori Alliance fall conference entitled “Back to Nature” where Sandy Bisdee, Director of Children’s Programs at CEINW, and Colette Segalla, member of CEINW’s Educator Council, gave the opening address. As we listened to the sounds of Sandy Bisdee’s Native American flute, we welcomed a refreshing change from the pragmatic nature workshops that focused on such worthy endeavors as gardening with children, worm composting, and conducting soil experiments. At last, we were given a presentation that addressed the spiritual needs of teachers and children. Collette Segalla spoke of CEINW’s programs at Timberlake Earth

Sanctuary, outside of Greensboro and only a few hours drive from our school in Winterville, NC. Guided by the work of Thomas Berry, they offer opportunities for the children and adults who participate in their programs to explore ways of knowing which tap into our fundamental human capacities for intuition, imagination and contemplation, with the aim of *awakening* rather than educating. According to Thomas Berry, these soul capacities are particularly called for in our time.

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

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

As we learned about eco-contemplative practices, we recognized we were not just looking for ways to include simple acts of appreciation for nature, nor to use nature just as a resource, nor as a backdrop for scientific experimentation. By February 2014, we were attending CEINW's new program for educators, "Being, Beholding, Belonging: Eco-contemplative Practices for Children and Young Adults." Our work in this program began the awakening process for us. We learned how the "Earth Guides" worked with children and the natural world at Timberlake Earth Sanctuary through deep noticing, listening, belonging and beholding. As we explored these new ways to engage our students with the natural world, we began to embrace a shift from teaching about nature to experiencing it. Our initial attempts to connect our own students more intimately with nature's cycles were inspired by the Native American tale, "Earth on Turtle's Back."³ The students created a turtle calendar for tracking the phases of the moon and then gave each other "full moon" gifts through dance, poetry, or song.

Upper elementary students engaged in beholding work in pairs and responded in nature journals, describing moments of intimacy and careful observation. A nine-year-old wrote: "First I saw the leaves were

hairy and with purple edges and some of the hairs had dew. The second time, I saw the way the leaves overlapped.” We witnessed loving attention to the natural world in their writing and felt the strength of nature’s potential as the ultimate teacher.

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

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

We began to explore ways to provide our students with special moments in nature. In *Coyote's Guide to Connecting with Nature*, Jon Young explains routines that have deep roots in ancient traditions, such as finding a “sit spot” for practicing intimate presence to nature.⁶ At the beginning of the school year, we read the book *Everyone Needs a Rock* by Byrd Baylor and each student chose a rock for themselves.⁷ Each of us found a sit spot in our garden and held our rocks, to help us stay present in nature. During a sunny day in December, we returned to our sit spots, entering nature with silence as a companion-presence, in the way Robert Sardello suggests in his book *Silence*.⁸ We heard the crickets chirping in the fields around the garden, enjoying the alternating sensations of warm

sunlight and cool air. The children settled into silence and suddenly birds came. They flew fast, swooping and diving over our heads, as if we were just another part of the garden. Afterward, back inside the classroom, students shared their observations. We went around the circle, each student describing a sight, sound or feeling with an accompanying gesture. Some of the students mentioned the birds, others the wind, clouds, plants, sky. One six-year-old student said she felt energy flowing up and all around her. Another said he felt like he was on the moon. This reminded us of Sardello's statement that "space has collapsed into the time experience" and we become "Time Beings, not beings in time" when we engage with silence.⁹ Similarly, Sandy Bisdee writes about the children she works with in nature and observes, "A gradual shedding of the everyday world begins to occur as they begin to focus their attention on the miracle of life that surrounds them."¹⁰ We, too, marveled that a brief time in nature seemed to have left such strong impressions. Through these eco-contemplative practices, we began to cultivate within ourselves and our students a stronger sense of awe, wonder and reverence through loving attention to and connection with the natural world; and in the process, we began to notice ways for ourselves and our students to foster both an authentic sense of self as well as an intimate sense of togetherness.

As we ended the first year of our journey of discovery in partnership with Center Director, Peggy Whalen-Levitt, and the Center's Earth Guides, we did not yet know that we would find something greater than any lesson we had conceived of as Montessori teachers. We would arrive at a deeper understanding of our Montessori "Great Lessons," whose potential power is emphasized in our Montessori teacher training programs, but can only be fully realized as we further develop our own understanding of them. Maria Montessori emphasized the importance of the teacher's own inner preparation for the work of educating children.¹¹ In June, the "Inner Life" participants gathered for a two-day retreat that led to the birthing of a practice for our second year in the program. Through our readings of Thomas Berry, we came to see an important message of hope that had been missing in our own presentations of the Great Lessons. We planned to revise them by incorporating his words and

vision of a future in which we come to see the world as a “communion of subjects, not a collection of objects.”¹² Maria Montessori also called for children to find their own purpose and reach their unique potential, and discover that all things are connected and have a purpose. As we immersed ourselves deeper into the work of Thomas Berry and CEINW, we heard echoes of Maria Montessori’s cosmic education for elementary age children, through which they come to see that all beings have a unique contribution to make to the whole of the earth. Thomas Berry proposed that in order to do this inner work, we must connect to the larger context provided by the story of the universe, the story of the earth and living beings, and the story of humans.¹³ Maria Montessori believed the elementary child is in a sensitive period for absorbing these stories. She recognized that “...nature has made this a period for the acquisition of culture...,” and that “...at six years of age all items of culture are received enthusiastically, and later these seeds will expand and grow.”¹⁴

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

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

Inner Life of the Child in Nature Practice

In the revisions we made to the first great lesson, “The Creation Story,” we introduced the students to Thomas Berry’s own words emphasizing the dichotomous nature of the universe, as a drama of both creation and destruction, and the view of the human as the universe reflecting upon itself.

By the second great lesson, “The Coming of Life on Earth,” we discovered the quotation that resonated most with the children: “Only by dealing with the difficulty does the creativity come forth.”¹⁹ It became a refrain throughout the story, repeated after the telling of the oxygen poison crisis, the giant meteor crash, the mass extinctions. We ended with, “Only a sense of the sacred can save us.”²⁰

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

Within the Great Lessons lies the power to awaken deep convictions necessary for living a life in concert with the natural world. With the revision of the third lesson, “The Coming of Humans,” we attempted to convey the power of Thomas Berry’s call to relearn how to connect

with the Earth and with the universe as a whole in the full wonder of its being, just as our early human ancestors once did. He reminds us that if humans hope to guide the future of earth effectively we must engage our visionary, intuitive and imaginative ways of knowing and listen to what the earth is telling us, rather than using only our scientific/rational ways of knowing to determine the future of the earth.²² He invites us to reimagine our place in the universe. "Our best procedure might be to consider that we need not a human answer to an earth problem, but an earth answer to an earth problem."²³ In the face of such harsh realities as war and environmental devastation, children and adults need to know the solution is within reach. The first and most important step on this journey is to recognize that humans are not the pinnacle of creation, with earth and its beings as resources for our use.

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

When we gathered the children around the collection we had made, along with our early humans timeline, we read, "The universe is

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

We ended the lesson by laying out a compass rose on a mat and placing four words at each cardinal direction, love with south, reverence with north, wonder with west and gratitude with east. Thomas Berry

invites us to recover what our early ancestors had, which we have lost...a love of all living things, the wonder of the natural world, reverence for the difficulty that brings forth creativity, and gratitude for the earth and the universe, which give us life.

Conclusion

In her book, *Nurturing the Spirit*, Aline Wolf reminds us that if we hope to affect societal change through our lessons, we must nurture children's spiritual development.³ Similarly, in *Children of the Universe*, Michael and D'Neil Duffy invite Montessori educators to probe and understand Montessori's Great Lessons, if we hope to realize their potential as a catalyst for peace and environmental change.³⁴ Montessori understood the power of these stories to kindle the child's imagination and sow the seeds for societal change. "We shall walk together on this path of life, for all things are a part of the universe, and are connected with each other to form one whole unity."³⁵ Our cosmic task is to bear witness to and promote unity for all beings and the universe itself. The Duffys remind us that "We are only in the early stages of understanding our relationship to the universe. Perhaps humans may be able to affect the universe itself in ways we do not yet understand."³⁶ They conclude with a call to update Montessori's cosmic curriculum to reflect the contributions of modern science.³⁷ In *The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos*, Brian Swimme agrees that science plays an important role in our understanding of the universe, but instead, views cosmology as a wisdom tradition. He proposes that the power of the universe story lies in its ability to awaken deep convictions and inspire us to live in unity with all creation.³⁸ Thomas Berry, too, recognized the previous century as important to the development of our scientific tradition but invites us to go deeper.

In May 2015, we decided to move our sixth-grade graduation ceremony to Timberlake Earth Sanctuary. In order to meet the needs of each member of our group, Sandy Bisdee designed a special day for our students and their parents. Sandy set the tone for respect, deep noticing and reverence for life and for each other. Then we spoke to the children

about this special time in their lives and each child completed a necklace of beads representing their past, present and future. The rhythm of the day included empathetic listening in pairs, listening “with new ears” to nature in silence, and journaling. The day ended with the children taking a solo walk across the Marsh Bridge guided by the sound of Sandy’s Native American flute. As they walked across the bridge, they thought about what they were leaving behind, what they were taking with them and what they were hoping for their future.

In June, the “Inner Life” participants engaged in the same ceremonial Marsh Bridge crossing. In *The Dream of the Earth*, Thomas Berry states, “We are like a musician who faintly hears a melody deep within the mind, but not clearly enough to play it through.”³⁹ By looking back to the beginning of our partnership with the Center, we are able to weave our own story with the story of the universe. We continue to explore ways to strengthen our own connection to nature through eco-contemplative activities. CEINW has provided us with a supportive environment in which to reflect on our educational practices and expand them to include often neglected inner capacities, such as gratitude, reverence and wonder, in order to enhance our students’ understanding of the mutually beneficial relationship between themselves and the natural world.

Coda

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

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

Montessori's Vision:

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

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

Heather Koch and Andrea Reed were members of the Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice Cohort, 2014-2016. "Re-imagining Montessori's Great Lessons in Light of Thomas Berry: A Message of Hope," was originally published in *Chrysalis* (Volume 13, Spring 2016) 5-15. At the time of this writing, Andrea was a lower elementary teacher and Heather an upper elementary teacher at the Greenville Montessori School in Winterville, NC.

Chapter Thirteen

Giving Voice to Love: Speaking to Schoolchildren through Poetry

by Lisa Saintsing

During the past two years I have learned that my experience in the Inner Life of the Child in Nature program is intricately tied to my time spent at Timberlake Earth Sanctuary in the Poetry of Nature program that I attend every year with my students. In both programs I have found great joy: I have delighted in the changing seasons, the untold beauty of nature, the resonance of silence, the peace of solitude, the wonder of others' discoveries, the fulfillment of self through artistic creation and the satisfaction of deep communion with fellow seekers. It was my intention to write poems that grew out of my observations of and meditations on nature. In reviewing my poems I learned that I often brought my teacher-self into the mix—I found myself addressing my students in many of my poems, and many of the poems seemed to follow the change of seasons, like the school year.

More importantly I discovered that spending time in the quiet recesses of nature has allowed me and my students to find our voices, to allow our hearts to speak, to bare our naked souls without shame in an unspoken dialogue of verse. Of course a shyness remains. We do not analyze what we have written, nor do our experiences in Poetry of Nature sessions miraculously change our daily life at school—there are still

largely failed efforts to solicit student responses to various authors' ideas or worldly concerns. We are not drawn into an open, deeper communion in the classroom. Students still talk among themselves, worry most about what their peers think of them and spend a lot of time off task. It is hard to imagine things otherwise with middle schoolers. But somehow having had a glimpse into another person's heart, I feel a bond with them that was not there before. I realize that I can speak to them through my poems, and that they have much to tell me through theirs. I have learned that I can express great passion for nature, for poetry, for God in what I write. I can let them know how much I care. I have learned that if I allow my heart to speak in poems, I can touch their hearts; I can teach them love.

Here follows a school year of poems.

New Students

How shall I come to know you?
As the one who never has anything to say?
Or the one who cannot be still for a moment?
Will your smile encourage me
To ask you for your thoughts?
Or suggest I glance away?

Who are you?
My ally. My comrade?
The one who sits with me shoulder to shoulder
Who begins to understand
My heart's message,
Though our eyes will seldom meet?

Through all the turmoil and commotion
Can you hear the throbbing in my ears?
Will you turn this way even for a moment?
Try to understand a different vision?
Know that I care to know what you think?

How you have dared to love?
What we have in common?

Observe

Why must you hurry?
Take a moment to watch
A solitary leaf tremble
Before it breaks free
And floats stem over notch
To the ground,
Lost on the forest's floor.

What difference
Can one leaf make?
In that humble descent
A piece of nature's carpet
Is repaired,
A missing thread completes
The tapestry and nourishes
The Earth – giving life,
Giving hope –
That out of death and loss
Some new beauty will be found.

On a Mission

I wonder if,
All the while we were walking
And you were talking,
The birds were carrying on their conversation?
Or were they intimidated by our movements,

Lying hidden in the undergrowth,
Waiting for us to pass,
So they could continue uninterrupted?
But now that we have found our silence
They emerge like fighter pilots,
Careening and diving into the dead
And dying rushes that encircle
And embrace the pond.
What a raucous chorus they are making!
Between their calls and twitters and
Their thunderous descent through brittle foliage,
They have broken the fragile silence
And revealed to me their world
Of hidden sounds and secret movements.

Making Preparations

Like the shimmering surface
Of disturbed water
That distorts and animates
Inverted images from the space above
I feel fragmented and distracted.
I hear a steady chirping,
A static backdrop that accompanies
A sudden hiccup, an agitated twitter,
Or a rustle and a flapping.
My eyes are drawn
To the sounds before me,
Now on my left, now behind me.
I turn to look, but
The forest's creatures are elusive.
They sense my presence.
They know I'm different.

I'm the stranger
In their peaceful woodland.
They're hospitable and leave me sit.
As long as I'm quiet and respectful,
They'll carry on their tasks.
Unencumbered by my clumsy self,
They make ready for the coming winter
And care little for my idle spell.

Homecoming

I hear a gentle quaking
Followed by a louder rustling
That grows to a steady applause,
And amidst this autumn shower
Of leaves spiraling downward,
I am struck by nature's outpouring
Of love for the Earth.
All creatures love this source
Of life from which they spring:
The mighty oaks and delicate ferns
All clasp tightly to their mother.
And like birds and squirrels
Who often journey skyward,
We humans, with our lofty ambitions
And our desire for heaven,
Should never forget that our feet
Naturally turn homeward
To the source of our beginning,
To the Earth,
Our origin and mother.

Nature Trek

To those of you who are cold
I say embrace this moment.
Won't the warmth of hearth
Be all the more a blessing?
Doesn't the breeze invigorate you?
Fill you with a new found purpose?
Even if your goal is to return
To the beginning and
Stand again before the fire
In the company of friends
And neighbors,
Your sojourn into nature
Will fill you with unending treasures,
Memories of time spent in reflection
As well as the anticipation of reunion

Gift

There in your hands
You hold the past and future –
An indiscriminate clump of brittle leaves,
The underworld of the forest,
A remnant of another time.

I bend close to smell
The gift you bear and
A familiar odor rises:
Earth's perfume – musky, dark undertones
Give way to a sweeter fragrance,
Like some sacred funereal balm
That soothes a grieving heart
And quiets the troubled mind.

Your smile affirms my discovery:
This scent transcends loss
And brings a promise of renewal –
That out of winter's landscape
Comes the breath of spring.

Spring Frolic

What will you keep of this day?
Take to your heart and bury
Deep within your soul?

Will you choose
The first ray of sunshine
Upon your cheek?
A foretaste of the coming summer?
Or perhaps the giddy deviance of your friends
As they scurry to find a spot,
Hidden and out of sight,
So you might yet savor
Childhood's call to truancy?
Or maybe you find
The steady caress of this spring breeze
At once intoxicating and enervating.
It makes movement seem
Excessive and unnecessary.

I think I shall recall
My time spent here with you
Outside our classroom,
Surrounded by your openness and wonder,
Your hearts full and giving,
While nearby a bird calls incessantly,
“Be here, be here, be here.”

Life Force

Behold this life,
This busy time of being!
Minnows pause
Then ricochet around the rocks
Cluttering their stream.
Wind stirs the leaves
On slender shafts of green bamboo.
A lone young hardwood sits
Just below the rocky tumble of stones
Over which the stream pours steadily.
So much being and redeeming –
Sprouting, growing and then fading,
Something new amidst what is decaying.
Overall is the spirit of acceptance –
Simple meaning found in essence.
Here there's no place for anger,
Or resistance, or grief or hurt,
Or remembrance of what's been lost.
Life goes on –
Spilling over rocks and
Tumbling to the ground,
An ever-changing pattern
Of what was and is and might be
Still tomorrow.

Magic

I hear water
As it tumbles
From the mouth
Of a conduit.
It lands in frothy whiteness

And breaks apart into bubbles
That drift lazily in concentric circles
To the edges of this dark pool.
They succumb to gentle pressure,
Pop and fade into the shiny blackness.
The surface before me
Now like a window
Through which I can see
The muddy leaves,
Packed in layers.
They provide a cover
As minnows dart here and there –
Suddenly I've lost sight of them.
I search and search
And in this moment
A second picture is revealed –
Through the magic of glass and water
I see the reflection of the world above:
Here in this mystical place
Bird and fish commune together.

Hope

Your words inspire me
And give me hope.
I watch delighted as
Your pens move easily
Across the pages,
Capturing the sense
Of wonder that you feel
As you discover nature's bounty.
I long to hear your hearts' responses
To all this beauty,
This freedom to linger,

The Place of Our Belonging

Reflect, and share
A deep communion
With each other, yes,
But also with the forest,
The cool air of morning,
The hidden birds
And brilliant sunlight on the water.
Here, now, a sacramental moment
Is given to you.
In this quiet solitude
You can find God
And begin to know Him.

Transformation

Like the moon
That hangs low in the morning sky
Distinctly white yet translucent
Against the emergent blues of dawn,
I discern a certain excitement in your smile
That does not match the wistful sadness that I feel,
As I contemplate our impending separation.
You are but a remnant of the night,
A beam of hope and warmth and light
In the inky blackness that envelopes and confounds.
In you I saw my thoughts and dreams and fears reflected.
I watched you grow close to fullness
As I poured out my heart, my passion.
You hung on my words of praise –
Poetic and redemptive.
Inevitably, though, you turn from me and wane,
Your need to follow a cycle
Stronger than your desire to remain
And imitate, and so you wane and wax and wane again.

You pull me close and then turn from me.
You leave me waiting for your next phase.
Now, before I am ready to let go,
The sliver of your former self that I beheld but briefly
Gives rise to one unknown –
Transcendent, whole and radiant,
Your own passions have been lit.
You burn with a ferocious desire,
You are yourself aglow.

And so ends another school year and now my Inner Life of the Child in Nature class as well. I am deeply grateful for the opportunity this class and the Poetry of Nature programs have afforded me. I also give thanks for my mentors and classmates in the Inner Life program who shared their hearts' messages with me and showed me patience as I tried to learn a new way of being present in our world. May you all know peace and may you always take the time to commune with nature.

Lisa Saintsing was a member of The Inner Life of the Child in Nature Cohort, 2012-2014. "Giving Voice to Love: Speaking to Schoolchildren Through Poetry" was originally published in *The Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice, 2012-2014* (Greensboro, NC: The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World, 2014), 53-58. At the time of this writing, Lisa taught 8th grade at Our Lady of Grace Catholic School in Greensboro, NC.

Chapter Fourteen

Where the Sense of Space Thickened

by Andrew Levitt

I value the times as a teacher when the inspiration of a moment compels me to abandon my plans in order to allow a felicitous accident to carry the day. Often those are the classes my students and I remember most fondly. This is the account of such a class in ninth grade English at the Emerson Waldorf School on a sunny spring day in May. I like to refer to it as our “vertical class.”

But now that I have introduced this story as the story of an accident, I have, in part, to retract the claim, for I know, of course, that although they may be unexpected, accidents in human affairs are never wholly accident. In retrospect, we can often see where an apparently isolated event fit into a sequence begun before it and echoing after it. When we do, that sets it in an arc of destiny and attributes poignant necessity to the event itself, in much the same way a landscape contains and gathers at a center where the sense of place thickens. So to convey the feeling of the experience, I must also account for the context in which the class occurred.

Because we have four grades and only three classrooms in the main building of our small high school, I teach my English classes in a rented space that used to be the office of the horse farm adjacent to the school property. It is a two hundred yard walk downhill from the high school to

the English classroom, known as Spence's. Spence is the name of the man who owns the farm. On this particular day, I was on my way downhill with the heavy volume of *Nature Writing* edited by Robert Finch and John Elder. I was prepared to read Scott Russell Sanders' essay, "Buckeye."

The essay is one among others by Robert Benchley, G. K. Chesterton, Annie Dillard, Aldous Huxley, Anne Lamott, and John Muir, I ask students to read for our study of the personal essay, which culminates in the last assignment of ninth grade English to write a thousand word personal essay on a topic of one's choosing. My goal is to have students recognize essay writing can be moving and fun. The so-called "thousand word essay" has become a *rites de passage* of the ninth grade. When I receive the finished work, the essays are invariably worthy to celebrate, for the students bring much of themselves to bear on themes for which they have intense interest.

So Scott Russell Sanders' essay is one I offer students as a model of elegant essay writing. But I also choose it for its content. In it, Sanders writes about learning to know trees and love the troubled landscape of his childhood in the northeastern corner of Ohio. The two buckeyes his father carried in his pocket as a talisman to ward off arthritis and the walnut box his father made from a plank bought at a farm auction in Ohio release reflections on how the land Sanders knew as a child changed. Moved by the sense of loss, he summons the hope to create new maps and new stories for other ground so we can know where we are and "dwell in our place with a full heart."¹

Sander's essay is one among several nature writings I assign because I take it as a part of the imperative of the naturalist focus we carry in our high school to develop in the students consciousness of the relationships between the human and the more than human realms. In a part of the year devoted to poetry that comes just before the study of the essay, I ask students to attune themselves to reflective relationships between human beings and nature, to read poets who have ears and eyes for nature, and to record what they hear in contemplation outside as their own poems in the anthology of the poetry of nature. So by the class on which I here report, students were awake to nature around and within them.

Between the main building of the high school and Spence's farm lies what is known at our school as the "Fairy Meadow." It is a grassy side of a hill with a dogwood tree in the center and a stand of old cedar trees off center. The meadow is bounded on three sides by forest—hardwoods and pines—and opens toward a field at the horse farm on the fourth side. A path from the high school comes down through the woods to this green space. It is called the "Fairy Meadow" because the natural world seems refreshed there and the very youngest children in kindergarten and the early grades, who learn folktales and fairy tales as part of the curriculum and are sensitive to such things, often spend part of each day in this space. Even those without such sensitivity or imagination find in it a peaceable place removed from the scurry of life at the school and the town of Chapel Hill.

On this particular day, I was passing through the Fairy Meadow on my way from the high school to Spence's. I heard a rustle in a cedar as I walked and figured one of my students was hiding there to startle me as I passed. When I looked into the branches of the tree, I discovered not one but all five students of our small ninth grade were up in the tree. Instantly I realized this was not a moment to be missed. So instead of reprimanding them as insurance risks, I told them to be quiet, not to throw things at me, and to listen. Then I sat down on the bench at the base of the tree and read them "Buckeye" by Scott Russell Sanders. I read:

I learned to recognize buckeyes and beeches, sugar maples and shagbark hickories, wild cherries, walnuts, and dozens of other trees while trampling through the Ohio woods with my father. To his eyes, their shapes, their leaves, their bark, their winter buds were as distinctive as the set of a friend's shoulders. As with friends, he was partial to some, craving their company so he would go out of his way to visit particular trees, walking in a circle around the splayed roots of a sycamore, laying his hand against the trunk of a white oak, ruffling the feathery green boughs of a cedar;

"Trees breathe," he told me. "Listen."²

As I read, we all realized how coincidentally perfect it was that they were all up in the tree. No one interrupted my reading as I continued to read:

All those memories lead back to...the place where I came to consciousness, where I learned to connect feelings with words, where I fell in love with the earth.”³

As I read those words, I thought to myself that this was what I wanted for my students right there. I continued:

How could our hearts be large enough for heaven if they are not large enough for earth?...The only paradise I know is the one lit by our everyday sun, this land of difficult love, shot through with shadow. The place where we learn this love, if we learn it at all, shimmers behind every new place we inhabit.⁴

When I finished reading and told the students to climb down to go to math class, everyone was surprised to realize the time had passed. The next day I asked the group to write a short reflection on their class in the cedar tree. Here are selections from their accounts:

“As Mr. Levitt became visible, walking slowly down to Spence’s, the tree broke out in whispers of, ‘Shut up! Levitt’s coming. Nick, go hide.’ To our immense delight and surprise, he suggested, with a smiling amused face, that we stay in the tree for the duration of our English class.” (Emily)

“I wanted to climb to the top but I knew everyone would get mad if I tried.” (Dayyan)

“As I ascended to the upper branches, I was slowly separated from the earth.” (Nick)

“It was a beautiful tree which had most likely seen many happy

children climbing on its arms, reaching to the heavens...I remember feeling our tree talk to me.” (Mitchell)

“It was one of those rare moments when the students truly love being there and find deep excitement in every minute of the class. The uplifting, open feeling of clinging to a tree, possibly risking one’s health, is such an exciting change of pace as to make the entire day feel lighter, more interesting, less terrible. What a wonderful class.” (Sandy)

On another day later in the week as we walked together to Spence’s, someone shouted out, “Let’s all climb the tree again.” “No, no,” said Sandy, with the recognition that we had shared a unique and sacred moment together. “It will be too predictable.”

Why do I like to call this class our vertical class? The first obvious reason, of course, is that all the students were up in a cedar tree instead of on the ground. Another reason is that our class that day seemed to find a juncture where unexpected connections were made across time and space so that what Scott Russell Sanders wrote about his own life experience in Ohio during the 1950s seemed to intersect with descriptive understanding of the immediate moment of our lives in North Carolina in 2006. During the reading of the essay, we all had a feeling of poignant necessity, as if we could almost identify our moment in the arc of destiny. With that, it seemed that the sense of place thickened around the cedar tree. At the conjunction of time and space, it seemed, a vertical axis formed to reach high and deep to where the sense of the lofty met the chthonic power of earth.

Andrew Levitt was a member of The Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice Cohort, 2006-2008. “Where the Sense of Space Thickened” was originally published in *Chrysalis* (Volume 3, Fall 2006), 16-17. At the time of this writing, Andrew taught Humanities at the Emerson Waldorf High School in Chapel Hill, NC.

Chapter Fifteen

We Are Earth

by Elizabeth Porritt Carrington

Working with the students of School of Living Arts (SOLA), middle and high school, has been a forming path of homecoming in Appalachia for me. I have worked as aesthetics teacher with the students there for three years now, coming to the school to teach two-week periods, twice annually. SOLA is a treasure of a school, and its commitment to being in conversation with the living Earth has offered rich grounds for me to work with as a teacher.

My effort has primarily been to open doors of creativity and encourage expressions in the students that are inspired by and in recognition of the interrelatedness of their lives with the natural world, and particular to the lands that are home to their school. This has been much through the teaching of classical drawing, painting and illustrative skill and technique. And, always encircling the conversation of what art is in their lives and the support of Nature around them. Whether that is making their own charcoal to make sketches of the landscape, creating field sketchbooks, making cyanotype prints with the winter sunlight, or, as we did this past March, making a lyrical poem of their experience of SOLA life that we could illustrate with paper cut scenes.

Over the three years, I have noticed the deepening and furthering of the students' capacities to understand how valuable it is to articulate their experiences of life in a visual way. They are observing for themselves that having a visual language of their own can, in its practice, reveal aspects of themselves and their lives that they may not see otherwise. This is particularly apparent in their artistic expressions of their sense of connection with the land they inhabit at school and seeing their part in the ecosystem there.

This poem was co-created over a week together. We began visioning for it by making a black board of life, listing all the visible life we see and know at SOLA. The students then went outside with their sketchbooks and pencils. I asked them to try for a while not to name what they see, but to notice the qualities of the life. They each had three subjects to work with. The second day we did the same with the life that was invisible to the eye. They then wrote out notes of all the life seen and unseen, described in its qualities of being.

We had a basket in the middle of our large table, seating fifteen of us, where they placed their notes. We visioned more together, taking our notes and reading them to each other and starting conversations around their ideas. These conversations generated more ideas and notes and the basket began to fill. By the end of the week we had a far range of material. Our conversations of life at SOLA and the land there were getting very interesting indeed. Mid conversation, four days in, a student emphatically cried out, "WE ARE EARTH!"

Yes we are! And we had a title, I replied.

That weekend, I laid all their words out on my kitchen table. It was quite a bounty. I created some ceremony of the reading and got started on pulling it all together. Some were already perfectly formed lines of poetry, others were expressions and thoughts full of vitality and heart, listing the traits and virtues of their lives at SOLA. They had encountered beauty in multitudinous forms on those days and were gushing about Earth and their school. It was, as a teacher, a most exciting and invigorating process to meld together these works of young minds and hearts pouring over. I felt very blessed by it.

We Are Earth

After this poem was formed, I asked the students to then take sections to illustrate. They made paper cut scenes of their sections which will be used in the creating of a shadow play in our next block together.

We Are Earth

It is snowing here in the mountains of Southern Appalachia
Winter still, though spring is close at hand
We can smell it in the earth and on the air.
Tiny white star flakes are covering the first purple violets
Their flurries will blanket the red clay roads soon.
This last breath of winter has come to land.

Our School is a village of round houses, warm nests of our
learning
Settled in along the shoulders of Mount Pisgah,
We are high in the ridges blue.
We come here by all our paths, a spectrum arriving like rainbows
Each day, each season, each year that passes.
The trees greet us first along our way
They are tall, grey brown umber in this light
White Oak, Maple, Poplar, Birch, Cedar, Hickory...
Rooting, branching out like neurons or bronchi.
The dogwoods will show their blooms in the lower canopy
Spring's early risers will be dreaming white butterflies on the breeze.

Cardinals red, flaunt their feathers before spring comes again
Piliated woodpeckers make hollow taps sounding out the quiet
woods like drums
The air is pure and clean
Deep green pines sway in harmony, resin perfume raises up to the sky.
And all along the edges of crystal streams symphonic waterfalls
accumulate different keys

Splunking here and bubbling there,
Then softly flowing over smoothed out granite or quartz, like small
glaciers.

Mica sparkles like fish scales in the sun by silver stripes, minnows
Traveling together, around the pools like friends at recess.
Heron visit here, coming through in wide heavy wingbeats
Long beak poised, they stand like statues at the water's edge
Fishers of the tributaries, of all these capillaries, of life.

Mossy stones are small world rainforests.
Ferns, lacey and smooth, uncoil their spines from spirals and roll
out their leaves for Spring and
Spiders weaving webs catching dewy drops of morning
Others between the rocks, running hither and thither
Salamanders mottled red and brown. Worms, working their way
down, in the Underworld
to the burrows and dens and mycelium messages.

The fruit trees bloom and a new snow falls
Pink petals and the palest creams of peach, cherry and apple
blossoms too
Their sweet fruit will fall generously, lovingly to us.
The garden grows again, vegetables like easter eggs to be sought
out
They taste sweeter when grown by you.

We work with the gardens and the bees hum
The birds sing and children's voices raise up like hands
To say we are not alone, we are here echoing with the birdsong
Playing up trees in colored raincoats, sliding down muddy hills in
the rain,
The fledgling children trying out their wings, inhabit this place
Being part of everything.

Come, climb up with us, off the trails to caves and enter into the
dark

Encouraging each other to be who we are.

Some say no, it is wild out there, in the woods,

Stick to the trail, it's straight, a right track, and never look back.

But up there on the bald, the cattle roam, long horned white and
sandal brown

Gentle beasts, their eyes tell you that. Their great mass tells another
story, old.

Their breath heavy and deep as if out of the very soil.

And there are galaxies of flowers that bloom on those slopes, some
seen and unseen

Galleries of color, spreading wide their hues, glowing out
messengers of beginning and ending

And beginning again making seed pods to rattle in fall's winds.

When Girls are knighted, dubbed for integrity and chivalry and care
for their world

Whilst snakes slither through, sunning themselves on rocks or
hanging from trees like ropes,

You won't see them till you do.

Virago and Lyra, Pyrenean friends, protect the rabbits here and
sheep and Loki the pony.

They look too huggable to be fierce but bark enough as you pass to
spread their word

Till they circle their napping spot, again resting with one eye open.

Our teachers, our guides, walk alongside us. They show us how to
make our own books.

A gentle giant smiles upon us being sure all our interests are at
heart.

And here there is a gate keeper, and mystery weaver seeing over us
and all we do

The Place of Our Belonging

And that none is turned away from a School of Living Arts. An
ancient new school, an old wisdom, Bright vision of how it
could be,

Like the small mossy stone in the stream or an island in the sea.
A haven, in the storm of undoing and unease.

For it's not news that people forgot the way.
That belonging to the earth was lost in the plundering, in the taking
and the tearing
Humans in their problem solving were problem creating and
became afraid of the unknown
We forgot to be the colored galaxies of flowers seen and unseen
willing to open and grow old.

As fall becomes winter it is traditional here, to walk a spiral of
candlelight and fir,
Slowly the woods become a glowing constellation of light,
And we take turns to walk the night sky.
Silently or in whispers and then into songs
we carry the year into another year through
Re-membering Earth as we learn and grow and
Our part in the system that serves all life.

The gifts in our own hands that can bring light and more light and
more life

We open our books and write, into our days and our nights

We are Earth

We are Earth

We are Earth

Elizabeth Porritt Carrington was a member of The Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice Cohort, 2016-2018. “We are Earth” was originally published in *Chrysalis* (Volume 17, Fall 2020), 18-23. At the time of this writing, Elizabeth was teaching aesthetics to middle and high school students at the School of Living Arts in Candler, NC.

Epilogue

Pax Gaia

“The experiences that we have spoken of as we look up at the starry sky at night, and as, in the morning, we see the landscape revealed as the sun dawns over the Earth—these experiences reveal a physical world but also a more profound world that cannot be bought with money, cannot be manufactured with technology, cannot be listed on the stock market, cannot be made in the chemical laboratory, cannot be reproduced with all our genetic engineering—cannot be sent by e-mail. These experiences require only that we follow the deepest feelings of the human soul.

What we look for is no longer the Pax Romana, the peace among humans, but the Pax Gaia, the peace of Earth and every being on the Earth. This is the original and final peace, the peace granted by whatever power it is that brings our world into being. Within the universe, the planet Earth with all its wonders is the place for the meeting of the divine and the human.”¹

~ Thomas Berry

The children, they will lead us to the original and final peace. In the image of the Pax Gaia, we end with a story of the Three Tree Shrine,

imagined and created by two young people in the forest of the earth sanctuary in the summer of 2011, told by Sandy Bisdee.

It was the sixth summer of our Earth, Air, Fire and Water summer program for 11-13 year-olds. Seven children signed up for the program. All but one of them had participated in various programs with us over the years, growing up with us. I had one college intern and one teenage helper for the program. The intern was a college student with an interest in Chinese Medicine. The apprentice was a young man named Sebastian whom I had first met when he had come out in the 8th grade with his Catholic school for a Poetry of Nature program. Sebastian immediately felt a deep connection with the earth sanctuary and with us. His connection to the place and to us deepened over time. He loved music and accompanied our morning contemplative arts on a sitar. Sebastian's first year of the program would not be an ordinary summer program experience at all. The mother of one of the boys attending the program had cancer and was in the final days of her life. She would cross the threshold on Thursday afternoon, the next to last day of our time together. Sebastian was an integral part of the ceremony that her son would create with nature and with us for his mother the day after her passing.

There was a young man named Kai who had signed up for this year's program and who had been coming to our programs for six years. He first came to us in the 2nd grade with a Jewish Day School for a Special Design program to celebrate the Jewish Holy Days in the setting of the earth sanctuary. He came to our "Children of the Forest" program after school during the spring and fall and to our programs during the summers. He often spoke of the healing qualities of nature on our earth walks and he carried a bandana with him at all times. If someone was hurt, he would put his bandana in the creek water and gently dab it on the scratch or bruise. Kai had missed one year of our summer program and I was glad to see him again. He told me right away about his interest in Shinto, a Japanese

nature religion and asked me if he could build a Shinto Shrine in the woods. It sounded like a fine idea to me and I sent Sebastian with him to find the perfect site for the shrine. It soon expanded and developed into a joint project between the two of them. Every day it evolved in design and intention. Over the course of four days they worked together to find a place for the shrine, design and build it, decide on what and who it would be dedicated to, and what the dedication ceremony would be like. Every day they would bring their ideas to me and I would listen to their latest developments. It expanded from just a Shinto Shrine to one that would honor many different wisdom traditions. They settled on Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Native American, Shinto, and Buddhism.

They had located an area in the woods that was free from sister ivy, close to the treehouse and private. There they found three trees that formed a triangle. The trees were about seven inches in diameter, straight and tall. The space inside was big enough for one person to kneel comfortably. Kai sawed lengths of bamboo to make a mat that was strung together with jute. He would tie it together with seven knots. It was about 3½ feet long. This was hung on the tree underneath a wooden circle upon which symbols were drawn for each of the wisdom traditions. A mirror was added to the circle to represent the Shinto religion. Kai added an infinity sign underneath the mirror. We gathered beautiful flowers from our organic garden and stuck them in the hollow ends of the bamboo mat and in-between the stems in preparation for the ceremony the following day. At the culmination of our Earth, Air, Fire and Water program, on the last day, Kai and Sebastian gathered all of us together after lunch in the treehouse round room to tell us about the shrine and to tell us how the rest of us could participate in the dedication ceremony. They had every detail planned out. The ceremony would be conducted in silence, except for two parts, flute playing and a blessing. They had gathered together three containers, two turtle shells and a bowl. The vessels would hold redwood and sage incense, a candle in the shape of an ear of corn, and water. We had a gourd bowl full of

dried flowers. I was asked to bring my Native American flute and to offer a spoken blessing. Following the ritual at the shrine, we would then form a processional line and make a silent marsh bridge crossing, remaining in silence all the way back to the treehouse. Each of the five campers, the intern and I sat around the two young men listening to the plans in rapt attention, interest, respect and silence. Once the directions for the ceremony were explained and questions were clarified, each camper was given something to carry on the way to the Three Tree Shrine. We were ready for the dedication.

The temperatures were in the mid to upper nineties. The hot summer air was very still in the shade of the forest. We were surrounded by greens of all shades, early July greens above and below. Dozens of small cricket frogs made the path look like it was moving and was alive! As we approached our destination, it became very quiet in the forest. Sebastian and Kai led the way and the rest of us followed, in the silence, one by one in a loosely formed line behind them. As we approached the little path that led to the shrine in the interior of the forest, we walked up to it one at a time. We gathered around as Kai lit the redwood incense to represent Peace. Then he lit the yellow corn candle. A small amount of water was put inside of the turtle shell. One of the campers surrounded the Three-Tree Shrine with dried flower petals.

I dedicated my song to all of creation and played reverently in the stillness of the afternoon. I then pulled out my owl wing that I only use during sacred ceremonies and fanned the redwood incense. I gave thanks for the time together with each one of the people who was there. I gave thanks for the stone people, the plant people, the animals, the humans, the earth, the planets and the stars. As I spoke I held the wing of the barred owl close to my heart and gave thanks for the owl's special gift of seeing into the darkness. The silence of the forest began to lift as the birds became animated, perching near us and singing. Bullfrogs and cricket frogs started singing too. An invisible choir surrounded us. I reached into the gourd bowl and took out a handful of dried flowers and scattered them on the

ground inside of the shrine. I entered and kneeled in silence. One by one, we entered the shrine, spreading dried flowers and kneeling in silence. Everyone was quiet and respectful during the ceremony and eyes were soft and reflective. Silently, one by one, the children were led out by Kai onto the path that meandered down to the boardwalk that crossed the Marsh. Sebastian and I were the last ones to leave the shrine. As we started to walk out, a barred owl hooted his familiar cry very close by. We stood very still. Then he did it again. Sebastian and I looked at each other in wonder and amazement. And then he hooted for the third time. Chills ran down my arms in the heat of the afternoon. The power of the moment registered deeply into our souls.

After the silent solo processional to the treehouse on our very last day together, it was time to have our ritual popsicles and to say goodbye. We didn't talk about what we had shared at the Three Tree Shrine. I wrote Sebastian an e-mail several months later during the autumn when I was getting ready to write down my memories of the ceremony. He shared some of his reflections and asked me if I had been back to visit the shrine. He said "It seems like one of the holiest places on earth to me."

Appendix I

Awakening to Nature: An Eco-Contemplative Program for Children

by Sandy Bisdee

(While our programs for children and young adults came to a close in 2021, we are now offering descriptions that introduce you to the Center's practices and ways of working)

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

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

Children then return to the circle where they enjoy a bag lunch together. The day ends with a heartwarming circle of reflection. The rhythm of the

day enables the children to assimilate their experiences and to enter into community together as they share what touched them about the day.

Inner Preparation of the Earth Guide

At the Center, we take great care in our approach to leading children into meaningful experiences with the natural world. Qualities of centeredness, loving attention, wonder, respect and reverence must be embodied by our Earth Guides before they can be imparted to the children.

Center Earth Guides complete our 2-year Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice program and then experience an Earth Guide apprenticeship that includes a consideration of the inner gesture of the Earth Guide, an introduction to the Center's practices, an opportunity to practice the practices on the trails, and a review of the Rhythm of the Day for our Awakening to Nature Program. In the second phase of the apprenticeship, each new Earth Guide is given one or more opportunities to shadow an experienced Earth Guide before taking a group of children on an Earth Walk.

Throughout the year, the Director of Children's Programs and our Earth Guides meet together after each Awakening to Nature program to share experiences from the day in order to deepen their understanding of all that is involved in bringing the child into being, beholding and belonging to the natural world.

It is also an expectation that our Earth Guides practice the practices in their daily lives between programs and find ways of making the practices their own so that they can be shared naturally with the group.

For public school programs, we all practice a way of working that speaks the language of love and communion, a language that is not religious and does not alienate anyone. We keep careful notes after each program and refer to them before a repeat visit.

Preparing the Teachers

We make every effort to meet with teachers/schools/principals that are new before a program takes place. After our introductory meeting, we work with a combined approach of snail-mail, e-mail and phone calls

to contact each teacher. Phone calls preceding each visit include going over the content of our acknowledgement letter and more: rhythm of the day, length of the program, waivers, clothing (we always have backups), snacks, adult chaperones (limited to 3), pre-arranged groups of children, name tags and questions about any special needs.

Preparing the Adults That Join Us

We ask the adults to follow the children's natural curiosity, bring up the tail end of the group and be there for the slower walkers, help us model the practices, help us maintain a focus on the children's discoveries by refraining from everyday conversation on the earth walks, and turn off their cell phones (we use ours for emergencies and program each others' numbers at the circle if needed). We ask the adults to take the time to be present with nature themselves and to support the children's sense of wonder.

Inner Preparation on the Day of the Program

The Drive to Work

On the way to work: no radio, notice the season of the year, the moon, the weather, the colors and the feeling of the day. Take this time to go through the rhythm of the day in our imaginations, section by section. Do we need a fire? Is it too cold to begin outdoors? What insect friends need protecting that day? (They will need a proper introduction!) What elements will be in the story that prepares the children for the Earth Walk? What names, dwellings, family relationships will be used in the story that will reflect the particular group of children? The story takes a form and a life of its own. What songs might be sung? What activities might we do after lunch?

Before the Bus Comes

Check the benches and lunch tables in warm weather for webs. Check supplies, sit-upons, water and cups ready, trash can, recycle can and compost bucket, nature table put in center of the round room near the bathroom.

Moment of Shared Silence Before the Bus Comes

The Earth Guides stand together in silence and hold in trust that each child will receive what they need today. Sometimes words are spoken, sometimes not.

Welcoming and Beginning

The Arrival of the Bus

The Director of Children's Programs boards the bus and welcomes the children while the lunches are unloaded. Warm welcome, so good to see them again. Who is new? Welcome! You have all grown so much! Then, one of the Earth Guides boards the bus and drives over with them to the parking place. They walk quietly down a woodland path, back to the fire circle to surprise us! We adults pretend that we do not hear them coming until the very last second. A tone is set.

Beginning the Day

Once everyone is seated, the Director of Children's Programs welcomes them again and introduces our Earth Guides. Then she takes out her Native American flute and plays a welcoming song that she dedicates to everything that lives at the earth sanctuary, both seen and unseen, to them and to the sun, moon and stars. This may be a time for singing, if needed.

She notices how much they have changed and grown, and she might mention that she too has changed and grown in new ways. She asks them if the earth sanctuary is the same as it was the last time they came. She asks them what they remember from their last visit. This really helps the new students to feel more at ease.

Our beginning for newcomers is pretty much the same, except that we do not have the section of memories from past visits, and perhaps a little more time is included for addressing fears and for sharing the idea of a protected property and protecting all forms of life.

Then, our Director introduces the children to the idea of an earth sanctuary. It is a place where everything is safe and protected, including plants and insects. It is a place that will not be turned into a golf course

or a housing development. Sanctuaries are found all over the world in all of the continents. She tells them that it is her job to protect everything and that she'll need their help. Will they help her? In conjunction with this subject we talk about what it means to be a guest. How does a guest behave in another's home? Respectfully. We are all guests in the earth sanctuary, including the Director. This is a time that children's fears bubble up and we look for every opportunity to address them. Daddy Long Legs. Moving webs carefully. Walking around ants. Modeling love and compassion at the fire circle.

We engage introductions to each other by introducing ourselves first and then introducing one of our favorite animals (hopefully the teacher has remembered name tags!). We listen intently as each child speaks. There are no wrong answers. For older children, we ask them to tell a little bit about why they admire the animal they spoke about.

Snack and bathroom break (nature table inside by girl's bathroom)
Please touch!

Regroup at the fire circle, settle down and prepare for earth walks with a story or an opportunity for a group mini-experience of some of the practices.

Divide into 3 groups of about 8 children each and two adults. Trails are chosen. It is important to know your trail well beforehand. Who is the leader? The Earth Guide! We will be walking slowly, at nature's pace, and we are very interested in what you notice!

The Earth Walk¹

Gathering Silence

The practices themselves bring the children into a more peaceful space that allows them to slow down, turn their attention outside of themselves and come into communion with life.

At the beginning of each earth walk we might gather together and center ourselves by feeling our feet rooted in the earth and becoming aware of the stars that are overhead. We take the time to breathe in and out with the trees. There is a sense of anticipation as we get ready to

enter the canopy of forest. We invite the students to walk at nature's pace. We invite the students to walk with silence—to observe silence on the trails. We might ask the group why we walk with silence at the earth sanctuary. The answers serve as an inner guide that comes from the children themselves. If we feel that the word “silence” might be difficult for a particular group, we might simply ask the children to walk quietly and keep their voices down during the Earth Walk.

The Earth Guide role-models silence on the trails. We do not ignore the children when they speak with us, or tell them to be quiet. We might smile, nod, and direct our focus out. We might tell them that we'd love to hear their story later, at lunch. The pace is slow. Earth Guides are at the front.

There are many ways to gather silence on the walk. The practices, especially the listening practice, can bring this about. The stillness of our bodies as we do the practices together is very quieting. Non-verbal communication during the Trail of Beauty and Behold practice foster this peace and silence. Silent Walking between two sticks brings a rowdy group into a quieter space. There is a way of walking back to the treehouse, in a silent spaced processional, that brings about a profound peace. The ritual of a solo Marsh Bridge crossing can bring students into a quiet space of being, beholding, belonging.

Every group is different, as is every day. The experience of silence is of a different quality with grades K-2 compared with grades 3-8. The natural sense of wonder, joy, mystery and curiosity brings the children into a focused attention that brings them into periods of deep communion and moments of curiosity, wonder and joy. We strive to maintain a balance of attention to exuberance and quietude with the younger groups.

Deep Noticing, Trail of Beauty, Listening, Beholding

Deep Noticing

One of the first practices that we present to the children during our Earth Walks is Deep Noticing. We stop along the trail and invite the children to stand very still and to notice the particular place that they are in. We ask them to start by noticing movement, any movement at all,

both large and small, high and low. During this brief period of time, the sounds and the smells and the air come to greet us and the moment is enlarged. We might add noticing as many different colors as can be seen and later include shapes of tree trunks and bark. Depending on the age of the group, we invite them to silently count on their fingers as they discover new movements. When this practice is over, we might invite the children to share their Deep Noticing. Noisier and more active groups appreciate this. If the practice has brought silence to us, we continue our journey without a need for speaking at that time.

Trail of Beauty

This practice is done with partners. We begin by modeling the practice to the children ahead of time during our circle time or on the trail, emphasizing non-verbal communication as a means of directing their partner's attention to something beautiful. It is important to designate a beginning and ending point on your trail and to space the couples out evenly as you begin, so they are not all bunched together and have space to explore. Each child leads their partner to something beautiful and the partner notices it deeply, acknowledges when they are done (with a thumbs up or sparkle in the eye!) and then they take turns.

Listening

Find a place where everyone can sit down comfortably. This could be on the side of a bridge or on a leafy floor. If it is damp or wet, we bring sit mats. We begin by asking the children if anyone has a problem with closing their eyes for a few minutes. This can be hard for younger children, and if it is, we show them how to cover their eyes with their hands. We take out a watch and explain that we will be still as a rock while we are listening, and we practice being rocks for a moment. Then we explain that we will be still and listening for all of the sounds around us, near and far, loud and soft, for one or two whole minutes. When the time is up, they will hear a soft whistle, which signals them to open their eyes. We invite them to open their eyes slowly and softly and to let their sight rest upon the first thing that catches their attention. Once again, if

the group needs a little help with focus, they are invited to count on their fingers as they hear each new sound. At the end of this practice we bathe in the silence as long as possible without rushing to break it or going on to the next thing. Sharing is a wonderful way to deepen the Listening Practice.

Beholding

We model this practice at circle time and/or during our Earth Walk. In pairs, one person closes her eyes and allows herself to be guided to something to behold. The guiding partner says “Behold!” when just the right subject is discovered and the blind partner opens her eyes and beholds deeply, noticing every detail. Then she closes her eyes and brings the image back into her mind’s/heart’s eye for as long as she can. When she is ready, she opens her eyes and beholds it again. What did she notice the second time? This practice has to be done in a safe location and adapted carefully to the age of your group. The language is carefully chosen for your intended age group.

Expanding Circles

Thomas Berry liked to say that we are intimately bonded with everything all the way out to the stars. Our expanding circles practice is intended to give children a feeling for this expansive bond of intimacy. We begin by selecting a site where you can see both close up and far into the distance. A pond or field is a good place to do this practice. We then offer the following guided meditation to the children:

Standing very still, imagine that you have a light in your heart (put your hands over your heart) that you can shine brightly whenever and wherever you want to. Tell the children that they will only see what their light is shining upon. Using a pond in this example, invite them to shine their light on everything between the earth beneath their feet and the edge of the pond. Do they notice any movement? Then invite them to shine their lights brighter out across the pond. What do they notice? They answer this silently inside, not out loud. Their light then shines out farther to the canopy of trees surrounding the pond, on into the sky and then, right through the atmosphere of the earth and out into the universe! Imagine

the planets and the stars and the comets and the beautiful galaxies! We tell them that their light meets the light of the stars. And then they are invited to come back to their center, the way that they left, back through the universe, through the atmosphere of earth, over the tops of the trees, across the surface of the pond and into the grass and back into the heart of the traveler. And they are reminded that the light is always there.

Lunch Time

All three groups converge after the Earth Walk at the fire circle. We practice the poem of gratitude that we will say together before lunch before we sit down to eat. After lunch we have free play by the dam. There is a lot of energy to run off. We might play animal games like Find Your Partner or Charades in groups. Adults tend to be tired at this time, so our attention is important to manage the group energy. It is important to offer a water source after recess.

Ending Circle

Closing reflections are led either by the Director for the whole group or by each Earth Guide in smaller groups, depending on the age of the group. For the younger groups, the guide will recreate the earth walk to give the children some help in remembering something that was special for them. For the older groups, the Director will ask each child what was special for them.

We end with an echo ritual with gestures. Each child is asked to speak a word that captures their experience of the day and to accompany that word with a gesture as it is spoken. For example, the word joy might be spoken while the child lifts her hands to the sky. Then, the whole group is invited to echo the word and gesture. When we have come full circle, we go back around with the gesture only, one by one around the circle with the whole group echoing back.

Waving Goodbye

We stand together and wave and smile and sign I LOVE YOU as the bus pulls away.

Clean Up

We clean the facility where our programs take place, leaving it as we found it.

Looking Back on the Day

Our staff meets after every program to share their experiences of the practices and the responses from the children during the small group Earth Walk. This is very illuminating and gives us new ideas to explore and new language to help us in sharing this work with our diverse populations. We also share our perceptions of the adults' participation during the Earth Walks.

Our aim is to make ourselves deeply available to a sacred universe by offering loving attention to the natural world and bringing ourselves into the deeper Presence that surrounds us. Unlike many mindfulness practices in which "attention" is a goal in itself, in our practices the intention is "relationship" and "resonance." We behold the natural world in a deeply listening and receptive way. We behold with a loving eye and an open heart. Our practices might be viewed as "holding at bay" our habitual ways of "knowing about" and accumulating information. Through these practices we are awakening the unitive imagination, that more subtle faculty which unifies and moves us beyond the dualism of an I-It relationship with the world. We are discovering our own inner capacities to open to life in new ways. We are attuning ourselves to the soul of the world.

Appendix II

Empathetic Listening

by Sandy Bisdee

(While our programs for children and young adults came to a close in 2021, we are now offering descriptions that introduce you to the Center's practices and ways of working)

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

The "Empathetic Listening" program engages children in a practice of deep listening to each other and to the natural world. During the first half of the program, the children are invited to listen deeply to the natural world during a solo writing time in their own special sit-spot within a beautiful earth sanctuary. They are invited to become still, to deeply notice the place where they are sitting. What makes this particular landscape special and unique? What are you hearing in your special place? What might nature reveal to you? In the rare experience of silence, a voice begins to emerge—their own—inspired by the beauty, wonder and intimacy of the natural world.

The second half of the program begins with an introduction to empathetic listening, a way of listening that creates mutual understanding,

trust and respect. Can we learn to listen without judgment? Can we listen without interrupting? Can we reflect back what we think we have heard? Can we sense the feelings behind the words? These are some of the practices that children have an opportunity to explore together in pre-selected pairs.

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

Welcome and Introductions

We welcome the children to the fire circle with Native American flute to quiet the mind. The sounds of a Cedarwood flute intentionally express gratitude for the amazing universe that we live in, for each of them, for the animals of the earth, the plants, the insects and the stones. We speak with the students about the earth sanctuary as a safe place for all creatures, no matter what their size or appearance may be. At the earth sanctuary we are guests of all who live there and we act accordingly. Everything is protected and worthy of respect for its intrinsic value to the whole of creation.

Living in today's world requires new ways of seeing and new ways of hearing that are different from our habitual ways of seeing and hearing. We share from Helen Keller's autobiography, *The Story of My Life*, about some of her experiences in nature and the lovely ways that she expressed her connections with the natural world without having the benefit of her eyesight or her hearing. Helen was forced to develop other ways of knowing to help her perceive the essence of each divine spark of life. She learned to sense life in new ways—tactile, intuitive and deeply interior ways—that connected her with the elements, trees, birds, and flowers.

Empathetic Listening with Nature

It is time to divide the children into three groups of eight children each. The focus will be on listening to the world of nature through all of our senses as well as through our inner sensing. We gather at the trailhead and take a moment to give thanks for the gifts from the trees. We explain

that we will be forming a processional line with about 15 feet between each person. We will walk in silence with deep attention to the beauty of the landscape as we walk toward the bridge where we will meet. The sounds beneath our feet are not quiet at all as we swish through the ankle deep multicolored leafy path. Our collective footsteps form a kind of swishy rhythm that gently sounds through the forest, announcing our presence. The air is dry and comfortable in the shade of the forest. The dark green ferns dominate the sides of the paths. There are bird songs far away. A great blue heron flies silently over our heads, but few notice him as they look for rocks and roots on the trail hidden beneath the leaves. The silent solo walking is relaxing. Children are comfortable with this way of being in the forest with us. Silence is a friend, not a foe.

When we arrive at the small bridge over the creek, we gather together with our legs dangling over the side of the bridge and watch the gentle flow of the creek. A crawdad sticks his claws out from beneath a rock. We ask each person to close their eyes and listen to all of the sounds near and far, soft and loud. We tell them that we will softly whistle when it is time to open their eyes. The deep listening brings with it a peacefulness. Eyes closed, the children further relax and listen for a long time. When the time seems right, we whistle softly and invite them to open their eyes slowly to allow the light of the world to enter back in gently. What is the first thing they notice when they open their eyes? What did they hear? We share what we noticed in the silence with our eyes closed.

We invite the children to find a sit spot nearby and to take some time to settle into the special place they have chosen. What do they hear, both inwardly and in the world around them? At the end of their writing time, we listen to each child's unique experience of listening and to what they heard and sensed. The uniqueness of each person's way of sensing paints a beautiful picture of this special place and how each person perceives in their own special way. The second half of the walk back to the Treehouse is relaxed. The children's eyes and ears are attuned to the music of the forest and the children eagerly share what they notice as they explore with those near them along the path.

Empathetic Listening with Each Other

With everyone back at the Treehouse, it is time to gather the whole class together again to learn about the art of empathetic listening and to have some fun practicing reflective listening skills in pre-arranged pairs.

What is empathetic listening? Empathic listening (also called active listening or reflective listening) is a way of listening and responding to another person that improves mutual understanding, trust and respect. Empathetic listening helps the listener better understand the emotions and feelings that are underneath another person's words. It is often used by mediators to help with conflicts between two parties to help them come to a resolution, but we will be focusing on person-to-person listening.

We discuss habits of listening that inhibit communion between two people and that take away from a sense of being respected and heard. During empathetic listening, we show a willingness to be present and to let the other person speak freely. We are attentive to what is being said, take care not to interrupt, and try not to get distracted. We do not try to change the subject. We listen for the feelings beneath the words. We try to create a positive atmosphere through our body language and non-verbal behavior and provide eye contact. Through empathetic listening the listener lets the speaker know, "I am interested in what you are saying and I am not judging you."

We are now ready to break into pairs and sit together, face-to-face, down by the pond on the grassy dam to practice empathetic listening. The teacher has chosen pairs of children ahead of time, children that are not best friends or at odds with each other, but children that might benefit from extending their circle of friends. The adults will be participating too.

The pairs scatter about on sit mats facing each other and begin to tell a story of a time they were in nature. Instructions are clear to only interrupt if a point needs clarifying. They are consciously paying attention to their body language and eye contact. The children are deeply engaged with one another, and the dam is buzzing with stories as everyone engages in the practice. Our Earth Guides linger and support children who seem to be finished very quickly or who need some gentle guidance.

Lunch

Closing

After lunch, as we come together to reflect on our day, students often say how wonderful it felt to be able to speak without interruption and with such rapt attention. Most of them listen very carefully and are able to reflect what they heard back accurately, including how the speaker felt about the event. The intrinsic value of every human being—and of every creature, plant and stone—has been affirmed through empathetic listening in the natural world. Through this program we come to deeply understand that the Earth is a single, sacred community.

Appendix III

The Poetry of Nature

by Sandy Bisdee

(While our programs for children and young adults came to a close in 2021, we are now offering descriptions that introduce you to the Center's practices and ways of working)

*Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—over and over announcing
your place in the family of things.¹*

~ Mary Oliver

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

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

Program Background

We introduce the poetry of Mary Oliver during our general Poetry of Nature programs with middle school students. In addition to using Mary Oliver's work, we also use original poetry from students who have attended our programs in the past. We have been blessed with the unique opportunity to work with the same school for 10 years, a school that has brought out the entire 8th grade class for a Poetry of Nature Program once a year. Following each program, when they get back to school, the teacher gives them the opportunity to re-visit and to refine their own nature poems and to illustrate them. At the completion of that process, the work of the students is assembled into a book. Each year, when working with this particular school, we select and read the original poems from the poetry books published over the years, reading them to the current students in the 8th grade class. Following the reading of each poem, we share the name of the author. This brings about gasps, great surprise and delight because many of the poems were written by students they know, many of them friends and family members!

Program Rhythm of the Day

Opening

9:30 am – 10:10 am

Introductions

The day of the program begins with a verbal expression of gratitude from the guide for all of creation followed by soothing flute music. A

brief introduction is given to the earth sanctuary and to the Earth Guides who are present.

Sitting together in a circle outdoors, we speak to the group about the idea of being consciously present to the moment in contrast to being somewhere else mentally. It is one thing to appear to be present in the body, but to have the mind elsewhere. It is another thing to be fully present in body and mind and open to the moment at that particular moment in time. The students are then asked to introduce themselves and to tell us if they are just “here” or if they are “present.” If they are “present,” we ask them, “What are you present to?” This is a wonderful way to bring in many of the facets of nature during our circle time, both inner and outer dimensions, which enlarge the experience of the introductions to each other and to the communion of subjects that have remained unnoticed thus far. Swirling smoke rising from the fire, feelings of anticipation, a cool breeze on the cheek, the smell of the smoke, the bark of a tree, a leaf fluttering to the ground, a Harvestman walking by, a rainbow spider web illuminated in the tree above and swaying trees are some of the examples of the many modes of divine presence that come to meet us through the conscious presence and deep noticing from each individual. Introductions are followed by a reading of Mary Oliver’s poem “Morning.”²

Poetry of Nature Introduction

The Poetry of Nature introduction is intended to help the students understand the role of the poet as someone who can help them see things in new ways and in a different light, through new eyes. We can become habitual in the ways that we see and we tend to look at things in the same old ways. On this day, the students will be invited to practice seeing through the eyes of a poet. The attitude of the poet is really important. It is an attitude of wonderment. This kind of attitude can be a way of approaching the world as if you’ve never seen it before. In the Poetry of Nature program, we are asking the students to become poets for the day.

The natural world can be a vessel within which we access some of our deepest inspirations. Writing in an earth sanctuary, in a quiet

and protected place, is a unique opportunity in which young people can receive inspiration from the natural world. How do we go about doing this? We walk and work in silence, without the typical everyday conversation that we are accustomed to. We are willing to slow down to nature's pace, without any destination in mind, and seek to come into the present moment fully.

What does it mean to live deeply in the present moment? It means that we are willing to let go of the past and of the future, and all of the drama of life, and to open all of our senses to the world around us and to the world within us. We tell the students that this is going to be a new experience for them, as it is for the adults who come to some of our programs. We know that walking in silence with your classmates is not something that you ordinarily do. Today's program is different from taking a hike in the woods. We will not be walking very far, and we will have three opportunities to sit alone and to write. The present time that we live in requires new ways of being in the world.

Once we still our bodies and our minds and come into the present moment, how do we reflect the present moment in nature with words? There are many different ways to do this. We understand that some people write easily and without prompt while writing does not come as easily to others—they will need some structure and guidance to get started. By reading examples from former students' poetry, we introduce all of the forms that will be available to them to choose from during their solo writing time. We begin by introducing several sentence stems such as, *I am present to...*, *In the Silence...*, and *In this Moment...* We then share some examples of acrostic writing forms, Haiku, and freeform writing. We finish the introduction with the idea of simply writing what they notice from the unique vantage of their sit spot. We emphasize that there is no right or wrong way to write. We tell them that they will have the chance to read what they are writing in their small groups during the morning and that everybody will be asked to share at least one poem at the end of the day, after lunch, during our large group poetry reading.

Writing in Nature

10:10 – 12:00

Materials: sit-mats, pencils, journal, watch

Overview

At each of two or three pre-selected locations, the group will be invited to stop and to become still as the guide reads a poem. The guide has already pre-chosen a poem that resonates with the particular landscape where they will be stopping. Writing times range from 10 to 20 minutes per place. Several stops are built into the morning as a way to get the students comfortable with being in silence, solo writing and small group sharing. It is common to have students who are unwilling to share what they have written during the first sharing. By the second stop, they have loosened up and are often willing to share, if their peers are. The Poetry of Nature guides and the adult chaperones write and share, too. The small group sharing gives the students time to hear their own voices, re-write/reword if they want to, and gives them the courage to share at the large group reading after lunch.

Stop One

When we come to the first stop, we stand together and the guide reads the selected poem.

We then invite the students to be fully present to the moment in time and to the unique landscape where we find ourselves. How do we do this? We invite them to take a deep breath and to become very still and quiet both inwardly and outwardly. We then ask a series of questions to connect them with the landscape. What is happening here now? What kind of movement do you notice? What colors do you notice? What do you see that makes this place special? Are there any scents on the breeze or any particular smells? What sounds can be heard? What does the air feel like on your skin? Is it dry or moist? What is unseen that lives in this place? What feelings are arising inside of you? These are some of the ways that can help you come into a relationship with your surroundings.

After these deep noticing practices, we invite the students to find a solo spot in the area (not near their classmates where they might be tempted to chat!) and to repeat the “coming into presence” practices that were just shared with the small group, but now by themselves to help them get centered and settled for their writing time. The students are reminded of the different forms that their writing might take from our morning introduction. We assure them that we are there to help them if they get stuck or need some help. We might suggest the sentence stem *I wonder* or writing the word BEHOLD vertically on the page for an acrostic poem to get them started.

The role of the guide at this time is to make sure that the students have found a place that they are able to settle down into and that is not within talking distance of their friends. We ask them to stay in sight of the guide. The guide finds a place to sit where he or she can write and keep an eye out for any student who seems to need assistance. Help is gently offered. If we see students sitting for a long time without writing, we quietly come up to them, ask them how things are going, notice their progress and offer a few suggestions to get them started. Maybe they would like to write about what they notice? What *do* they notice? Acrostics are great ways to help students enter into the process of writing when they are feeling stuck.

When it looks like the majority of students have finished writing, we ask several of them, the ones that are still writing, if they need more time and to please begin to wind down as we will be coming together for a small group sharing opportunity in a couple of minutes. Sharing is done without clapping or comments following each recitation during the small group sharing. We also encourage them not to laugh at anyone because it takes a lot of courage to share and laughing could be misconstrued. This is a tender time and great care needs to be taken in the way that students are encouraged to share. Sometimes a brave and confident individual will offer to begin, but often times the guides might need to start off the reading time with something they have composed and then go around the circle.

Stop Two

During the second carefully selected landscape and stop, we repeat the same sequence of reading a poem, practicing presence and deep noticing together, encouraging them to practice presence and deep noticing in their special solo spot, engage in writing time followed by a small group sharing. We offer the sentence stem *In the Silence* and the word LISTEN for acrostic form. We find that everyone feels more comfortable to share during this second sharing time.

Stop Three

The third poem is read at the end of the small group sharing unless there is still time in the schedule to walk to a third location.

Either way, we read the poem “Some Questions You Might Ask” by Mary Oliver.³

The students are then invited to write down at least 3 of their own questions. This does not take a lot of time and when they have each written at least 3 questions, we sit in a circle and take turns reading them one at a time in the round. This prepares them for the grand finale of the Poetry of Nature poetry reading after lunch where we repeat this process of reading one question at a time with a large group of 24 or more students and teachers.

Lunch

12:00-1:00

Group Sharing

1:00-1:30

We have an area that is already set up and ready for the poetry reading that follows lunch. We arrange chairs in a large oval where everyone can see and hear each other.

We begin the afternoon with some flute music. Following that, we begin the poetry reading by going around the circle, one after the other. The students are invited to read slowly and a little bit louder than usual

so that everyone can hear them. Following each reading, there will be no clapping or laughing. There will be silence until the next person reads. We encourage them all to take a deep breath after each reading before they follow by reading their own work. Creating a safe place for everyone to share is very important. We have had 100 % participation with over 300 students in our Poetry of Nature program, working in these ways.

Closing: Questions

Each person in the circle is asked to speak his or her question out loud. We usually go around the circle for three rounds of questions.

Suggested poems from Mary Oliver's *New and Selected Poems*:

“The Ponds” (p. 92)

“Landscape” (p. 129)

“Wild Geese” (p.110)

Appendix IV

Eco-contemplative Arts and Rituals for Children

by Sandy Bisdee

(While our programs for children and young adults came to a close in 2021, we are now offering descriptions that introduce you to the Center's practices and ways of working)

Inspired by the vision of Thomas Berry, our summer programs for children have provided a unique opportunity for a small group of 12 children to make a deep personal connection to the natural world within the meadows, creeks, gardens and forests of a 165-acre earth sanctuary. Earth walks and creek walking are daily sources of joy and inspiration. Within the peace and beauty of an earth sanctuary, new eyes and ears awaken as the children create expressions out of their experiences with the earth. Mandalas, papermaking, nature journaling, universe flags and Native American flute are some of the eco-contemplative arts that enliven the rhythm of our days. Soul-centered rituals bring the children more deeply into a feeling of communion with each other and the natural world.

Contemplative Flute Music

We begin our programs with music played on a Native American flute. The music sets a tone for the day and is intended to have a peaceful,

relaxing and calming effect on the listeners. The music often gives people a chance to come into stillness, presence and to breathe more evenly. The music is not a performance and is always original, unless a particular song is sung. Any instrument, including the human voice can be substituted. The music is offered with a feeling of gratitude, love and appreciation for all of creation. It is dedicated to the sun, moon, earth, clouds, birds, trees, plants, stones and to all of the people that are with us on the day of the program. An image of this “communion of subjects” is held in the heart while the music is played. The musician does not have to be a professional to play this kind of music. The effect of the music comes from the intention and feeling in the heart of the musician.

Children are often very moved by this kind of music and spontaneously share their experiences with us. Some children begin to notice the world around them in concert with the music, like smoke swirling around a log from the fire and leaves dancing on the trees. Some children say that they have felt the presence of God while others say the birds are singing along with the flute. Some children have commented about hearing something ancient in the music. Starting programs in this way creates a space for deeper listening.

Nature Mandalas

During our weeklong summer programs, we begin the day by creating mandalas. While one staff member greets families with a warm and welcoming presence as they arrive at the earth sanctuary treehouse, another staff member is sitting on the back porch waiting for each child to join her at a communal table.

As the children arrive one by one, they see that she has already begun her nature mandala for the morning. She invites the children to begin their own mandalas in the silence and peace of the earth sanctuary. This is a natural silence, a comfortable silence, and a non self-conscious silence. Silence has a gentle way of entering into what we are doing and suspending time, while giving the children a chance to be in each other's presence. During the mandala creations, silence enlarges the moment as the children become aware of the natural world that enfolds them.

Our staff member shares with the children that she is creating a circular design, and that she has started at the center of the paper. As she creates the mandala, she slowly moves to the outside of the circle. She tells them that images, symbols, or shapes may take form in their minds as they are drawing and that when this happens to her, she tries to draw those images on the paper. She also shares that sometimes feelings may arise in their hearts, and that they can acknowledge them and then let them go. This gives the children the opportunity to create from their own inner knowing. Children are given the chance to let go of their own egos for a moment and enter into an eco-contemplative way of being in the natural world.

This process allows them the space to commune with their own inner sanctuaries and the sounds of the outer sanctuary. The sounds of the birds, frogs, crickets, and sometimes the breeze in the trees surround them. At times, there may be soft flute, sitar, guitar, kalimba, or dulcimer live music to accompany the natural sounds. The presence that the children feel in the earth sanctuary sustains the silence as they create their own authentic nature mandalas.

This process also allows the children to feel a sense of community with the other children in the group and the natural world through the language of imagination. It allows the seed of imagination to be born and nurtured. The children are given the space throughout the week to cultivate their own seeds of imagination. This can be continued and followed into the next morning if the children are still working and need extra time. Some of the children add found objects from the earth walks to their mandalas and glue them to the paper.

Papermaking and Journals

Papermaking in our summer programs takes some preparation from the adults before the children start the process of making. It is ideal to have two adults setting up the screens, making the pulp, and getting materials organized.

Paper from the recycling bin is perfect for making pulp. Also paper from a shredder will work. The shredded paper is placed in a food

processor or blender. Water is added and mixed until the paper turns to a pulp. The pulp is poured into a large flat container filled with water. Dried flowers are added to the mixture. Seeds can also be added and the paper can be planted to grow flowers or herbs at home.

The children take a screen and dip their screens into the paper bath. The screens have wooden frames around them. Once they dip the screen down into the paper pulp, they bring it up and down again and again to get the right thickness. This process is intended to bring the children into the present moment and give children the freedom to go at nature's pace. It also allows children the opportunity to commune and form bonds with old and new friends while they are waiting to make paper.

Making the paper outside on the back porch, in the fresh air under a canopy of trees filled with frogs, butterflies and birds, brings us closer to the divine presence surrounding us. Bullfrogs, cricket frogs, wood frogs, and green frogs serenade us in intervals. Peace eagles (black vultures) glide in closer to get a better look. Blue lined skinks with reddish heads rest near our papermaking station. Joy permeates the air.

The water is then pressed out of the sheet of paper through several stages using wood blocks, felt, and a thick fiber paper. Then the paper is dried flat overnight. The next day the dried paper will become the cover of their journals. The children use recycled paper for the signatures, string and natural beads to bind their journals together. Some children take the paper home and enjoy looking at the paper as a work of art. Other children may want to press flower or herb seeds into the piece of paper while it is still wet and then make a card to give to someone special in their life so that they can plant it in a flowerpot or in a garden.

Universe Flags

The idea for making universe flags came from our eco-contemplative artist, Marnie Weigel:

My mother gave me these beautiful batik fabrics. I had no idea at the time what they would become. One day, I was at home creating and thinking of all kinds of ideas for the fabric. I started to think about flags around the world. I am

particularly interested in prayer flags from Nepal. I love the idea that as they blow in the wind, they are sending prayers all around the world. I thought how wonderful it would be if children were given the chance to use their imagination and creativity to create a flag to celebrate the connection of their life with a magical moment in the natural world—a flag of gratitude for all life and creation, and that is how the idea was born.

I thought of three very special moments in my life that I wanted to celebrate and honor. Over several weeks, I made three Universe Flags filled with meaningful symbols, shells, natural materials, and hand-made paper sewn to the batik fabric. I hand stitched the flag around a bamboo stick. Each flag represents a magical moment in my life that I have deep reverence for. All of these moments were connected to the natural world.

The first flag celebrated the wonderful Magical Garden at Timberlake Earth Sanctuary. The flag celebrated all the wonderful butterflies in the garden and a magical moment I experienced in the garden when I could hear the breeze beneath the wings of a butterfly flying over my head one morning.

The second flag honored the great and glorious ocean. I celebrated two special moments at the ocean with the moon and stars in the cosmos. I also celebrated all the seashells and each tiny life that lives in each one.

The third flag expressed my reverence and gratefulness for The Center for Education, Imagination, and the Natural World with a symbol of a spider web I created with vine and string. The web symbolizes life and our connection to all beings in the Universe. I remembered many magical moments noticing all the amazing spider webs at Timberlake Earth Sanctuary with the children in our day programs. There were iridescent rainbow colors glistening in the web when the sunlight reflected off the web. A gentle breeze breathed through the web and created a delicate movement that suspended us in time. This moment allowed us to be in the present with our own breath and notice in amazement as the strength of the web changed and transformed into a living being. With deep noticing, we would see the beautiful spider that created her. There is also a beautiful stone sewn onto the fabric that was the stone I chose on a day of gratitude for The Center for Education, Imagination, and the Natural World and for all that have come together to make the dream real in the world. I traveled with this stone for months before I was called to sew it onto the flag. It represented the stability

and grounding that The Center for Education, Imagination, and the Natural World has nurtured inside my own heart.

Each staff member makes a Universe Flag before the summer program begins. They bring their flags and share them with the children on the first day. After the staff members share the meaning and symbolism of their flags, the children are ready to get started on their own. Pinkish shears, batik fabric of all colors, needles and thread, and an assortment of beads and natural materials are placed on the tables on the back porch to begin this communal creation with the natural world. We bring bamboo for them to sew their flags on and encourage them to find their own if they want to. One staff member plays guitar, sitar or a kalimba for us while the children work on creating their own flags. It is a two-and-a-half-day process, culminating in displaying the flags and then sharing them by hearing each child speak of the symbolism behind what he or she has created.

The act of creation can inspire related projects for the children. For example, one boy sewed two pairs of curtains for the Woodland Home, another boy sewed a quiver for hand sharpened arrows that he whittled, and other children created little “medicine bags” that were made out of small three-inch batik fabric circles tied at the top with string and filled with wishes, prayers, and feelings and other intangible substances. Some were filled with tobacco, lavender, flower petals, semi-precious stones, and tiny seashells. Tobacco is a traditional Native American offering symbolizing gratitude to the earth. They were ornately decorated with natural beads and worn around their necks or tied to their flags.

Heart Words and Secret Pals

Secret Pals has been a favorite activity during our weeklong summer programs. For Secret Pals, each child chooses the name of a child or staff member in the group from a bowl during the morning circle time following the contemplative morning arts that begin each day. Each person is invited to observe their secret pal throughout the day and to notice some of the things that make that person special and unique. At

the ending circle of the day, each child shares what they have learned about their secret pal, always with help from an earth guide if needed. Grade school age children love this ritual.

We discovered the Heart Words ritual for older children, ages 10-14, after being gifted with a bag of Hearthstones from the Sophia Center. Heart Words is a natural extension of our Secret Pals ritual that includes the natural world. The older children and adolescents choose a Heart Word and ponder how that word relates to nature and to humankind. At the end of the day, while we are gathered together for a closing circle, the children share some of the insights that have come to them throughout the day. Sometimes children get stuck, and other children chime in to give their perspective, which is always appreciated and generative. All of these rituals invite a kind of relational thinking and feeling with humankind and an invitation to extend that to the natural world. The Hearthstones contain 55 words etched on a natural heart-shaped clay piece: abundance, acceptance, awe, balance, beauty, believe, blessing, bliss, change, compassion, courage, delight, encourage, enjoy, excellence, faith, forgiveness, freedom, friendship, gentleness, grace, gratitude, healing, honesty, honor, hope, humor, imagine, integrity, joy, kindness, light, love, magic, Miracles Happen, openness, passion, patience, peace, play, power, praise, prosperity, recovery, respect, rest, serenity, strength, surrender, tenderness, transform, trust, welcome, wellness, willingness and wisdom. Sometimes questions arise as to the meaning of a word. If that is the case, the question of defining it is put to the group's wisdom. If there are still lingering questions, someone volunteers to look up the word when they get home and to bring the definition back to the group the next day.

Mystery Bag Beholding

We have a large collection of all kinds of found objects from the natural world. We select enough for a group of children to choose from and put each of them inside a bag. Some of the things that might be chosen with eyes closed could be a dinosaur tooth, a spear point, the inner ear bone of a whale, a miniature loofa, a crystal, a sea horse, a

bit of fur, a seed pod, a feather, a fossilized shark tooth, or a shell. The children choose one thing and hold it in their hands with their eyes closed as they describe what they feel. After a while, they might take a guess as to what it is and then they open their eyes and see what they have held. Sometimes they know what they are holding, and other times it is a complete mystery! Middle School students especially like this activity.

Wishing Rock

Every landscape has special places that beckon to us to stop and stay awhile. We are always on the lookout for these kinds of places when we are sharing our practices with others. Timberlake Earth Sanctuary has a flat rock located right on the edge of a lake under an old Maple Tree. It was named the Wishing Rock a long time ago and there is a rustic sign in front of it. Hundreds and hundreds of children have made wishes there. This is one of the practices and places that gather silence. While one child is making a wish, the rest of the children wish that that child's wish will come true while they wait quietly for their turn. Wishes can be kept secret or spoken aloud. We are often touched by the spontaneous wishes for peace for people and for the earth.

Solo Walking and Processional Walking

This simple way of walking, in silence and with some distance between the people as they walk in a single file line, is a beautiful way to lead up to something special like a Gratitude Circle in a remote location, or for following a special event like a ceremony or dedication. It can also be used for calming down a rowdy and boisterous group of children on an earth walk.

We have engaged in this kind of walking in a wide range of Center programs. One summer a small group of children created a shrine in a beautiful place in the earth sanctuary amidst three trees. They designed and decorated it over several days. They decided to dedicate it to many of the world's wisdom traditions. They named it "The Three Tree Shrine." It was designed so that each person, no matter what their spiritual path, could kneel in silence on a bed of dried flowers inside of the three trees.

After the dedication ceremony that the young teens led was completed, we all left in silence on a processional walk back to the treehouse.

Sometimes during an “Awakening to Nature” program when we have an overly active group of school children, we find a place in the forest that has a bend in the path that the children cannot see beyond or a boardwalk whose end is not in view. The Earth Guide walks to the end point around the bend and waits as the children walk alone and in silence to where the Earth Guide is waiting for them. The supporting adult stays behind and taps each child when it is her turn for the solo walk. Those who have completed the walk sit quietly and wait for each person to make the journey.

Gratitude Circle

Any time of the day is a good time for a gratitude circle! We infuse all of our days with gratitude for each other and for all of creation through thought, word and deed. We begin each day with flute music that expresses gratitude and look for opportunities all throughout the day to share our gratitude for all of life, including each other. A gratitude circle is as simple as it sounds. Sitting together in a circle in the natural world, we take turns going around the circle (with or without a talking stick or stone) and expressing something that we are grateful for. With older students in our summer programs, this sharing can go on for a long time.

Notes

Introduction

1. The phrase, “an intimate communion of thought,” was used by Thomas Berry in a conversation with Carolyn Toben in *Recovering a Sense of the Sacred: Conversations with Thomas Berry* (Whitsett, NC: Timberlake Earth Sanctuary Press, 2012), 71.
2. Carolyn Toben, *Recovering a Sense of the Sacred: Conversations with Thomas Berry* (Whitsett, NC: Timberlake Earth Sanctuary Press, 2012), 28.
3. Thomas Berry, in transcript of “The Primordial Imperative: Nature, Education and Imagination,” a program sponsored by the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World at Timberlake Earth Sanctuary, October 12, 2000.
4. Edith Cobb, *The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood*, with an introduction by Margaret Mead (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).
5. Richard Lewis is the founder of the Touchstone Center for Children in New York City, devoted to encouraging both children and adults to express through different mediums their innate relationship to the natural world. His books include *Living By Wonder*, *In a Spring Garden*, *Each Sky Has Its Words*, *The Bird of Imagining*, and *Cave*.
6. Richard Lewis, “Our First Conversation” (*Chrysalis*, Spring 2004), 4-5.
7. Tobin Hart, *The Secret Spiritual World of Children* (Makawao, Maui, HI: Inner Ocean Publishing, 2003), 39.
8. Carolyn Toben, *Recovering a Sense of the Sacred*, 99.
9. Ibid.
10. Thomas Berry, in transcript of “The Primordial Imperative: Nature, Education and Imagination,” a program sponsored by the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World at Timberlake Earth Sanctuary, October 12, 2000.

11. Richard Louv, *The Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 2005).
12. Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way Into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 82.
13. Carolyn Toben, *Recovering a Sense of the Sacred*, 117-118.
14. Ibid, 97.
15. Peggy Whalen-Levitt, ed. *Only the Sacred: Transforming Education in the Twenty-first Century* (Greensboro, NC: The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World, 2011).

Part One: The Meadow Across the Creek: Introduction

1. Thomas Berry, “Goldenrod” (unpublished essay), 5. This essay was shared with the Center by Margaret Berry in preparation for our performance piece, *The Meadow Across the Creek: Words from Thomas Berry*, performed at the Greensboro Historical Museum for the Thomas Berry Centennial on November 7, 2014.
2. Thomas Berry, “Childhood Reflections” (unpublished writing), 1-2. This unpublished writing was shared with the Center by Margaret Berry in preparation for our performance piece, *The Meadow Across the Creek: Words from Thomas Berry*, performed at the Greensboro Historical Museum for the Thomas Berry Centennial on November 7, 2014.
3. Ibid., 2-3.
4. Thomas Berry, “Goldenrod” (unpublished essay), 14.
5. Ibid., 28.
6. Ibid., 24.
7. Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way Into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 12-13.
8. Thomas Berry, “Contemplation and the World Order,” 10-11 (a paper available on the Thomas Berry Foundation website at http://thomasberry.org/wp-content/uploads/Berry_Contemplation_and_world_order.pdf)
9. Ibid., 20.
10. Thomas Berry, *The Christian Future and the Fate of Earth*, ed. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 71.
11. Thomas Berry quoted in Carolyn Toben, *Recovering a Sense of the Sacred: Conversations With Thomas Berry* (Whitsett, NC: Timberlake

- Earth Sanctuary Press, 2012), 62.
12. Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 2006), 13.
13. Thomas Berry, *The Christian Future and the Fate of Earth*, 38.
14. Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, 208.
15. Thomas Berry in Carolyn Toben, *Recovering a Sense of the Sacred*, 98.
16. Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe: Earth, Spirit, and Religion in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Mary Evelyn Tucker (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 149-150.
17. Thomas Berry, *Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as Sacred Community*, ed. Mary Evelyn Tucker (Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 2006), 54-55.
18. Thomas Berry in Carolyn Toben, *Recovering a Sense of the Sacred*, 86-87.
19. Edgar Dacqué, *Leben als Symbol* (Munich-Berlin, 1928), 114.
20. Robert Sardello, *Silence* (Benson, NC: Goldenstone Press, 2006), 11.
21. Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, 223.
22. Jessica Towle, "Conversations With Thomas Berry" (*Chrysalis*, Fall 2004), 16.
23. Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe: Earth, Spirit, and Religion in the Twenty-First Century*, 48.
24. Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*, 17.
25. Mary Oliver, *New and Selected Poems* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1992), 70.
26. *Ibid.*, 230.
27. *Ibid.*, 92.
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29. *Ibid.*, 50-51.
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Appendix I: Awakening to Nature: An Eco-Contemplative Program for Children

1. We are indebted to Joseph Cornell for the seed thoughts for many of our practices, which we have adapted and made our own over many years with an eye always toward ways of working that cultivate soul capacities in the child.

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