

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

2006-2008



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The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World
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The Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice 2006-2008

Introduction

by

Peggy Whalen-Levitt

Since its beginnings in 2000, The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World has worked closely with ecotheologian Thomas Berry to re-imagine the child's relationship with the natural world. Seminal to these conversations is the following quote from Thomas Berry:

There is a certain futility in the efforts being made – truly sincere, dedicated, and intelligent efforts – to remedy our environmental devastation simply by activating renewable sources of energy and by reducing the deleterious impact of the industrial world. The difficulty is that the natural world is seen primarily for human use, not as a mode of sacred presence primarily to be communed with in wonder, beauty and intimacy. In our present attitude the natural world remains a commodity to be bought and sold, not a sacred reality to be venerated. The deep psychic shift needed to withdraw us from the fascination of the industrial world and the deceptive gifts that it gives us is too difficult for simply the avoidance of its difficulties or the attractions of its benefits. Eventually, only our sense of the sacred will save us.¹

In considering the education of children and young adults in our culture, we have come to believe that this “deep psychic shift” that Thomas Berry refers to is the central task of our time. To what extent does the schooling of children contribute to their view of the natural world as a commodity? How might we create a context within which children awaken to the wonder, beauty and intimacy of the natural world? What might be done to restore a sense of the natural world as a sacred presence in the lives of children? These are the questions that have concerned us.

In response to these questions, the Center initiated a two-year program in the autumn of 2006 entitled “The Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice.” Funded by the Compton Foundation, the program was designed to prepare educators to develop capacities to nurture the deep inner faculties of imagination and intuition in children, and to create contexts within which children are given the opportunity to develop a bond of intimacy with the natural world.

The response to “The Inner Life of the Child in Nature” program exceeded our greatest expectations. It was heartening to read the applications of so many educators who indicated a deep interest in creating a new vision of the relationship between the inner life of the child/young adult and the natural world. We attempted to compose a group of educators that represented diversities of place, context and young people served – a microcosm of the macrocosm, so to speak. The final group of 24 educators worked with young people from 2 to 22 years old, and represented teachers, child

¹ Thomas Berry, Foreword, *When Trees Say Nothing* by Thomas Merton, edited by Kathleen Diegnan, Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2003, pp. 18-19.

psychologists, religious educators, medical doctors, parents, nature educators, child care providers, horticultural therapists, college professors and volunteers who worked in contexts ranging from homeless shelters in New York City to nature preserves in North Carolina.

The program began with four one-day retreats during the 2006-2007 school year and one two-day retreat in the summer of 2007. At the Center, we try to create a meaningful context for our programs by paying close attention to the rhythm of the day. Retreats began with a moment of silence intended to quiet the mind and create a field of receptivity for the group. Every retreat included solo time in the natural world, time for reflection and sharing, the fellowship of shared meals at lunch, and presentations related to the theme at hand. Each retreat ended with a time for silence that brought closure to the experience we had created together throughout the day.

Over the course of our two years together, we invited the educators to “come alive to the natural world,” especially to the natural world within which they worked with children. We asked them to begin a daily practice of awakening to nature by keeping a nature journal as follows: *“You might begin this practice of awakening to nature by calling forth from memory, at the end of each day, one image of the natural world that has stayed with you from the day. You may recall nothing - simply write that down. But you may be surprised to find that this simple practice of looking back over the day yields a bounty of images. Choose one and write it down. If you have time, you might stay with the memory for a while, letting it deepen and noting how the qualities of the image evoke a particular response in you. Soon you will find that this practice of remembering an image at the end of the day will strengthen your capacity for beholding during your waking hours.”*

In preparation for our second retreat with Robin Moore and Nilda Cosco, Co-Founders of the Natural Learning Initiative, we invited the educators to awaken to the natural world within which they worked with children and young adults and to submit a journal entry relating to these special places: *“Be as brief or expansive as you like, but try to stay in the mode of loving attentiveness rather than objective description of the schoolyard, backyard, preserve, urban street, etc. that you and the children call home.”* Through these practices, we were slowly learning to shift from a “spectator role” to a relational way of knowing the world around us.

During our third retreat, we turned our attention to inner landscapes: our own and those of the children and young adults in our care. Guiding us on this journey was Tobin Hart, psychologist and associate professor of psychology at the University of West Georgia. Founder of the ChildSpirit Institute and author of *From Information to Transformation: Education for the Evolution of Consciousness* and *The Secret Spiritual World of Children*, Tobin is a leading spokesperson for the inner lives of children.

In preparation for this time together, we asked the educators to reflect on their own inner experience of the natural world: *“Pay particular attention to the ways of knowing that allow this experience to unfold: beholding the moment, slowing down, appreciating what is before you, empathetic resonance, communion and listening with the heart.”* We also asked them to share a brief story of a young person’s feelings of awe, connection, joy, insight, or deep sense of reverence and love for the natural world; pondering, puzzling over, or playing with questions about the natural world; playful encounters with nature; or any other experience at the meeting place between the inner life of the child/young adult and nature.

On April 28, 2007, we continued this exploration of the inner life of the child with Richard Lewis, Founder of the Touchstone Center for Children in New York City and author of *Living by Wonder: The Imaginative Life of Childhood*. Throughout the first four retreats, we encouraged the educators to take their time moving through this meeting place between inner and outer worlds.

During our two-day retreat in the summer of 2007, we began to move these newfound capacities and understandings toward the formation of a dedicated practice for each person in the group. In an atmosphere of warmth and hospitality, we listened into the true intentions of each other and birthed practices that could move out into the world.

The following questions guided the formation of a practice that would be small and deep enough to be a focus for the year ahead:

In what ways is the image of “a communion of subjects” a guiding image for my practice?

What is to be the circle of my attention in this practice?

What are the fundamental activities of my practice (i.e., forming an experience for children and/or young adults that I can observe in a diary over eight months, deepening a personal practice of communion that I can reflect upon in my journal, dedicating myself to a piece of writing that explores a particular question relevant to the inner life of the child/young adult in nature, etc).

At the end of our two days together, each educator wrote down a “dedicated intention” for a practice that he or she would carry into the coming year.

By the end of the first year it was clear that one of the most essential aspects of the program was the community that had formed among the educators, and between the educators and the natural world – a true and palpable “communion of subjects.” Entering the second year, we resolved to nurture this communion in three seasonal gatherings in which the educators shared their progress with their practices and offered support for one another within the beauty, wonder and intimacy of Timberlake Farm Earth Sanctuary.

On June 28, 2008, we gathered for a culminating retreat where these practices were joyfully shared. In the pages that follow, you will enter this journey of reunion with the natural world.

Throughout the two years together, we experienced the kind of deep renewal that is the sole foundation for envisioning new forms of education for the young. Thomas Berry gives voice to what we now know: “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 phenomenon is renewed. Dawn and sunset are once again transforming experiences, as are the sights, sounds, tastes, and feel of the natural world about us.”²

Peggy Whalen-Levitt, Director and Co-Founder of the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World, holds a Ph.D. in Language in Education from the University of Pennsylvania, where she co-created a graduate Course of Study in Childhood Imagination. She has written widely on aesthetic communication in childhood and is the editor of *Chrysalis*, the Center newsletter. Peggy has pursued studies in phenomenology and contemplative practice with The School of Spiritual Psychology and the Choreocosmos School of Cosmic and Sacred Dance and completed the Foundation Year in Anthroposophical Studies at Sunbridge College.

² Thomas Berry, *Evening Thoughts* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2006), p. 18.

***The Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice
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June 28, 2008***

Opening Reflections

by

Carolyn Toben

The following words from Thomas Berry seem especially appropriate to open this gathering, this graduating today of the first class of the Inner Life of the Child In Nature: Presence and Practice. I will read the words slowly to allow time to absorb them as we consider our work together over these past two years:

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 and communication with the divine.¹

This group has participated in this "newly recognized relationship" between ourselves and the natural world and our experiences of its "beauty, wonder and call to intimacy". Through presence and practice, and then through responses in your beautiful writings, you have each taken up "an indispensable role" in a new work in the world at this time in history.

We started with a sense of presence (meaning pre-esse....before the essence), learning to sense the inner qualities of every living thing. We began to notice the natural world daily in particular ways, and recorded our "beholdings" in journal entries: the caw of a crow, the gesture of a squirrel, the smell of lavender . . . and we came to know these, not through dissection or analysis but through our own drawing closer in intimacy to another world in this world, one of beauty and wonder. In each moment of deep noticing (the meaning of the word "note" as "knowing"), a very particular relationship came into being as we actually seemed to "call" the other into being as it called us. It became part of us for that moment and forever after. Noticing, as inner knowing, it could be said, leaves an impression on the soul that can transform it.

¹ Thomas Berry, Remarks for the Bicentennial Celebration of Greensboro, NC, April 12, 2008.

We continued to practice this way of presence in the natural world over the two years and discovered a growing awareness of the essence of all living things, and then as Thomas put it, we learned to "preserve and augment" our responses to these moments of deep intimacy with the natural world through the written word to share with others. Gradually, gradually we came to a quality of feeling our minds could touch and then offer as simple gifts . . .

What happens on the other side, I wondered, on the side of the natural world as we recover this relationship? I didn't know so I went for a walk to question the trees, the flowers, the creatures.

I spoke first to the tall pines . . . "What can I tell them from you of this new relationship that is emerging?" And the pine trees replied: "Thank them for their gifts of noticing; thank them for bringing us into a new relationship of mutuality with the human world in which we are allowed to teach of patience and steadfastness and trust in a time of great change on earth."

Walking on, I discovered a box turtle on one of the trails and asked it: "What shall I tell them from you at the end of two years of deep noticing?" And the box turtle replied: "Tell them how grateful I am for their willingness to see the incredible diversity in the world as they have noticed my uniqueness. Tell them I now feel a deeper, more intimate relationship with them."

Next I came to the garden and I asked the flowers: "After two years of noticing and making new connections with the natural world, what shall I tell them?" And the flowers . . . gladiolas, daylilies, bee balm, daisies . . . replied in a chorus: "Tell them how we appreciate their beholding the gifts of beauty and eloquence we bring to the world. Tell them it is a reflection of the beauty and eloquence they carry within themselves."

As I turned from the garden down Timberlake Trail, I saw a young deer, ears straight up, tan coat gleaming in the orchard sunshine, and I became very quiet as we beheld each other in utter stillness. Finally I asked her as I had the others: "What shall I tell them after all they have given these two years?" She replied: "Tell them we are grateful . . . all of us everywhere, for the simple gift of recognition that we are . . . all of us . . . a communion of subjects on this earth, that the same spirit of the divine abides in every living thing."

And right before I returned to the farmhouse I heard the doves' message which said, even before I could ask, "Tell them to continue to listen always to the sacred voices of the earth."

For gifts dedicated to the recovery of "the inner vision of a society in harmony with nature," we all give deep thanks.

Carolyn Toben, Founder of Timberlake Farm Earth Sanctuary and Co-Founder of the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World, has taught in Greensboro, NC public and private schools and colleges with an emphasis on alternative and interdisciplinary education. She served for 18 years as a seminar leader at the North Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teaching in Cullowhee and at the Center for the Advancement for Renewal in Education in San Francisco. Her article, "Teacher Renewal: Pilgrims and Passages" was published in the *Holistic Education Review*. Carolyn has pursued post-graduate studies at The Jung Institute in Switzerland, The Institute of Creation Centered Spirituality in Chicago, The Guild for Psychological Studies in San Francisco and The School of Spiritual Psychology.

“Heaven in a Wild Flower”

by

Boykin Bell

When I first joined the other participants in the inaugural class of “The Inner Life of the Child in Nature,” I was not sure I understood our charge. I’m lucky to live in an urban environment that is still rich with nature, where my own children roam the neighborhood un-chaperoned, building dams after a good rain, climbing trees, making forts. The church where I work as the assistant in Christian Formation sits nestled against the UNC Coker Arboretum and Sunday school classes often meet in the garden. So, at first, I didn’t understand the urgency that one of our first readings suggested. Who was *The Last Child in the Woods*?¹ Not any child I knew. The children I worked with had grass stains on their dresses and khaki pants. They were out climbing the magnolias.

But Richard Louv made it clear that the crisis he calls “Nature Deficit Disorder” affects us all. Society as a whole has lost its bearings, becoming lost in the parking lots and shopping malls and air conditioning that – much of the time - we accept as the “real world.”

Because I work for the Episcopal Church, I felt called not only to push our young parishioners outside – many of them were already there – but to help them see the divine in the natural world and to understand that the natural world *was* the “real world,” a world made of God’s creations. I wanted to help the children see, as William Blake did, “heaven in a wild flower.”² I wanted them to see God in every living thing.

And so, as we walked to Children’s Chapel on Sunday mornings, I started asking the children (ages 2-5) to listen to the acorns crunch under their feet. I asked them to listen for a song in the wind. Sometimes, as we walked through the church yard, we would hear the pipe organ through the thick, leaded windows of the chapel. The music beckoned with a thrilling, majestic call. But then, there were the birds, and their cries were equally exciting and enticing.

Children, I think, have an easier time finding God in the natural world than most adults. We were reminded of this in Tobin Hart’s book, *The Secret Spiritual World of Children*, but I have seen it first-hand. One year, for Earth Day, we asked parish children to create a “stained glass” window that would show the “beauty of the earth.” We asked young parishioners to draw, on transparency paper, a place in the natural world where they felt close to God. Then they colored their pictures with markers, “staining the glass.” I was looking for artists on a Sunday morning when a mother heard me ask her child to think of a place in nature where she felt near to God.

“Oh, my gosh!” the mother teased, “I could never ask that question with a straight face.” The idea of finding God under a tree or by a river made her uncomfortable. One must ask, if a parent can’t talk about the spirit, who is going to encourage her child to wonder about the divine? If a parent’s unease is so obvious, when will her children start feeling the same embarrassment?

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

² From William Blake’s “Auguries of Innocence.”

After my first year in the “Inner Life” program, I knew I wanted to write a curriculum that would take children into the natural world, urge them to trust their own instincts and encourage them to believe in their innate knowledge that God was there. I also wanted a curriculum that would be easy for adults to use – even adults who had a hard time using the spiritual language that most “Inner Life” participants spoke without thinking. I did not want a series of lesson plans that required trips into the wilderness. I wanted teachers to be able to use the bits of nature that were around them, even if they were manicured gardens or a tiny church yard.

The three-part curriculum that I developed for children ages 5-8 uses the well-known Shel Silverstein book, *The Giving Tree*, as its core. Teachers and children are familiar with the story and the language is secular, hopefully reducing any apprehension a teacher might feel when she or he accepts the role of guide. After an initial gathering each day, the lessons are movement-oriented. Children are asked, for example, to explore a garden or church yard, looking for a favorite tree. The Giving Tree in the book is then compared to other trees the children have known, including the trees they have just discovered. The purpose of the curriculum is to encourage children to see God in the world around them and to feel the presence of the divine in the natural world. As with any curriculum, the more it is used, the more likely it is to be changed for a class’s specific needs. I am still adapting it.

It has been a joy to meet the other members of the “Inner Life” group and learn about their own passions and teachings. It has truly been an honor to be a part of the very first Inner Life project and I look forward to hearing what other participants will create with the energy they have gained from this experience.

Boykin Dunlap Bell is a writer and educator who holds a B.A. from Wellesley College and an M.A. in Philosophy from the University of South Carolina. She has published short fiction in various publications, including *The* (Raleigh, NC) *Spectator* and *Metro Woman*. She is the Assistant in Christian Formation at the Chapel of the Cross Episcopal Church in Chapel Hill, NC, where she works with children ages 2-11 and their families.

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 three 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 earthwalks 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?

Three 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 earthwalks and solo times, what it felt like while silence was present and lastly, what made silence withdraw? In the last two 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 have 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

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

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.” 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.”⁵ 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

² Ibid, p. 2.

³ Ibid, p. 17.

⁴ Gerald G. May, *The Wisdom of Wilderness* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), p. 168.

⁵ Sardello, p. 14.

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."⁶

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

⁶ Sardello, p. 31.

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-pressure 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 be done 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 streams 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."

It was a cool winter day and a 7th grade group had returned to the sanctuary. The assignment for the day was to find a special place where they could contemplate the nature of a covenantal

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

Living in the noise I feel alone
Living in the silence I feel at home.
Some silence is heavy, this silence is light. Some silence is shallow, this silence is deep.
Some silence is mean, this silence is kind.
Some silence is hurtful, this silence is my band-aid.

Our children live in a noisy world. Their days are overly structured and their senses are overloaded. The quiet moments of reflection and contemplation in the natural world that were taken for granted when we were growing up are disappearing. Robert Sardello says it well: "Happiness and Silence belong together just as do profit and noise. So long as we live in a commercialized world, noise reigns. All the distractions that keep us from the center of our being, where stillness of soul can resonate with Silence, belong to the world of profit."⁷

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 is the Educator/Naturalist at the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World. She brings over twenty years of experience as an educator of young children to her work at the Center. A gifted storyteller and musician, Sandy has engaged in a deep study of Native American perspectives. She will soon complete her studies to become a certified environmental educator with the North Carolina Environmental Education Certification Program.

⁷ Sardello, p, 8.

“Being Strong is the Magic”

by

Sarah Borders

*The sun is shining---the sun is shining. That is the magic. The flowers are growing-- the roots are stirring. That is the magic. Being strong is the Magic. The Magic is in me - the Magic in me. It's in every one of us.*¹

- Frances Hodgson Burnett

In this most satisfying novel set in England and written in 1909, the healing of the earth and the healing of the spirit are artfully set side by side. Mary Lennox, the protagonist, is a disagreeable child whose parents died in a cholera epidemic in India. She has been sent to be in the care of her uncle's family in England where she discovers that her cousin, Colin Craven, an invalid, had been hidden away in the big house by a grief stricken and emotionally ill father. In the story Mary befriends Colin, and leads him to discover with her the healing power of the Secret Garden. The words quoted above from the chapter called “Magic” were chanted by Colin in the garden as a sort of mantra, expressing his great delight as green shoots appeared among brown tangles in the neglected piece of earth. Soon after this, Colin, who had been bedridden for years, takes his first steps with help from Mary, Dickon and the gardener, defying the warnings and expectations of all the adults in his life. As the story ends, his uncle too is transformed by the Magic.

I was 10 (just the age of Mary and Colin) when my friend and co-adventurer in life, Sally Milstead, and I read *The Secret Garden*. We had made up a rule about books and movies. If you wanted to see “the movie,” you were required to read “the book” first. When *The Secret Garden* movie came to town, we hurried straight to the library. After we read the book, we paid 9 cents to see the movie at the air conditioned State Theater at 1 PM and stayed over to see it again at 3. The year was 1949. Charming Margaret O'Brien starred as Mary and handsome Dean Stockwell was Colin. The film was all shot in black and white until the very moment the gate to the secret garden was unlocked with the rusty key. Then it was TECHNICOLOR!!!! It was so magical we stopped eating our popcorn.

Now my grandson is 10 and has this book as required reading for the summer. It is my delight to revisit this story with him as we celebrate our study of *The Inner Life of the Child* at The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World at Timberlake Farm. The Magic for me in present time is that I see the metaphor of the healing power of the “I-Thou” relationship with nature as a corollary for my work as a children's therapist.

The Play Room

I see therapists' play rooms as good growing ground for children. Play is their work as well as their joy in life. There are moments in an hour of therapy which are not unlike unlocking a door to a

¹ Frances Hodgson Burnett, *The Secret Garden* (New York: Lippincott, 1962), p. 254.

secret garden with a rusty key. My hope is always that my clients grow strong in the same way as Colin and Mary. I am fortunate to share many magical moments with children. Indeed, these moments make me strong.

Some children whom I see in the playroom are not deeply troubled, yet they are most often overstimulated and overscheduled. Parents report “He’s got ADD” as if it were chickenpox. (It is already diagnosed in the principal’s office.) Rich Louv’s poignant coining of the term Nature Deficit Disorder is instantly understood by more of the public every day. I was delighted to read on the front page of a Children’s Health Publication that a doctor’s prescription for “time outdoors” is being taken seriously. Parents of these children need little convincing as they ponder how their children are obsessed with video games and can recognize more advertising logos than kinds of trees.

I work with more serious diagnoses than ADD as well. My most needy clients are those who not only live in the maelstrom of our culture, but also come to therapy out of the shadows of abandonment, domestic violence, divorce, poverty, DSS investigations, and threatening family talk of judges and going to court. These children live in fear and ambiguity. They are not grounded. “What is going to happen to me?” is the unexpressed, but deep-rooted question. Almost all children express with words or play a belief in a higher power. Also they believe in a parent’s love. However, at six or seven, they cannot fathom erratic behavior caused by substance addiction or personality disorder of the adults in their lives. What therapy offers is an hour where a child can bury feelings of sadness or rage in the sand tray or color his feelings on the easel, or put them into a song. Over time he or she develops the strength we call “self support” growing and blooming, albeit through a crack in the sidewalk.

Many come to the play room with fear the first time. “Why am I here?” “What’s wrong with me?” We therapists hopefully set their minds at ease by presenting choices for play, never probing, always reflecting and clarifying the feelings we “read” from their words or their play. To pull this off, we, too, must be strong. I adopt the tenants of Dr. Gary Lamberth (University of Texas at Denton). “I am here. You are not alone. I understand. I care.” The child will shortly understand this, not so much from what I do, but from who I am in the relationship.

Addressing Nature Deficit Disorder: My First Secret Garden

I’ve worked in several play rooms in schools and agencies. The first was a dark school janitor’s closet with the brooms and trashcans moved to the side. A succession of dark cubbies followed, always cramped, never light. Years later I was lucky to be assigned to a spacious classroom with a large window! I was determined to make a secret garden for the school. The behavior handicapped boys hauled in creek rocks to surround the indoor pond and fountain I had purchased at Lowe’s. Live greenery was artfully placed on rocks, and goldfish in the moving water. One little boy stood back in awe. “Is those things real or is they fake?”

Emma, one of my first clients at this school, helped me affirm the healing power of rocks, rippling water and REAL green growing plants. A child who longed to please but whose behavior was out of bounds, she was suffering from her early years of deprivation in a Russian orphanage. (From the book: Reactive Attachment Disorder) In the school cafeteria she ate applesauce with her hands, and drank from her cereal bowl. She could make no eye contact with peers. She tugged on the teacher all day, begging for attention. In this room we did weekly sessions for two years. There was a rhythm in her play. Each session she collected all the stuffed frogs and frog puppets in the room and brought them to the water. She moved the little candle lamp, and asked for the overhead light to be turned off. We turned on the music. She played out the same story for months. The baby frogs were crying. The mother attended, but complained loudly about the noise. The story began to change after I gently led her to

nurture the baby frogs. I taught her some lullabies to sing to the babies. Mother frog soon sang Brahms' lullaby spontaneously. Then one day she announced that she was finished with the frog babies, and she wanted to invite a friend from her class to come for a tea party there by the rocks and water. For several sessions we made time for tea with music and low light. This led to work on eating and drinking properly and sharing conversation with a friend. She was healing, and developing ways to self-support. I am convinced that the water, rocks, the goldfish and the greenery had helped her to flower.

I have carried the image of Emma and other children who loved this little indoor "secret garden" with sounds and sights of the natural world into my study of *The Inner Child in Nature*. After my experience with Tobin Hart, and Richard Lewis, my reading of *Last Child in the Woods*, the retreats with Carolyn Toben and Peggy Whalen-Levitt, I began to form a dream of doing therapy at least partially outdoors.

Sowing the Seeds

My current place of work is a reasonably well-equipped play room, with sand trays, miniatures, musical instruments, a puppet basket, and art supplies. Of necessity I made my return to nature in two moves. Last winter I began by utilizing my sand trays indoors in a different way simply by offering the children more natural objects and fewer toy miniatures of plastic. I retained some wooden animals and added shells, bits of moss and lichen, more stones and some art objects such as jeweled eggs and garden objects.

The First Stirrings: Ethan, Charlotte and Derek

I began to notice a change of pace when natural objects were displayed and presented. **Ethan**, a five-year-old abandoned by his mother, touched each seashell delicately taking his time instead of darting around the room to figure out what to do. He lined up all the small baskets, made a river in the sand tray, wrapped the figure of a baby in Kleenex and set it off down the river where a "mommy" waited for him. He found another baby figure and placed it carefully in a seashell. At session's end he asked me to put the baby in the shell in my desk drawer for safe keeping until next time.

Charlotte, a foster child said to be "ADD", also had little desire to rummage around the room. She focused on stones. We invented some rock games, and read *Everybody Needs a Rock* by Byrd Baylor. She enjoyed both watercolor and sand tray. She worked for two sessions with watercolor, getting inspiration for her artwork from Eric Carle's nature books and a large poster of a butterfly on the wall. For two additional sessions she chose sand tray. In the sand she created mountains and rivers (the blue bottom of the sand tray) and seemed to simply relish the textures and forms. There was a beauty to the simplicity of her sand tray world. With pride she said, "Before I came here not many people knew that I am an artist, but I am. Now I know it."

Derek, a sensitive child, inspired by sand and shells, does bookmaking. The title of his latest publication is: *The World of Sea Life: A Story of Fun, Community and Danger*. The hero is a swordfish who needs "a little alone time every now and then." Derek cares for three Hermit Crabs at home who are named Morning, Afternoon and Evening. He chose a shell from my collection to give to Afternoon who is feeling a little bad and will soon need more space in which to live.

Outdoors: The Sun is Shining, the Church Bell is Chiming

In early spring I set up the outdoor area which includes two adult and one child sized chair with a round table. The first change I noticed was that the magic was in me. I can time my sessions by the chime from the church bell! The grass is soft enough so I can take off my shoes. I recall barefoot days of my childhood, so therefore it becomes easier for me at 70 to get into the mindset of being seven. I am also free from sweeping up sand and mopping up spilled water. And, I can bring my dog to work!

I decided to leave one sand tray outdoors all the time. An attractive rolling garden cart from Big Lot's holds pitchers for water, and other kitchen tools (such as a rolling pin) which are good for wet or dry sand play. At the beginning of the session the child fills the garden cart to be moved outside. There is room to carry puppets, dress up clothes, tea sets or musical instruments in addition to natural objects.

New Energy: Jordan and Ethan

Outdoors is good because we now have water close by. We can wet the sand and make villages, houses, castles, and caves just with our hands. Rocks and shells can define the terrain in our Sand Play/World Play. Little twigs, leaves or flowers gathered on the spot can add to the beauty.

The outdoors offers opportunities for more energetic playing as well. I have a big tilting Bobo who can be socked hard with great anger or laughter. He always bounces back. Bobo does well outside because we can hit him with abandon and not disturb any adults in the building. **Michael** used the Bobo to work out some anger at being bullied at school. He made an amazing statement at the end of playing out his aggression: "I hate it when people call me names." (Bop!) "I hate it when I we have a test and another test all day!" (Bop!) "I hate it when I have to read out loud." (Bop!) "I hate it when my dad won't talk to me!" (Bop!) I just hate it; really hate it when people hurt anything that God has created. (bop!) Then he was suddenly calm, looking at me. "Do you believe in God? I do."

Tyrone: The Gardner in Charge

Tyrone, age eleven, is the Head Gardner. He planted pots of petunias to leave in the outdoor area. He knows that other children through the week can pinch back and water because the plant needs regular care. I chose him as Gardner in Charge because he, more than any of my clients, seems totally tied to video games and "the electrical outlet". He has had greatly limited contact with the outdoors, is fearful to try new sports and has severe problems with peers in school. He took to the planting with a smile. I introduced him to my dog Isabel. The first session he was too timid to touch her. The following week, he patted her on the head and asked, "Do you remember me, Isabel?" Now they romp together. In his latest outdoor session we took the whole family to the park for walking and exploring the woods. His mother and little brother enjoyed the session as well.

The Music of the Sphere: Kelly, Megan, Jordan and Blaine

Being surrounded by the natural world helped **Kelly** who loves to paint papers of all colors. He compared the blues and different hues of pink and green to sky and leaves. **Megan** noticed the church bell ringing from a nearby steeple. "You know what. I've heard music in my woods near home too. My sister and I always listen for it." The church bell reminded **Jordan** to listen to the birds too. He whistled back to a bob white and brought out the glock to play a song of his own. **Jasmine** makes up

songs as she plays “cooking show” in the sand. **Blaine** and his father do drumming and the xylophone together, switching off the lead.

The Magic is in Every One of Us

It was the bird in The Secret Garden who led Mary to the rusty key which opened the gate. I have been led to opening gates in my life and work by my colleagues in the Inner Life Program. They have inspired me to pause to remember my own practice, to burst out of dark rooms into sunshine. They have affirmed me and listened to my stories. We have been quiet alone, yet together, on the trails at Timberlake. We are a community. The magic is in every one us.

Sarah Borders, Licensed Professional Counselor, is a retired public school teacher/counselor, currently doing contract work as a child therapist in Statesville with a group called Care Net which offers counseling with a spiritual base. She graduated from Duke University and was first a teacher of English and the Language Arts in middle and high schools. She received her first degree in counseling from UNC C in 1979. Over years she worked as a high school, middle school and elementary school counselor. As an elementary counselor she combined her interest in children's literature and expressive arts in counseling with her study at Appalachian State University where she received an Education Specialist degree in Bilbliotherapy in 1990. She co authored a book, *Children Talking about Books* (Oryx Press, 1993), with her mentor Dr. Alice Naylor. She and her colleagues at East Iredell Elementary School received the Governor's Award for Innovation in Education in 1999 for the Close Harmony project which created avenues for lasting friendships between senior citizens and special needs children through storytelling and music. In her retirement she is an adjunct teacher at Appalachian State University, in addition to her work as a therapist.

Silence, Thoreau, and a Covenant

by

Marti Canipe

A Never Ending Friend

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

-Alli Lindenberg

Framework of the Practice

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

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

-B’nai Shalom Seventh Grader

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

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

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

The Practice Begins with Silence

“We need to find God, and he cannot be found in noise and restlessness. God is the friend of silence. See how nature – trees, flowers, grass – grows in silence; see the stars, the moon and the sun, how they move in silence... We need silence to be able to touch souls.”

-Mother Teresa¹

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

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

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

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

“In silence you can actually think and notice.”

“Without nature, there is no God.”

-B'nai Shalom Middle Schoolers

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

As I looked back on the days, I wondered what had been difficult for the eighth grade. Had I expected too much from them just because they are the oldest class? Did I affect their experience in some way since it was the third time I had led the gathering? Did the “personality” of their class make them

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

more reluctant to share their feelings with each other? Most importantly, what should I do differently the next time we gathered?

“How great was the silence the world once knew?
Everything under it flourished and grew.
Where did it go?
Why don't we know?”

-Alina Gabitov (Seventh Grade)

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

Moving into Thoreau

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

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

“Not until we are lost do we begin to understand ourselves.”² – Henry David Thoreau

“When you have time to think and when you are alone, you can start to think about who you really are in the world. When you are lost and you have nothing to do or think about – you will think about who you are right now and who you want to become.” - B'nai Shalom Seventh Grader

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

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

“The birds are your companions. Their chirping is the beat that guides you. There are so many different kinds of birds, and each one is its own drummer.” – Evan Semon (Sixth Grade)

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

³ Ibid.

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

“You don’t really need all the ‘luxuries’ to be happy. They seem to be good things in life, but are really just obstacles in your way from becoming a better person.” – Jessica Papier (Seventh Grade)

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

“Observe an insect at the same level, not looking from above, not feeling like a human, feeling like that insect.” – Alina Gabitov (Seventh Grade)

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

Working with Covenant

Behold

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

-Eliana Fishbeyn (Seventh Grade)

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

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

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

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

Some silence is heavy, this silence is light.
Some silence is shallow, this silence is deep.
Some silence is mean, this silence is kind.
Some silence is hurtful, this silence is my band
aid.

-Paige Feldman (Seventh Grade)

Reflections on the Practice

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

-Jessie Winfree (Sixth Grade)

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

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

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

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

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

-B’nai Shalom Sixth Grader

Marti Canipe teaches middle school science at B’nai Shalom Day School in Greensboro, North Carolina. She holds a B.S. in Biology from the University of North Carolina and studied zoology and freshwater ecology at the University of New Hampshire. Her passion for nature is rooted in many childhood days spent in the woods and creeks of the piedmont of North Carolina.

Detectives of Divinity

by

Anne-Barton Carter

As a Christian Educator, I wear many hats and serve many roles. It is my responsibility to find curriculum for all ages and, in some cases, to produce lesson plans. I supervise programming for Sunday mornings, Wednesday evenings, weekend retreats and numerous special events. I recruit, train and support a large number of volunteers, worship with young children and offer parenting and family support. My greatest charge as I see it, however, is to nurture and facilitate each child's personal experience of the Divine; their own spiritual relationship with God. This can present something of a two-fold conundrum. The first challenge is that the typical forum available to me is a Sunday School classroom or a worship service. The classroom functions well as a place to pass along Biblical literacy, church history and denominational heritage. A service of worship is wonderful for the communal expression of gratitude, repentance and the restoration of wholeness through liturgy. In my opinion, however, neither forum necessarily provides the best space or the ideal time to facilitate a child's own personal experiences of God. Limitations of space, time and the needs of others too easily get in the way. The second part of the conundrum is that a personal relationship with the Divine is, well, personal. I need to be able to nurture and support, yet remove myself from the equation. To solve this two-fold dilemma I needed to ask myself a question: "Where do children most readily experience God?" The answer, born of my own experience and the accounts of others, came easily—in the natural world.

Although it is possible to weave the outdoors into the church's regular Sunday School and Wednesday Church schedules by taking the children out of the normal setting for various activities, I knew I wanted to provide a more sustained experience designed to interweave faith and a first hand experience of the natural world. I wanted to help bridge the gap that our culture has encouraged between humans and the rest of the natural world; a gap that is, in essence, a spiritual crisis. It is a wound that separates us from that which created and sustains us. I wanted to be with children and encourage them as they became, in Barbara Brown Taylor's words, "detectives of Divinity",¹ seeking evidence of the genius of the Creator in Creation. That evidence, the fundamental awe inspired by Creation, would, I felt sure, begin to close the gap and heal the wound. No longer would we see ourselves as separate or apart from the world around us. Instead, we would look outwards to see a reflection of the truth we know and feel inwards. In our experience and appreciation of the creation we would meet the Creator; we would, in the words of Thomas Berry, "wonder at the magnificence of whatever it is that brought the world into being."²

In order to find the extended hours and consecutive days needed for such a sustained experience, I decided to employ the traditional summer program of Vacation Bible School. As for a guiding curriculum, the Biblical account of Creation seemed the logical place to start. However, the old Roman view of humans being granted "dominion over" creation was more likely part of the problem than a piece of the solution. I turned instead to Celtic Spirituality, specifically Philip Newell's *The Book of Creation*. Therein I found precisely the rationale I sought:

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life* (Lanham, MD: Cowley Publications, 1993), p. 16.

² Thomas Berry and Thomas Clarke. *Befriending the Earth: A Theology of Reconciliation Between Humans and the Earth* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1991) p. 9.

“God is to be found not by stepping aside from the flow of daily life into religious moments and environments, or by looking away from creation to a spiritual realm beyond, but rather by entering attentively the depths of the present moment. There we will find God, wherever we may be and whatever we may be doing.”³

This sense of all that *is* being infused with the very essence of God was exactly what I wanted to share with the youth. No longer did I want them to divide the spiritual and the material. Instead I wanted to offer them a world where all that exists is a theophany or a revelation of God. I wanted them to walk “into a God-enchanted world, where (they) could not wait to find further clues to heaven on earth.”⁴

And so I began, along with the creative team at the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World, to construct a guided tour of the days of creation drawing from the Biblical story, the Celtic sensibility and writings of Philip Newell, art, music, children’s stories and, of course, time spent in the natural world. We settled on a rhythm for our days that allowed for Earth walks in community as well as solo time in the natural world. We gathered music, quotations from scripture and from other pilgrims on this journey as well as children’s fiction to supplement our own knowledge. We encouraged the youth to use their imaginations and regard the world from the point of view of the plants and the creatures. Ample time for journaling, illustrating and reflecting was provided. We shared our discoveries, our own epiphanies, and our poetry. Finally, at the close of the week we walked the labyrinth in silence before composing our own prayer:

“O God who...

Is the light of the stars
Is powerful like lightening
Is elusive like the salamander
Is wise like an owl
Is fast like an alligator
Is as bright as the sun
Is as hard as a rock
Is as mighty as a river
Is skillful like a monkey
Is kind as a dove
Is as stubborn as a cow
Is as deep as the ocean
Is as shallow as the creek
Is as swift as the wind
Is as happy as a puppy
Is as tall as a giraffe
Is as big as a lion
Is as sturdy as a tree stump
Is as mysterious as the seed underground
Is as agile as a crane
Has the eye of a hawk
Is overwhelming as the sea
Is dark as the night
Is as wonderful as the sunset

³ J. Philip Newell, *The Book of Creation: An Introduction to Celtic Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), pp. 7-8.

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, p. 16.

Is as flexible as a worm
Can camouflage like a chameleon
Is proud like a polar bear
Is as magical as a rainbow
Is as quick as a snake
Is as innocent as a hummingbird
Is as peaceful as a whale
Is as old as the oldest tortoise
Is pretty as a kitten
Is as eternal as the universe

We ask for...

Answers
Peace
Comfort
Forgiveness
Freedom
Cunningness
Strength
Warmth
Patience
The ability to communicate

So that we can...

Care for our environment
Halt global warming and heal our atmosphere
End world hunger
Stop the destruction of species
Help endangered animals
Be safer and healthier
Live in harmony” (Detectives of Divinity Group)

Based on the evaluations, comments from both parents and participants and my own sense of what transpired, I feel the week far exceeded my expectations and dreams. As I worked with the group to compose their prayer, the feeling was that a breakthrough of some sort had happened. A new consciousness and new way of being in the world was amongst us. More than anything, though, I felt the presence of God in that circle. We had followed the clues, studied the evidence and discovered for ourselves the truth in the words from the Gospel of Thomas:

“I am the light that is over all things. I am all: All came forth from me, and all attained to me. Split a piece of wood, and I am there. Pick up a stone, and you will find me there.”

Anne-Barton Carter is a member of the Family Ministry Team at Holy Trinity Episcopal Church in downtown Greensboro, NC. She has a B.A. from the University of the South in Sewanee, TN, a M.T.S. from Vanderbilt University Divinity School and a certificate in non-profit management from Duke University. In addition to her ministry with three different congregations, Anne-Barton has served children and their families as a classroom teacher and in a variety of camp and non-profit scenarios. She has been married to Robert Carter, an attorney for the Moses Cone Health System for 17 years. Together they have three wonderful children, Bryson, Stirling and McGill.

Sitting (in good weather)

by

Dave Cook

Meditation is the emptying of the mind of all the things the mind has put together.¹

– J. Krishnamurti

As a boy I rarely, if ever, sat in the Woods, and throughout my twenties and thirties even, I was a wanderer in the Woods, my natural state to be in exploration and in motion. If I ever sat still as a child, it was inadvertently, as when I built rolling hills of sand in my grandmother's driveway, for ants to cross, myself at play as the tectonic plates of their world, like Mark Twain's devil in *The Mysterious Stranger*. I was a child; I was the world. The chaos of cruelty or compassion that so many adults fear made all my acts possible. I never consciously hurt the ants—or maybe I did; judgment of myself was not present—but I remember burying them, suddenly realizing what I'd done, sometimes unable to recover them, the loose sand folding upon itself like the earth in a West Virginia mining disaster and I the cause. It was something I didn't understand and thankfully there was no one to explain it to me. I remember the sorrow of seeing the injuries from my awkward rescue attempts, an ant missing a leg, or two, dragging herself away, or trying to. I was exploring the universe from the inside out.

Somewhere along the way of my youth I began the practice of sitting, something I read about in a book by Ernest Thomson Seton, I think, or in Thoreau's writing perhaps. It had never occurred to me that I might see as much, or more, of the world or myself by sitting still, sitting as a natural state, as we might see in a cat, unmoving in the sun, no thought to eating or sleeping—the cat watching, the mind still, and finding its stillness in the world. If a rat runs in front of the cat we can guess what happens.

Thoughts are a kind of doing. Thoughts and emotions construct the world. Young children play with this naturally, if their imaginations are undiminished or unbroken by what they're taught. In an adult this can still happen; we have the capacity to suspend our conditioning, because as Merleau-Ponty described it, "Nature is there from the first day."² But it can't happen by thinking. We can't unthink ourselves.

¹ Jiddu Krishnamurti, *The Book of Life: Daily Meditations with Krishnamurti* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), p. 27.

² Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, *Phenomenology of Life from the Animal Soul to the Human Mind* (Netherlands, Springer Netherlands, 2007), pp. 17-32.

*Only in relationship the process of what I am unfolds. The moment there is a pattern of what I should be, there is no comprehension of what I am.*³

- J. Krishnamurti

Sitting. I don't know what I'm doing. If I am to discover myself, or a universe outside of me, can anyone tell me? Is it meditation? Meditation doesn't know what it is, whether it's thoughts or the yellow tender stroke of a butterfly balancing for a moment on elderberry blossoms. Beauty is and so am i. To know the universe I come to terms with myself, though I could just as easily aver that to know myself I need to know the universe: unity, diversity and identity. It happens all at once, when it happens, if it happens—and yet no end to what I don't see, don't know, in so much mystery.

It is as if the universe itself had not yet experienced the creation of identity, no separation of I and other, no unity or diversity, yet unformed and all things possible, like in the imagination of a child. The law and agreements of physics, philosophy and religion are suddenly irrelevant or reversed; the definitions physicists make in terms of elements and molecules aren't in place—and so a young child, body and mind, aren't separate from Nature when playing in the stream, in the woods, in the meadow, and commingling happens in a delight of senses.

Later, talking to you, or writing this down, I degenerate into words. Look at what we've lost, when space came forth before the pace of doing flattened it. A thousand and one perspectives finally revealed themselves in epiphany, as when the evening air above the meadow is full of fireflies and I realize that each is imbued with spirit. "Time slows," some might say—"Time stops—"Time isn't,"—groping afterwards for that which was when space emerged out of itself.

Who believes the universe is what they've been taught it is: time and the nature of divinity and humankind, or what any animal is? What if we see that the cement of our universe has set, so to speak, that it became what we think it is.

*The moment I have a picture of what I want to be, or what I should be, or what I ought not to be—a standard according to which I want to change myself—then surely there is no comprehension of what I am at the moment of relationship.*⁴

- J. Krishnamurti

Embedded in the use of the word "practice," in the connotation of it, is a purpose, and a sense of time, as in 'practicing for something' which hasn't happened yet. A goal has been introduced; something hasn't been achieved. That talking in the head, can become compulsive, like identity. Spinning a worldview interferes with communion. Terms are made, stipulations, and creation is turned into a preconception, as if we had anything to do with the original idea. Sitting isn't *it* either—too much a noun—nor is fishing enough, not depression or scorn, working in a garden, drinking a fifth, or sitting in a hunting stand, all of which can be equal to fidgeting while waiting for the morning train. If we don't know the difference they are the same problem.

³ Krishnamurti, *The Book of Life*, p. 15.

⁴ Krishnamurti, *The Book of Life*, March 15th.

“Meditation has nothing to do with achieving a result.”⁵

- J. Krishnamurti

Sitting can be dangerous, how it ‘undermines’ all this, culture, nations and society. Sitting is Nature and my nature, and this “i am” as ignorant and unconscious, in a strange kind of way, to that one I was when seven. If it has a purpose it’s mostly unknown to me, the same way I was mounding sand and didn’t know why, watching what it was.

Words don’t suffice for this kind of letting go, the dying we have ‘to do’, the willingness to let it be, the world without us, like the phoenix with its flames, we destroy the universe we’ve invested with everything we are. What’s worse, there’s no guarantee the universe re-generates—that too, a law we’ve made: redemption, reincarnation, karma, good and evil, altruism and atheism, agnosticism even, the whole lot—they burn in the fire of watching. No one but ourselves can do it, and the only witness a desert or an ocean, a forest or a river, a prairie perhaps, or the penultitude of the starry skies about to break into beginning. We’re Nature. The separation between ourselves and other, inside and out, is dissolving. We are sitting, witness to this and ourselves and the word for this might be God or love, when they are not nouns, but verbs, the way light is both particle and wave. Who or what is present isn’t trying to do anything with it: not to understand it, conclude or project it. It is.

Wisdom perhaps is knowing *when* to sit—pick a boulder, make it yours, contemplate it as the omphalos.

It’s curious how all-important meditation becomes: there’s no end to it. It’s like a rain drop: in that drop are all the stream, the great rivers, the seas and the waterfalls; that drop nourishes the earth and man; without it the earth would be a desert. Without meditation the heart becomes a desert, a wasteland.⁶

- J. Krishnamurti

I returned to my original assignment: Sitting is akin to being. My intention is that I allow Nature to be the No House to me, that I open the window, and perhaps the wind comes in, on exquisite days when the demands of the working world are not a bother.

Certainly the working world has been a bother. Sitting spun downward into word, because I had to return to the western world of products, something getting written afterwards, like a shadow to a thing.

⁵ Ibid., December 23rd.

⁶ Jiddu Krishnamurti, *Meditations* (Hampshire, England: Krishnamurti Foundation Trust, Ltd, 2002), p. 5.

I.

to ask without words
wonder
not I wonder
just the action of wondering
having access to timelessness

II

the pond with wind
wave into counterwave
fragmenting into splinters of light
until the mind settles
and the pool settles
without thought

the pond is not a product of thought
can my mind be like the pond?
the wind subsides
and the pond goes rippleless

III

Thought and judgment, thought and judgment
Wind stirs, beech leaves falling
Crows calling, beech wood still
Beech leaves falling, beech wood still

“Sitting”

and by this I mean doing nothing, not waiting even, perhaps like trees in drought not waiting for rain, but being dry, or trees in rain being wet

sitting is not to be without purpose. Purpose isn't. Nothing is being achieved; nothing is waited for. It is listening, looking unattached to a cause for looking and listening. Silence, not as a response but as an origin.

“Sitting”

Sitting with rocks, large rocks by a river. They have a firm hold on eternity when it’s not a concept, when it is unexplained-not even explicable. Simply cause and being rock by river, not day in and day out, something deeper than that, what words are not. A causeless cause or what didn’t need explaining—a cosmic understood.

Rocks are
River is
Sitting isn’t anything

Then this began to form into singled haikus—afterimages—that poetry form best suited to the assignment:

Little creekside lilies
Ephemeral flakes like snowfall
Before a searing sun

The fiddleheads stand
About waiting for events
Of a smaller world

Tulips electric
Reflect upon a window
Red lights by sunshine

Fog lingers on limbs
Along a trail and grey field
As if purposeless

Auburn and yellow
Leaves witness without comment
The juncos’ twitter

One another crows
Call, explorations beyond
Sight, behind the Now

Mist holds the forest
Warm, humid air holds the bird
Sound speaking to me

Dave Cook is an educator/naturalist at Schoolhouse of Wonder in Durham, NC. He writes, plays music and is the author of *The Piedmont Almanac*.

“A Language Older Than Words”

by

Lisa Damian

In the earliest stages of embryonic development, growth and change are dramatic from the perspective of the embryo, but hidden from our conscious awareness, are imperceptible to us. My research was to engage the space around the human body, permeated with consciousness through meditative practices, as a way of more deeply engaging the material and non-material world of nature beings. And my practice is in its embryonic stages.

I set aside time daily – usually at dawn, through all seasons and weather – to intentionally use the enlivened space around the human body (the aura, energy or etheric body) to perceive in the natural world. Through specific meditative practices I allow consciousness to permeate the “substance” around my body. During this time I am especially attentive to the images, movements, sensations or thoughts I perceive.

My experiences are diverse, ranging from imperceptible and subtle to, on occasion, clear and direct. I am however at the earliest stages of development of this practice and I’ve realized through my year long struggle to capture it in words – spoken or written – that it is conveyed in a “language older than words”¹, to quote Derrick Jensen. It is not ripe enough, nor am I certain that its dynamic quality will be served by trying to “capture” it in the medium of the written or spoken word. Poetry may be a way, but I am a novice poet. At best I am able to acknowledge and speak openly about my efforts and continue to explore the boundary between the seen and unseen world, humbled by the challenge to live deeply with the questions this practice has birthed for me.

Lisa Damian is a life scientist by training and a student and companion of the natural world by constitution. She’s been taking children and young adults into the natural world for 26 years informally and as a naturalist, Waldorf educator and movement educator. She has studied the movement art of eurythmy and trained and studied for over 10 years with Jaimen McMillan, founder of Spatial Dynamics. She is certified as a movement therapist with the Spatial Dynamics Institute and is also trained as a Bothmer gymnast. She is presently the Life and Earth Science teacher at the Emerson Waldorf School and one of the founding faculty members who pioneered the development of that high school.

¹Derrick Jensen, *A Language Older Than Words* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing Company, 2004).

The Practice of Presence Connects All

by

Mary Jo Deck

The Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice experience has changed my life. All these many years I was aware. I saw and felt and knew that the spirit earth was alive and happening all around me. I did simple and natural things like respectfully calling the name of animal creatures encountered in the wild and addressing aloud the house bound insect prior to gently capturing him/her and releasing in the out of doors.

Or hanging laundry out to dry on a clothesline in order to create an opportunity to sense the day. There are a lifetime of lessons learned and stories to share about hanging out the laundry. Always and even now, I gather and collect random natural objects encountered just moving through the natural world outdoor space. These become honored collections displayed as centerpieces on a table or private additions to my jewelry box. Bones, leaves, rocks, bits of bark, nuts, feathers and seeds. They call my name and I fall in love and bring them home to live with me.

It used to be that this awareness was mostly an exclusive and reserved knowledge. Almost a secret. Too often, when I would open my line to the universe to other parties, there was frequently a pause, followed by “that’s weird”. Or maybe “you’re weird”. This never really made me feel badly, I knew I was weird, but there was a genuine sadness that somehow I had failed. Now I know that all of this, and more, is a gift from the universe that I can share. The practice of presence connects all. My soul is alive and well.

It is so clear to me that I am just visiting this earth. The natural features are so much at home. Everywhere the hills and the valleys, the mountains and the beaches, the trees and shrubs and grasses, they belong where they are.

This doesn’t mean that there isn’t movement going on. There is. Rain falls, soil washes, stones crack and split, winds blow and lots of elements and plants and animals are rearranged. Sometimes even the mighty great trees let go of the earth and fall. But it all happens in the community of the earth. Even the invasives that came in from elsewhere and gorge themselves on the elements that suit them like a personal reserve of rich desserts, have fattened and bred and are at home now.

But the spirits of all the inhabitants of a place - both past and present – are always in attendance. There is no need to take an accounting or do an inventory. To be alive and be in the out of doors engages all of my senses. Being present with my body in contact with the earth, my eyes open, my ears tuned and my sense of smell and taste alert allows the knowing to come. Before too long, the whisper of stories begins to be told and the telling of other times and different lives and colder winters or fragrant springs come together to be the chorus of history and myth.

Translating this emerging awareness, this presence of the cosmos that is outside of myself yet so much the energy that runs all through me, is the challenge of creating a sustainable, emotional and spiritual practice. I have come to understand that keeping the quiet close and the at-home sense of being

alive must include simultaneous value-actions. These include: *honoring a sense of place, acknowledging the imperative of stewardship and the creation of a kinship community of learners.*

There is much about honoring a sense of place and acknowledging the imperative of stewardship that has informed my creation of a small 60-acre conservation by design development. This basic design approach is one that looks at a discrete piece of land with an eye to identifying those special features and qualities about it - long views, mixed old forests, springs and streams, rock outcroppings, deep shady glens, abandoned homesites - and setting those aside for everyone to share and protect. In addition, the largest percentage of the total acreage is also set aside as protected. Never to be disturbed. The development of lots for homes and land for roads then proceed in a cluster fashion to keep the infrastructure to a minimum.

I have created this development community, The North Hill at Staurolite, and arranged for the placement of a permanent conservation easement on 70 percent of the land with a local land trust. This decision aligns with my fundamental and soul clear known understanding that I don't "own" a plot of land, I live in it. There is a rhythm to the wind across the south facing ridge and a history of other lives that have passed here. The current real estate market has my financial investment barely holding steady, but the life of this very place on the earth is so special. And I have been given the gift of caring for it, about it, and learning from it. I know that there is no rationale for the current cultural practice of laying survey lines on the earth, somehow dividing yours from mine and ours. But what I can do is celebrate that for which I have responsibility, knowing that it is seamless with the adjacent land, sharing a watershed and a climate and a life force that has no boundary.

Sometimes when I am outside, I realize that there is so much sky here. And that there is so much that happens there. The sun and the moon and the stars, dancing across the valley dome, mixing the colors of the rainbow and spilling them into and over the day and night. Sometimes the light pierces my soulbody, brings me to a throbbing heart standstill. "Oh my!" I say aloud and then just LOOK.

To create and deepen a kinship community of learners has been the most powerful Inner Life of the Child lesson. This co-research process has given me genuine partners in the discovery and celebrations of the cosmos - a convergence of sojourner learners who have opened their own experiences to the celebration of sharing. In two too-short years, I have been able to speak aloud of the sensing of power and knowing of wonder. This time and attention has allowed me to notice the flow of a current that seems to bring together present and future work. I am still discovering the channel that this current is following, but there is a joyfulness to Wendell Berry's "little nagging of dread"¹ that comes along with the adventure of exploring a new place.

All of this has transformed my way of thinking as a professional early childhood educator and has culminated in the creation of a three-day experiential professional development opportunity designed for teachers and administrators working in programs serving young children. On October 2-4, 2008 there will be a Western Regional Outdoor Learning Environments Institute: Outside is In: Play and Learn Outdoors. I have played a leadership role in the creation of this event and it is my hope that those who attend will experience a sense of the sacredness in nature and a beginning community of learners.

Richard Louv's book, *Last Child In the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* was published just prior to the beginning of the Inner Life of the Child in Nature project. What Louv described gave names to the dread that I have felt about the multiple changes in our society and culture that have resulted in an increasing divide between children and the natural world. My reading of

¹ Wendell Berry, *The Unforeseen Wilderness: Kentucky's Red River Gorge* (Washington, DC: Shoemaker and Hoard, 2006), p. 42.

the book was a stunning reality check about the implications of the children and nature divide and was a big reason that I applied.

As a mother, grandmother and early childhood educator, I understand the negative cognitive, social, spiritual, physical, psychological and environmental consequences of children spending decreasing amounts of active time in the outdoors. More young children are spending more time in program settings and too often teachers of young children view the time and experiences outdoors as secondary to the learning which occurs indoors. “What good is it?” is often a phrase heard in reference to natural objects and as a consequence children are outside for minimum amounts of time in spaces devoid of natural materials with which to play and wonder. “Come see, look here, feel that breeze” are simple phrases that can open to children’s delight and reflection.

Some teachers born in the last two to three decades have not had their own direct experience in nature and may be among the first generation of “indoor children”. Many do not know “what to do” outdoors, miss opportunities for engaging children there and lack an understanding of ways to foster curiosity, invention and imagination. Engaged in a conversation about the amazing 17-year cycle of locusts emerging in a community, one young woman’s reaction was “eeeughh”.

Following my acceptance into the educator community of *The Inner Life of the Child in Nature*, I began to increase my outreach and education activities supporting outdoor inquiry, play and engagement. During multiple presentations at state and national early childhood conferences participants were asked to share their own childhood experiences in the out-of-doors. Story after story tumbled out about silky dust forts under the foundations of buildings or long silent hours in the company of imagination or riotous barefoot dancing in the growing puddles from rainstorms. Time after time, the faces of the storytellers were transformed from responsible pay-attention adult teachers to smiling human beings luminous from the gathering of the sensory memories.

My own emerging understanding and consciousness of the role of mystery and wonder in the daily occasions of being in nature have contributed to my focus on and leadership for the creation of this event. My regular practice of spending time in the natural world and the surprise of learning that follows the journaling about what I have observed and understood and felt and questioned has strengthened the mandate to action.

Writer Rachel Carson noted that “if a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder...he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in.”² The Western Regional OLE Institute is designed to provide rich outdoor experiences that will grow teachers and parents who value and enjoy the outdoors and begin to discover ways to bring it more directly into their lives and the lives of their children.

The OLE Institute will feature Richard Lewis as the keynote speaker. His clear message about the connections of thinking and feeling and the role of imagination will set the tone for the event.

There will be three tracks with multiple sessions that take place outdoors. So much of what happens in professional development settings is the power point presentation with beautiful photographs of the natural world. Instead, the “what to do” track will focus on observation, inquiry and hands-on activities that are stimulating and fun. Each participant will receive a carrying tote filled with miscellaneous items to be used during the outdoor activities - magnifying lens, garden tools, mirror, forceps and nets – and be taken back as a starter tool kit. There will be opportunities to experience time in the out of doors as the basis for nurturing imagination and intuition.

² Rachel Carson, *The Sense of Wonder* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), p. 55.

The site planning and design track will address fundamental principles of good design and address ways to improve existing outdoor spaces used by both infant/toddler and preschool age children. Part of the design work will be spending some solo time in a self selected place in the Arboretum garden followed by a “what is going on here?” discussion that helps to translate the feelings of a place to the elements of design.

The third track will explore licensing and regulatory requirements as supports and not barriers to the outdoors as a safe and healthy place where children are active in play and learning.

And so, I come to end of the time set aside for the shared journey of *The Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice*. I have so much more to learn.

Mary Jo Deck is owner of Staurolite Resource Group, a firm founded in 1996 to support systems change through the development of learning organizations. Jo has a MS in Early Childhood Education and has directed both small private parent cooperative model preschools in Atlanta, GA and the 900+children Head Start program in Greensboro, NC. She was an early architect of the statewide North Carolina Smart Start Initiative at the Division of Child Development (DCD) and has provided multiple specialized early care and education consultations and instruction at both the state and national level. Recent work has included the facilitation of the Ready Schools Initiative in the seven western NC counties. Her current passion is focused on collaborations to create outdoor experiential opportunities for teachers of young children that support their use of the outdoors as a learning environment to connect children and nature.

Recovering a Sense of Wonder

by

Annamarie Edwards

Dear Carolyn and Peggy,

I feel gratitude towards both of you for serving as mentors for me over the years. The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World has been very supportive of my work with children. It would be more accurate to say that over the years working with the center my awareness has been changed. I now place a higher emphasis on the role the natural world plays in a child's life.

I recognize that I have recovered my own sense of wonder and I have a greater capacity to connect with children in ways never before possible. The irony is that the children have actually illuminated me and not the other way around. I have discovered over the years that children have an inner life and that it seems to be connected to the natural world around them.

Time after time I have done little experiments in my classroom with the children. Each morning, after our work period and before it was time to go outside, we would have a community meeting. When the children seemed ready I would simply ask them to tell me something poetic. Mind you, I would never tell them what poetic meant, yet each time the children would make simple to profound statements about nature.

For me it was like being invited into a secret garden that was there all along yet I was never aware of it. I would notice that the children were so full of wonder and were eager to connect this part of themselves with me, yet I had never thought to ask until my awareness was opened to the idea that very young children have an inner life. It may sound romantic to say that children have inner lives, but to actually experience it is another thing. I like to say that I am now "child realized." All the work as a Montessori educator that I have done seemed dulled in comparison to simply being in the presence of the inner life of a child.

In my role of Director of Education at the Winston Salem Montessori School, I facilitate a number of parent discussions sessions throughout the school year. This year each of the discussions had to do with the Montessori Method in one form or another. I included one discussion and entitled it "The Child and the Natural World." I saved it for the very last discussion. It was the discussion I was longing to have all year. It was what all this work we have been doing together had been leading up to. I called the Center that afternoon to just share with all of you that the day had finally arrived. It felt like opening night. Not many parents attended the discussion that night, yet those who did were deeply touched. I experienced a deep sense of peace as the words came from my heart. I simply told them my experience while in the presence of a child's inner life. I could sense that those parents would see their children with a new perspective and might even spend more time outside with their children.

Because my experience at the Center had been so profound, I could see myself giving the same kinds of experiences that I have had to the teachers I now serve. A year ago, I wrote my seed thoughts for my practice.

This summer, the school will begin working with Robin Moore of the Natural Learning Initiative on the design of an 8-acre natural area for the school. My hope is to have a full day retreat at the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World this fall for school faculty and staff to help them develop capacities for bringing the children into a deep relationship with this wonderful new outdoor space.

This retreat will be the first in a series of retreats over several years. The focus of this first year will be to deepen the teachers' own connection to the natural world. The focus of the second year might be the inner life of the child in nature. During the third year, we might focus on how to bring ourselves into a loving relationship with the natural area of the school.

Following the retreat, the faculty will be asked to engage in a daily practice of beholding or remembering an image from the day over a period of time in their own nature journals. Later in the fall, Center staff will travel to the Montessori school to provide a context within which these practices are shared.

Looking back over the past year, my dedicated intentions have come full circle and have been realized as a fulfillment of the seed thoughts that formed in my heart last June.

I love you both,

Annamarie

Annamarie Edwards has served as a Montessori Educator for 20 years. Presently she is the Director of Education for the Montessori School in Winston Salem, N.C. In this role, she provides support for faculty and staff to ensure that they are using best practices and that the school community is having an authentic Montessori experience. Annamarie spent 19 years in a Montessori classroom. She has a BSW in Social work from Warren Wilson College located in Swannanoa, N.C. near Asheville, N.C., and also earned two Montessori certifications that span birth to six years of age. She has completed the first level of RIE training (Resources for Infant Educators) and is a certified parent coach.

Letter to Hope Katherine

by

Sarah Gibbs

Upon completion of my year as an Inner Life participant, my practice was to begin a simple meditation ritual and to create promotional literature for my business as a permaculture designer. These two pieces were to become what I considered my journey of “right livelihood,” or creating a living by being present and working with generative purpose. In the midst of this process I became pregnant and gave birth to my daughter – Hope Katherine. With this spirit being at my breast I began to feel love and pain, joy and sadness as I had never before known. Being a mother has broken open my heart - I can see more clearly, feel more clearly and have a sense of knowing that is unparalleled. She has shown me that to work in communion with this earth is the *only* path I can undertake. It seemed as if the Universe opened her arms and beckoned me to the path – “Continue with depth and urgency.”

To Hope Katherine,

Arriving on that cold November morning, after 12 hours of deep, painful labor, you showed me how strong I am, how determined, how powerful. When I held your tiny wet body for the first time, pulsating with the Universe, the veil lifted and you showed me we are One. It is simple – everything I have known is no longer - you show me where I need to grow, how the only answer is more love and when I feel your warm skin snuggled next to mine “suddenly I realize that if I stepped out of my body I would break into blossom.”¹

I love you as I have never known possible until your arrival. Thank you.

~

My practice of meditation has deepened, including now my husband and daughter. I did complete some materials for my permaculture business and am pursuing this work with other mothers in the area who know the importance of this work.

Sarah Gibbs' communion with the natural world began early in life. Growing up on her family's land in the Blue Ridge Mountains, some of her earliest memories are of eating persimmon bread with fox grape jelly and fresh game and fish supplementing the bountiful family gardens. A degree in Biology from Guilford College and an apprenticeship with a master herbalist lent a more formal cast to her exploration of nature, but it was her introduction to Permaculture that unified the different aspects of her education

¹ James Wright, “A Blessing”

and interests. Sustainability, a fusion of the human and more than human world, the ability to grow food, medicine, create art and build community- Permaculture holds the promise of synchronistic economies replacing the standard extractive system currently in place- Sarah was hooked.

Inspired, she sought out Charlie Headington, a well-know Permaculture designer residing in her town. Their relationship evolved from mentorship to co-collaborators culminating in a two-acre garden that transformed the campus of Elon Homes for Children, a residential treatment center for at risk youth, located in central North Carolina. With fruit trees, flowers, 3 ponds, berries, herbs, vegetables and even chickens, the garden became a place of interest and beauty in a once mundane landscape. Sarah created science, art and gardening programs for the students and led workshops for the larger community. Eventually the cooks became involved and the meals were planned around what was being harvested in the garden- many proud moments were witnessed as the students showed off “their” vegetables at the dinner table. We went from eating out of the can to eating out of the earth! Through sowing seeds, tending plants and harvesting food, the children learned about themselves through learning about the natural cycles of life. And in recognition of Sarah’s work with the students, she was awarded Horticultural Therapist of the year in 2000 from the Carolinas Chapter of the American Horticultural Therapy Association.

After leaving Elon Homes for Children, Sarah worked independently as a Permaculture designer and in 2001 she took a position as the executive director of SEEDS (South Eastern Efforts Developing Sustainable Spaces), in Durham, NC. SEEDS is a community gardening and youth education non- profit organization, which has been in existence since 1994. She worked at SEEDS for three years, developing several new programs and incorporating Permaculture principles into their work with the community and the gardens.

She moved to the Virginia New River Valley in 2004 to reconnect with family and the mountains she loves. Since moving she has continued to pursue her interests in Permaculture, art and educating youth, through work at Tekoa, and the Floyd Leaning Project.

Reconnecting Ourselves and Children to the Natural World

by

Pat Greene

Almost two years ago Carolyn Toben spoke at the Childhood Outdoors Design Institute. I was immediately touched by her presence. She shared information about the work at The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World. A month or so later I joined the Inner Life of the Child group at the Center. The readings, presenters and individual reflections were meaningful, but I most loved walking the trails or just sitting and being in the natural world. This experience was healing to me as I remembered childhood outside times. I had always known that I needed nature and this experience has helped me to reconnect at a deeper level and to be present in the now.

The second year (2007-2008) the Center worked closely with Reach for the Stars, a Smart Start funded program. Early childcare educators in Guilford County were invited to participate in an activity “Linking Early Childhood and the Natural World for a Brighter Future.” Carolyn Toben, Peggy Whalen-Levitt and Sandy Bisdee provided an introduction that was open to all childcare programs and later the interested programs were invited to an orientation at the Center at Timberlake Farm. Three Saturday sessions were planned for Fall, Winter and Spring. The goals were:

1. To educate the participants about the research on early childhood and nature.
2. To enable the participants to make a personal connection to the natural world themselves as a basis for their work with the children.
3. To provide each participant with techniques, exercises, stories, and an action plan that would be applicable to the participants particular situation by means of on-site visits.

The Center staff worked to guide the participants in their reconnection to the natural world. The participants included three childcare providers, a therapist from Bringing Out the Best, a service provider from Adopt-a-Mom and four Reach for the Stars staff members. We remembered our childhood in the natural world (favorite trees, running cedar and other magical places.)

I had to miss the second Saturday, but my co-workers shared with me the wonder of the day. Sandy prepared the indoor environment with natural materials and also delighted the group with her storytelling. Each person also went on a walk to find a friend - a tree. The trees were sketched and I think there was verbal communication with the trees.

The last Saturday it was obvious we had not only reconnected to nature, but we had connected with each other as we committed to helping children discover the joys of the natural world.

Along with this work with the Center, the group met for a book study of Richard Louv’s book “Last Child in the Woods.” Several of us were able to hear Richard Louv speak when he visited Raleigh in April.

I greatly appreciate this opportunity. It has affected me at a personal and professional level.

Pat Greene is a Program Assistant for Reach for the Stars in Greensboro, NC. She has worked in Montessori education and the mental health field, and loves being a mother and grandmother.

Earth, Water, Fire and Air for My Children and Me

by

Katrina Holley

This is my practice of finding my way in life as a woman and a mother. So much of the time these two capacities are one but there are definitive spaces too. I engaged in a search for those respective spaces over these past months and share some of the intimacies here.

This school year my family (my two children and myself) moved from an outdoorsy creative type private school to the public school system. We now spend our days in large concrete buildings with fluorescent lighting and technology devices surrounding us. My daughter and I directly feel and verbalize this experience while my son seems more resilient. He comes home each day and spends the late afternoon and early evening hours outside. I find my way outside each mid-day to breathe in the elements and for an afternoon walk. My daughter spends a brief time outside each mid-day and again in the afternoon at home. I frequently contemplate the following poem in hopes that I can make some sense out of the educational decisions I make.

School System Prayer

by

Anna Kirwan Vogel

Teach my children evolution, telling time;
To name the birds, to know them---
The ones that sing now in the green place
Near the playground; to watch,
To give, to choose between
Damned near eternal pesticide
And season-hungry, crop-tail, flickered
Startlings. Teach them music.
And naturally
Our story. Teach them
Numbers: pearly fathom, challenged
Acre. Bits of base two, base eleven.
Still, still---remind them of the Seven
Wonders of the Classical World---
The Light at Alexandria
Where Atlantis' refugees found haven,
Where Gypsies, having chanced the Gulf, tented.

Teach them Geography
Of old and new worlds, the words
Of tribes of Canaan and of Ethiopia,
Namibia, Zimbabwe and Azania;
Of clans of the Short Well and the Deep Well;
The names of the Oceans of Rainbows and Tranquility
In the wet and dry quarters of the heavens.
Teach them how to change
Base metal into gold and not to always
Come in out of the rain.
Teach them to read
Signs
And while waiting in
---and between the---
Lines.¹

Through my experience with the Inner Life of the Child program at The Center for Education, Imagination and The Natural World over this last year, I have shifted from an “oh look” gesture to a “behold” gesture. As I hike with my children I feel a sense of beholding and share that with them. There is a sense of reverence in beholding in contrast to the consumption of looking. I have stopped and asked myself what I want for my children as well as what I want for myself. I have found that this has become a bit blurred. Asking these questions helped me realize a deep longing that I have been aware of on various levels throughout my life. I long to live a more earth-centered life but struggle with finding a daily way amidst the life I have created.

Richard Lewis visited the group on April 28, 2007. He made a lasting impression on me as he showed me how he found nature in his metropolitan life. The most significant gesture he shared with me is that of “looking up.” I have practiced this over the last months and have found that when I “look up” the whole earth embraces me. It is a comforting and encouraging feeling for me. In his book, *In a Spring Garden*, he brings a poem by Issa that says,

Just simply alive, Both of us, I And the poppy.²

I can certainly appreciate this sentiment and take it into my daily practice.

One of my spiritual teachers, Rudolf Steiner, speaks of the sky and colors in his December reading from *Human Needs and Cosmic Answers*:

When the city-dweller goes out into the country, he may feel as if he were recovering the use of a part of his being he had almost forgotten. The colours and patterns revealed by the light begin to speak to him again in ways for which he had become deaf in order to protect himself from the chaotic voices of the town. There is indeed much beauty to be found in every town: but unless he makes a habit of looking at the sky, and in this way refreshing and renewing the sensitivity of his vision, the confusion of ugliness and meaninglessness, with occasional beauty and significance,

¹ In Judy Allen, ed., *Anthology for the Earth* (Cambridge: Candlewick Press, 1997).

² In Richard Lewis, ed., *In a Spring Garden* (New York: The Dial Press, 1965).

*will generally succeed in blunting it.*³

I am not sure the life I live in a small town blunts my experience of nature but rather feel that it agitates my continuous desire to be surrounded in nature.

I am drawn to the elements and what they provide: Fire for the aboriginal wild that I manifest by building fires in the fireplace. Water for the flowing/evolving. The drought of this year has left me with such a sense of loss. I appreciate this experience and feel evermore grateful when the rains come. I feel grateful for the connection I feel to women around the world when I conserve water and feel it flow from the faucet. Earth for our foundation and substance. One of my favorite song prayers is: "Substance of earth, essence of life, grace from heaven in us unite." And air for our cleansing. One of my lifelong practices is hanging out laundry. I often look at a day and define it as a wonderful day to hang out the bedding. I also practice airing out our house with frequent open windows and doors. There is a unity in these elements that is created by their distinct qualities and the balance created by their relationship.

I build fires for my family in our fireplace. The fireplace was an essential element of the home we purchased. I have come to realize that the draw I feel to the fire is really my secret hope that we will experience the aboriginal in our souls. We will start the New Year with a hike on the earth along the river under the big sky with a fire, food and good friends.

Reading provides inspiration for me. Willa Cather provokes my thought with this from *Death Comes for the Archbishop*:

*It was the Indian manner to vanish into the landscape, not to stand out against it. In the working of silver or drilling of turquoise the Indians had exhaustless patience...But their conception of decoration did not extend to the landscape. They seemed to have none of the European's desire to "master" nature, to arrange and re-create...It was as if the great country were asleep, and they wished to carry on their lives without awakening it; or as if the spirits of earth and air and water were things not to antagonize and arouse...The land and all that it bore they treated with consideration; not attempting to improve it, they never desecrated it.*⁴

I know that we are a society of destruction and I am part of that, though in my depths I loathe it. I also know that I am trying to become more and more aware of my impact on the earth and minimize it. My simple birth on this earth lets me know I am part of the greatness and tragedy occurring. My daily practice allows me to shape how I participate.

The sun salutation has connected me to this earth since the early 90s when I first learned of it while taking a yoga class while I was stationed in the US Air Force on Okinawa, Japan. I always feel better physically, emotionally and spiritually after moving through this asana.

Confucius says: "When you know something, recognize that you know it, and when you don't know something, recognize that you don't know it."⁵ I recognize that I am a teacher by nature in occupation and vocation. One area that I derive great joy from is children's literature. I have shared this joy with my children and my students over the years. Audrey Penn brings nature to children through her

³ In Adam Bittleston, *Human Needs and Cosmic Answers* (Great Britain: Redwood Books, 1975).

⁴ Willa Cather, *Death Comes to the Archbishop* (New York: Vintage Classics Edition, 1990), Book VII, Chapter 4.

⁵ In Russell Freedman, *Confucius: The Golden Rule* (New York: Arthur A. Levine Books, 2002).

stories of animals in *The Kissing Hand* and *A Kiss Goodbye*. Jane Yolen also shares nature in her stories for children. I have found that children's books are not just for children because I really enjoy reading them. The text is clean and simple and the illustrations are marvelous. As I close the day with my son I enjoy reading one of these books to him.

On January 17, 2008, it was a rainy cold day and we all stayed still for a few extra hours as nature took over. We all waited. It was a beautiful change to our daily rhythm. Rain fell most of the day and I could feel Mother Earth rejoice. Today we celebrated my mother's 69th birthday. My son was so cantankerous and I felt exasperated as a mother. I have been questioning the choices I make for my children since they were born. Today the questions seemed more obvious and poignant, maybe because as they grow their experiences are becoming more and more out of my hands. My conversation with a dear friend left me in a huff this night. He and I spoke about philosophy and education in relation to John Gatto, an educational philosopher who supports education via experience. This is a philosophy I agree with and want for my children but it is not my reality. Thus the landslide of questions, doubts, confusion and disappointment was nearly out of control.

Of no little consequence, I was part of a support team developing an education plan for a young man today. His mother talked of his needing to be outside to optimize his learning. I found myself surrounded by the question, "WHAT ARE WE DOING!" I sit alone by the fire after the children are tucked in for the night and reach for my book *Earth Prayers*, I read Rumi:

Don't Grieve.
Anything you lose comes around in another form.
The child weaned from the mother's milk
Now drinks wine and honey mixed.
God's joy moves from unmarked box to unmarked box,
from cell to cell.
As rainwater,
down into flowerbed.
As roses, up from ground.
Now it looks like a plate of rice and fish,
Now a cliff coved with vines,
Now a horse being saddled.
It hides within these,
till one day it cracks them open.

. . .Fa'ilatun, fa'ilatun, fa'ilatun fa'ilat
There's the light gold of wheat in the sun,
And the gold of bread made from wheat . . .
I have neither, I am only talking about them

as a town in the desert looks up
to stars on a clear night.⁶

⁶ In Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon, eds., *Earth Prayers From Around the World* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), p. 33.

My practice continues and just as the word suggests, it evolves. I have engaged in reading Daniel McGill's *Forty Nights: Creation Centered Night Prayer* after our evening meal during this time of Lent. I am refreshed and surprised at the spiritual/nature connection in these prayers and writings. When I have spent the weight of the day in the school building and feel torn because my children have too, I can share these inspirations and feel we are nurtured.

I know life is a journey, not a destination. When I reflect on some journeys I have taken I recall getting nervous when I was not sure where I was going or if my directions were correct. I also recall finding many interesting surprises when I was "lost." I find comfort in this knowledge from my experience(s) when I feel lost on this journey. When I find myself longing for the directions for getting to where I think I want to go, I know there are not any clear directions, only the voices telling me to look up.

Katrina Holley is the youngest of 5 children born to creative and thoughtful parents. Katrina served 11.5 years in the USAF working in various areas such as Honor Guard, Instructor Duty and Equal Opportunity. While in the USAF Katrina earned a degree in psychology from the University of Maryland Asian Division. Upon becoming a mother Katrina left the USAF and completed her BS in Education supporting her lifelong dream of becoming a teacher. After teaching for 2 years Katrina completed her Waldorf Teacher training at Antioch Graduate School. Katrina was then blessed to take a class through the third grade at Emerson Waldorf School. The class created a Fairy Meadow play haven, a Forest play area and pioneered the school farm. After spending the last year in the public school system Katrina is pursuing ways to support others as they navigate their way in our hectic modern culture.

Over Story

by

CC King

From the outset of the program at CEINW, I threw myself into the process. Immediately, the life of the program responded and pulled me in deeper. I had no idea what we were doing, but shared the belief with others that there was a specific gift here for us; many people spoke of a powerful sense that we were very blessed to be a part of this journey together.

Engaging with the authors and their works counterbalanced internal spiritual exercises. It was not until well into the second year that I began to feel a subtle shift. After so many months of trying to cognitively grasp the process, to “catch on” or “catch up”, I let go and began to quietly trust. I risked speaking my own truth. Lo! My hearing improved drastically!

Now, it is with a light heart that I Listen for the silent voices, and experience belonging once again - to everything and everyone - in a way long forgotten. When I was a child, I belonged to my farm; separation at puberty brought intense loneliness. Some might say this was simply the process of “growing up”. Would it be more truthful to say that the wounds of childhood left scars, dulling a natural empathy, and ossifying a once boundaryless belonging?

The process at CEINW is an invitation to Soul, and simultaneously to Oneness. It is at once a long-awaited return home, and an explosion out of the confines of the perceived self.

What follows are a few different entries, shared along the way with the folks at the Center. Peggy's being there to warmly receive my words was a critical component of first flights. I have only begun to Listen. It took the patience and loving awareness of the staff, the real time we invested, and the living, loving intention of the entire group. As a result, I have formed new habits. I cannot imagine turning back to the bondage of doubt, or hiding within the known. Thank you for these wings!

Passing Over

March 29, 2008

Yesterday I was with a very large bass fish who had been caught and was tail-down in an otherwise empty 5 gallon bucket, without water. Eyes wide open, the fish looked up surrounded by humans standing above, looking down. I squatted down to say 'Thank You' to the fish for the gift of his life; for the gift to the young man who caught him. (I thought he was a male, I do not know.) And, I found myself apologizing for our rudeness. Above my head, and his, the humans were saying, "Now that's good eatin'!" and other such comments. Some just stood and stared.

As the instructor, I had already spoken about the ethical dilemma of teaching fishing skills, especially to young children, and had addressed the individual versus the group or species as a concept, discussing why we choose to practice "management" of wildlife for the overall health of a population.

But in that moment, I said nothing. I offered up Silence to the group. One man made a joke, kindly patting me on the head: "You want to throw him back, don't you CC?" I smiled. "Yes, I do". But really, what I wanted was respect. I wanted to respect my fellow humans. I wanted not to feel the same gut rejection of those around me that I knew as a youth. It was just like what I experienced in high school sitting among peers at a violent film. How could they enjoy this stuff? Who are these people that think this is entertainment? I am so out of place.

Now, decades later, this is my work. I have chosen this, and I love the work; I love being with humans as we wrestle with these moments. We learn from each other. A friend who I told later that night said, "Few people want to be conscious; it's too painful."

Somehow the gift of Silence in that moment drifted into the group and everyone seemed to grow quiet and back away.

The fish released being here as a fish. I had the opportunity to be with someone in their final hour. May I be more Present in such moments to the beauty and courage of passing over.

Amen.

CC

Prayer

April 2, 2008

Standing in the cold, watching the lunar eclipse on a Holy night;

sitting in a summer night circle of friends on a grassy hillside;

Staring into the fire under the loving watch of tall, leafless oaks;

I am here with You.

No requests, no regrets, just gratitude, for You.

And, some kind of ache that releases silent tears;

some kind of grateful mourning for You.

Over Story

April 2, 2008

One with the Universe.

What does it mean?

Releasing boundaries.

Feeling steel come alive and speak to me.

Loving someone I just met.

Celebrating my husband's visions before they come true.

Time and space fade; what is possible becomes Now.

And

humans somehow take up less space, even as they continue to multiply

while wildlife thrives in the understory.

Preparing for the Backcountry

April 7, 2008

On the surface, this seems a little off the path of my deep work, but perhaps not completely...

I was the guest lecturer in a class the other day and the professor called in to say s/he would not be able to be there. I sensed a bit of annoyance in the group. They were grumbling. This was not the first time.

In response to this, I told them a story about a professor of mine once who didn't come to class for three or four weeks in a row. I was so miffed I went to the Director of Education to report him. We were preparing for our first ever 6-week backcountry trip leading high school field ecology. This was no joke. She thanked me and directed me to do what I could with the team to prepare; she would follow up.

A few days later, he strolled in. We were just days away from the arrival of the students. He calmly asked how we were. It was all I could do to keep from saying, "We're basically ready, no thanks to you!" We handed over the meal schedule, the curriculum, supplies list, hiking plans, emergency plans etc. He studied it all carefully. Finally he looked up, very satisfied. "Nice job. Then added quietly,

Looks like you didn't really need me after all". He was smiling softly. The silence lasted a long time. The concept spread all through me. Damn. He was right.

What a gift he gave me in that moment. One helluva teacher redefined teaching that day, and I will never again begrudge someone for allowing me to take ownership of my education. Roger Smith demonstrated the real job of teaching; getting out of the way.

...sending in my writing to CEINW requires a similar sort of faith in self.

Communion

15 May 2008

In this program, we have engendered a Life: a shared life as a group that breathes with new awareness. We came together to listen to our Inner Voices, and those of the children whom we teach/reach, and in the process we shared there was a marriage, albeit a spiritual one, among us. From this commitment to each other, a blessing was conferred on us, rooted in the Eternal. I feel the pregnancy; it challenges me every day as we move along together. Will I honor our work as a team, or will I let this day pass without engaging the Gift. And now, as the program draws to a close, I feel this rush to bring to fruition this germ of a life we share, and carry.

I feel an absence coming, a loss in the offing. My throat constricts. I've taken too long. I desire more of us, more of our time together. I've spent too little time in Silence. More often than not, True listening still eludes me. I am learning to attend to the Eternal, but have only begun my journey home.

With you, I am restored to gentleness and compassion. I cannot afford to stop now this process of birthing awareness. I feel a desire to know you all for years - to know in a decade, or so, how we each have continued to bring this Life we share forward. Oh, how we might embrace our child with laughter from that vantage point!

I love you. Thank you for the gift of each of you, and for sharing this reverent moment together.

Roots

Undated

At Howell Woods nature preserve in Johnson County, Jamie Sasser is bringing back longleaf pine and restoring native habitat. He is the sole tree planter, organic gardener, habitat builder, and trail crew member managing a huge preserve, and he is not fond of the feral hogs digging up sections of the property.

In the evening we spent together, we spoke of the politics and health benefits of eating meat, of choosing wild meat versus rare breed domestics, organic, or grass fed. I wanted to explore the possibilities for the hogs on the land. Jamie graciously entertained these thoughts, and because of his acceptance and willingness to listen to me, I believe he freed me to receive a gift from his trees the following morning.

In the dawn light of the next day, I walked out among the long-leaf pines he has planted. These “truffula trees” as one ranger called them, came in all sizes. Into the Silence, came a soft but clear message.

“If not for Jamie, we would not be here. The hogs are just hogs. The hogs are here. They have their place, and so do we, so do we, so do we, now, as then. We’re home again, where we once belonged. If Jamie’s vision takes root, it will require others to understand what he is doing, and why.”

Who are You?

Undated

When I was a child
I went to Earth
asking “Why?” about her.

Who She was,
what She knew.
I couldn’t get by without her.

“Pine scent rising,
mossy bed...
...hard bark markings”
is what she said.

Cecelia Carver ("CC") King is blessed to live in Chatham County. She is the founder and Director of Screech Owl Farm School, a NC Environmental Education Center. She holds an MA in Geography from UNC Chapel Hill, and has completed a Masters Level twelve-month Professional Residency in Environmental Education at Teton Science School. She was among the first 100 NC Certified Environmental Educators. CC works full-time for the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission, teaching wildlife curriculum and outdoor education skills. She also works part-time as a farm-to-school curriculum consultant, primarily with the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy on 'Noah's Ark Today', a K-5 interdisciplinary farm animal curriculum. Her primary interest in the Inner Life program stemmed from her membership on the Children's Religious Education Committee at the Chapel Hill Friends' meeting and a desire to connect Quaker Listening to the natural world. Most importantly, CC is the mother of two young children, Rufus and Sutton King, and wife/partner to Tim King.

Holding a Vision in One Small Garden

by

Jo Anne Kraus

I sincerely believe that for the child, and for the parent seeking to guide him, it is not half so important to know as to feel. If facts are the seeds that later produce knowledge and wisdom, then the emotions and the impressions of the senses are the fertile soil in which the seeds must grow. The years of early childhood are the time to prepare the soil.⁸

– Rachel Carson
The Sense of Wonder

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

What the Cathedral has is two square blocks on the Upper West Side of New York City. For decades this site has provided spiritual succor not only through religious services conducted in its buildings but through the shade of its enormous trees and extensive, lovingly tended grounds and gardens. It is an oasis, a respite from asphalt, steel, and brick, from the exhaust of high-rises, trucks and taxis, and rushing citizens. But the grounds shrank significantly in the past year as one large corner, the corner closest to our children's garden, became the site of another tall condominium. Trees, playground, rose garden and South Lawn, all used by the camp in former years, disappeared as a result, and the place wherein I hoped to draw city children into a 'feeling' connection with the natural world, had as backdrop enormous cranes with a surround sound noise of jack hammers and drills.

A city camp inevitably offers such challenges to the naturalist-gardener, though our setting is more generous than many in its ratio of earth to child. Our 40 by 60 foot triangle-shaped children's garden is surrounded on two sides by an asphalt driveway and on the third by a school building. Approximately 120 first-through-third grade children come in eight groups of 15- 20 twice a week for a 45 minute visit. Together we plant and maintain the garden, hoping to harvest at least some of what we sow given our late start in the growing season, the partially blocked sunlight, and the predators—peacocks, small birds, and squirrels as well as humans strolling through the Cathedral grounds— who pick off the fruit and pull up our plants.

To these urban challenges, I add a personal one. I insist on keeping our focus clearly on the immediate natural world around us. I want the children to know the non-human lives that share our urban world 'intimately, particularly, precisely, gratefully, reverently, and with affection,' as Wendell Berry defines imaginative knowing in *Life is a Miracle*.⁹ So we explore the Cathedral grounds to observe, touch,

⁸ Rachel Carson, *The Sense of Wonder* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998), p. 56.

⁹ Wendell Berry, *Life is a Miracle* (Washington, DC, Counterpoint, 2000), pp. 137-138.

listen for, smell, and taste the flora and fauna we can actually find at hand. But the natural world operates in its own cycles and on its own time. And even the species that live here do not predictably show up when required, their dramas playing out in a mostly invisible, parallel world. This is the ultimate challenge—to help the children tune in to the quiet stories playing out around us.

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

Some of the summer's success is due to simple mechanical improvements—an added bench in the seating circle, an added table in the crafts area, the large blue tubs that made watering an independent and ongoing activity—and some resulted from making room for the children's ever present desires to dig, water, find worms and roly-polys, taste, touch, make things. But a grace was also present that I attribute to the practice of “beholding.” Beholding is about just taking a moment to stop in the presence of nature, to look closer, to acknowledge beauty, life, complexity, mystery. Beholding is about understanding that the moment one gives attention to anything, even a blade of grass, the marvel of its particular life and its connection to the bigger world becomes clearer and deeper.

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

Over and over in my own beholding practice, I marvel at what I see when I stop and really look, but the trust that in some fundamental way this is all it takes grew almost unconsciously. I was certainly not aware that it was in place as the summer began, yet I see now that I was more open to the garden last year, to seeing the lively diversity in that small place.

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

What Nature Provided

The children, never far from awe and reverence if the adult world allows it, caught the tone easily. There were little moments of shared wonder, like when a first grade group trooped into the garden one hot afternoon and found me sitting “beholding” the sow thistles I had just noticed at the edge of the garden; together we marveled at those tiny, wind-borne seeds that keep the species alive, lifting them into the air to watch them blow away. Or the rainy day walk in the gardens to see what liked the rain, that produced not much in the way of slugs and worms, but opened us to the quiet, damp pleasures of a garden stroll when everyone else is stuck indoors.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

By August camp, the weeds threaten to take over the garden, but weeding does not have much meaning for young children, especially city children for whom green is green and one plant is much like another. It takes repeated exposure–looking and naming– for children to learn to distinguish plant species, and camp is not a school science class. I hope they will make a feeling connection through concrete associations, so my nature curriculum focuses on the beauty and usefulness of weeds. August (known as “Weodmonath” in old England, because just as the garden plants are reaching harvest stage, weeds too get a burst of energy) is a good time to make this our subject.

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

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

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

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

The world around the garden supplied the rest. A crab apple tree near the garden, planted decades before, had a bountiful harvest in August. Children picked, washed, and quartered the tiny apples with plastic knives and we boiled them to make jelly. The wild grape that hangs over the garden was also ready

by the last week of camp—its tiny green grapes watched all summer finally turning deep purple-red. Several boys determined to make “wine,” and were happily busy for two days, picking and squashing grapes with the kind of total focus that make-believe brings.

All in all, it was enough.

Saying Good-bye

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

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

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

By the final week of camp last year, I expected what I remembered from the year before. With over one hundred children trooping through a small garden space day after day the place soon gets a weary, trampled look. As the summer sun beats down and the asphalt and brick surrounding the garden heat up, the plants lose the vibrancy, the freshness of early summer days. But after the last sessions of August camp, where we said good-bye by clipping weeds and raking paths, setting in a few late summer flowers, and putting the worms to bed, the garden looked great.

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

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

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

Jo Anne Kraus has lived and worked in New York City and environs since 1968, but her love of the natural world was fostered in her childhood homes in rural Virginia and Indiana. She holds an M.A. in Medieval Literature and a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from CUNY and has taught ages pre-school through college. Ten years ago she developed and ran a literature-based literacy program in transitional housing facilities in the North West Bronx, working with children, parents, and teachers to promote a love of reading. There she began taking the children outdoors for nature explorations in city parks. Currently she teaches reading at Northside Center for Child Development in Harlem during the school year and spends summers as the Nature-Garden Specialist at A.C.T. Day Camp, situated at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine.

I Would Give You a Sense of the Morning

by

Andrew Levitt

The writing of this book of poetry I have been calling *Heron Mornings* has always mingled search, discovery, transformation, and renewal. This year has been no different. I dedicated myself to collecting poems out of my journals for the work of the Inner Life of the Child in Nature seminar in an attempt to realign myself with myself during a difficult year. To that end, the effort has served me well. In collecting my reflections, I have recovered myself, renewed my relationship to nature and restored myself to the practice of beholding, which is how it all began.

Eight years ago when I scratched the first piece in this collection in one of the sketch books that slide into the leather binding my wife Peggy gave me and I realized I was at a new beginning, I made a determination not to let my days slip away without notice. Shortly after that, I also came to the realization that I had partners in my plan. One was the heron that Sasha and I had seen that first morning. He seemed to play the part of grace in my efforts to pay attention. So I made a rule for myself to record every time I sighted the heron, hence the working title, *Heron Mornings*. Later I recognized that sightings of a red-tailed hawk with their association to wildness in nature also offered me encouragement. So I returned my respect to the hawk and also gave it an honored place in record of my days. Those two pillars were the only supports I deliberately set in place for the construction of a personal mythology. Any other structure came willy-nilly from what I noticed and heard on walks with Sasha that most often took place at dawn or in the hour just before dawn.

Of course, Sasha was my most constant partner, companion and teacher during all this time. In a graduation address this year I told my students what these years of walking with Sasha have meant to me. This is what I said to them:

~

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

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

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

*It was still in the gray of the dawn
a good twenty minutes yet before
the sentinel crows would call through the light
As usual Sasha and I stopped on the road
above the creek and I looked down
to the unmarked glass surface
of the heron's favorite fishing site
Suddenly there was a flutter of gray
in the gray field the gray on gray
set off only by a noticeable grace
Then there he was standing in that
or any other reflection the signal
most alert figure of the hour
And despite the shadow in which we stood I knew
for that impenetrable moment I was awake*

These many years later, I have learned many things from the liminal realm in which Sasha and I have traveled. Among the many things I have learned at Sasha's side, one of the first was to sniff things out each day. Sasha never assumes that a single blade of grass just outside our door today is the same grass he sniffed yesterday. He checks each bush and tree and blade of grass with enthusiasm to discover what's new.

He also knows each and every blade of grass is unique. He may not know that the Talmud says there is an angel above each blade of grass whispering, "Grow, grow!" but he acts as if he does.

Sasha can see things I cannot. From him I have learned to look to see. On another morning beside the creek, he stopped. I stopped with him, but, though I knew there was something to be seen, as I looked I saw nothing. Then I got down to focus my gaze where he looked. Still I saw nothing. Then in the grass across the creek, an ear twitched. Suddenly a red fox leapt straight up into the air, came down completely visible, and looked across the creek at us. We three acknowledged each other for awhile. The communion was palpable.

In great transitions, Sasha and I have read portents and signs. While an owl soared over head and my thoughts westered on his wings to time beyond the brief imperial moment of a life, we watched the auspicious arrival of a new century after a total lunar eclipse. We grew in respect for nature's power to rejuvenate as we saw her heal the scarred landscape devastated by a storm with tornado force that had torn up one-hundred-and-fifty-year-old oaks and thrown them at homes, over roads, yards, and fields.

We stopped to read the signs in lesser transitions, too, like the day a titmouse cried in a dogwood tree mourning the death of his mate who lay at his feet and one could feel domesticity and wildness in the moment. We saw the terror of beauty when we passed through the tightening of nature's fist as crystalline ice on encrusted branches maimed trees. When we saw a trail of bird prints end abruptly, we were reminded that the trajectory of life can never be fully recorded.

As the years passed, I learned distinctions, like how to tell the difference between a shag bark oak, a hickory, and an ash in winter, just because we visited the trees regularly and I had been paying attention. I learned to distinguish markers in nature of times of passage through the day, seasons and year. And through life's longer stretches of time. Now that he is old, Sasha has shown me how to take on graciously the burden of one's own dying.

At his side, I have learned about the world and I have learned deeply personal things. It has been a practice of taking the sage's stance of reverence, as Abraham Joshua Heschel describes it: "Awe enables us to perceive in the world intimations of the divine, to sense in small things the beginning of infinite significance, to sense the ultimate in the common and the simple; to feel in the rush of the passing the stillness of the eternal."

The great lesson in it all has been to realize there is a direct line between the wilderness that is all around us and our home in the holy. There are messages sent both ways. In the wild and ever-changing world outside the door where foxes, deer, raccoons, otters, muskrats, herons, hawks, and song birds still hold authority in the principality of nature, we are all pilgrims passing through. And yet there are moments outside under the planets, moon and stars when I know that one may find one's place in the magnificence and come to rest at home in the universe within the embrace of the holy.

You know I do not believe in giving advice. So this is the only advice the man who walks the big white dog will dare to give: *Find a good teacher and go out into the new morning every day of your life.*

Now let me offer you one last gleaning from reflections on walks with Sasha, something I wrote with you in mind on a morning this fall as Sasha and I went out to see what kind of a day the world had laid at our feet.

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

~

In what I have reviewed in my journals this year, and I confess I have not had time to review them all, I have listened to the voice in which these words were spoken. Although I have come to identify with it, I still recognize as I have always recognized, that the gestures and words of these poems come only partly from me. They also come from sources outside of me as voices of things seen and unseen for which I am simply auditor.

As I walked through these many mornings, days and nights, I have practiced the art of memory, gathering the words on our walks and recording them when I returned. These poems have come as expressions of awe and reverence, of celebration, of invocation and prayer, of sorrow, defeat and melancholy, of astonishment, of joy, gladness and laughter, of love, and of gratitude and thanksgiving. They are observations, arguments, dialogues, meditations, incantations, and songs. In them, I have

discovered truths I did not know before; I have recovered buried memories and insights; I have fixed the sensations of a moment. I return to them as moments wrested out of time. They do not hold nostalgia for me as static snapshots of the past. Instead they serve as little portals to eternity.

Reading them again, I recognize that some are clearly written and some do not quite say what they intended. Yet even in the inadequate expression of a moment, I can discern a shard of insight or imagination. Some in this particular selection appear as I found them in the journals. Others I have reshaped for the sake of clarity, I hope without distortion of the experience “recollected in tranquility.”

In putting this sampling together, I have realized that the book I would like to make of my poetry is different from the one I thought I was creating. Because they represent a kind of journey of initiation, I hope some day to set these poems in the narrative context of the journey. Although for me they represent the journey well enough, I think for others the fragments need some narrative support. For example, there is a story to accompany the poem that recounts the heron feeding in the lake which ends with the line, “What must be done is done with speed and grace.” I recorded that poem on the morning of Christmas Eve 2003, just hours before I was in a nearly fatal car wreck. Serendipity? I think not. But why I am convinced that one can see forward into the day at dawn is a subject for elaboration at another time, though admittedly a topic of importance to the broad understanding of initiate experience.

One last quick note: throughout this collection there are references to weaving and woven cloth. These may not always seem occasioned by the natural world. During the years in which I began to record these poems, I was collecting oral accounts of the lives of men who grew up in a mill village in South Carolina. Since my conversations with them, the looms of the mills of the South have given me a referential base to which I have often returned.

Poems

It was still in the gray of the dawn

It was still in the gray of the dawn
a good twenty minutes yet before
the sentinel crows would call through the light
As usual Sasha and I stopped on the road
above the creek and I looked down
to the unmarked glass surface
of the heron’s favorite fishing site
Suddenly there was a flutter of gray
in the gray field the gray on gray
set off only by a noticeable grace
Then there he was standing in that
or any other reflection the signal
most alert figure of the hour
And despite the shadow in which we stood I knew
for that impenetrable moment I was awake
11/17/99

All morning long while

*All morning long while
the crows took their places in the trees
and the sun lighted the last of autumn's foliage
I was thinking about love
One and three and one again
Eros philia and agape
So little red left
and in this skimming brilliance
even that looks brown
I have a friend who finds his love in sex
For all the murky mess that makes
he seems to get it right
He has more heart than most
and certainly he takes more joy
Blue jays hang with blackbirds in the beech
The crows call across the yards from separate oaks
And yet if Merton was robustly celibate
while he was at Gethsemane
which I suspect he was
despite a dalliance with a nurse
then in the end all love is passion for creation
When clementines and coffee ought to be enough
the only sin saith the preacher is a lack of joy
11/29/99*

Sometimes the emptiness is the best there is to offer

*Sometimes the emptiness is the best there is to offer
the clear stars unbuttoning the blue
the flocked fall crackling at my feet
the wing sound of an unseen flight
The bright vigor of my boots against
the ground is not a march
It is a bass line that I listen to in winter
while I wait to hear the melodies of songs
12/2/99*

No one can befriend the wind

No one can befriend the wind
It was a threatening and intolerant wind
last night that howled in the morning cold
Nothing in the evening air gave consolation
to my fearful mood For now I am relieved
that sunlight has incise the crystalline dawn
I will enjoy the mallards at my side
with equanimity But still I am repentant
at the memory of the illiberal lord
who sits in judgment over all
within the terrible impartial wind
12/7/99

My eyes for Sasha's nose

My eyes for Sasha's nose
In snow I see what Sasha sniffs because
another dog has left a footprint trail
The other's tracks are clues to how my own
dog knows He finds a scent and follows till
his nose discovers where the scent comes from
or trail gives out then searches till another scent
alerts him to another trail He does
not idle by a tree without good cause
Like me he wants to know the origin
of things and what if any sense it makes
1/19/00

Landscape: Inwardness with Outer Space

The morning of the century's first eclipse
I wear my father's shearling coat to block the cold
The moon again is flat and bright against the sky
not hanging like a ragged amber sphere
suspended in the nothingness of space
My father's vibrant spirit keeps me warm
He would have loved these daily walks along the creek
the heron mornings when the air is full of grace
In interstices of the dawn I sense him here
beside me in the way we walked together through the years
And as an owl soars across the setting moon
I wester on his wings to thoughts beyond
the brief imperial moment of a life
1/21/00

Tracking

I see that others went before me in the snow
Some footprints go ahead and some return
but both the sidewalk and the street are void
of everything but signs of former occupants and ice
reflective of the vacant status of the mind
that lacks the presence to engage itself

Beyond the sidewalk in the open field
are little birdprints that begin and end
with such improbability they make me laugh
not just because they seem to lead to nowhere now
but that they should have been recorded there at all
reminders that a life's trajectory
is only scantily recognized in print
1/23/00

The beauty of the glass enveloped trees

The beauty of the glass enveloped trees is like
the venomous tincture of a grim apothecary who
has smoothed his poison over youthful lips
for such a beauty kills and yet
the heron shall survive the tintured frigid lips
of ice where flowing water still is warm
till warmth annuls the harlot's kiss
1/31/00

Carved in the azure cornice over poplar trunks

Carved in the azure cornice over poplar trunks
the heron and the hawk are feeding from
the creek and field And I who stand inside
the temple of the dawn am stunned by both
a humble soul's awareness of religious grace
and a proud imagination of the wild
2/9/00

The world made whole is just the same

The world made whole is just the same
as the world in fragments torn
and tattered like a woven cloth
whose weave has come undone
for life is in the weaver's hands
and force is in the shuttle's fly
and once the cloth has been turned out
no shred or ravel can destroy
the pattern that the warp and fill
once set for all of time
3/14/00

All morning I had listened to the matins of the birds

All morning I had listened to the matins of the birds
The smallest often voiced the sweetest notes
and even common looking grackles serenaded dawn
The dogwood-whitened morning whistled clucked
chirruped and tattled on itself so I was ill-prepared
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 overspoken world
3/29/00

It Is

Be careful where you put your feet down in
the grass Accept the dearth of birds and trust
that they are nesting safely somewhere else
Look over to the clearing in the wood to see
if something moves Be silent Do not turn
your head so fast Go slow Take on
the child's humility to live in every step and place
as if the wilderness were all around It is
4/24/00

The great green canopy is torn

The great green canopy is torn
like Coventry cathedral ripped and bombed
And I remember how I stood
to listen in those ruins for
the sounds of war but recognized
the battle only by the loss
The windows of the new cathedral were a sight to see
and yet the silenced voices of the ancient stones
still held the greater mystery within
And so it is with ancient trunks
where years of history embedded in the rings
have now been lost to violence in the wind
5/29/00

Something in my heart I cannot reach

Something in my heart I cannot reach
Except for moments with my dog in open air
among the birds the trees the rabbits in
the playing fields when players are all gone
I have not found my place

*A little boy confronted darkness all alone
and when he could not find the words
the anger broke his spirit and he cried
He built small fires by himself to harvest light
He searched the highest leaves for evidence of wind
6/27/00*

The efforts of the will will not suffice

The efforts of the will will not suffice
I want my mysteries intact and yet
I keep on formulating fragments in my mind
I lack the spider's knack to weave a work of art
My threads unravel and keep flapping in the wind
And maybe I should leave this thread at that
But I have learned to tie a weaver's knot
and maybe if I tie up broken ends one day
a single knot may make the woven fabric hold
8/31/00

Poison Ivy

Stay out of thickets by the creek
They may hide something there you should not touch
It is no fun avoiding places where we like to walk
There always is a risk within the natural world
And I have caught it good
So what's the use of this precaution now
Besides the outward pain is just a symptom of the truth
I have an inward itch to match each outward pain
And as Suzuki said *the truth is pain*
raised to the level where the pain subsides
9/20/00

Sasha appreciates the chill gunmetal smell

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 imaginations of an unfenced life
10/8/00

As if there were no barrier beside the road

As if there were no barrier beside the road
I heard the rasping call call twice
and glimpsed a second heron shadowing the first
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 and so my mind and senses were
alert and nothing interfered with my
perceptions at 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
11/15/00

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 true etheric nature of all things
who understand the view from here
is just as fine as there
12/6/00

Creek restoration

Deep excavation threatens to destroy
the land and soul whatever its intent
Too much intrusion will not save the wild
nor set the spirit of the landscape free
Left to itself the water will inscribe
its own illegible intentions in the ground
and beauty will be scribbled out in nature's code
But tended by an overzealous hand
the natural mind goes mad and seeks to burst
the banks with forces too long dammed
and drown forever everything it can
12/7/00

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 worshipers
arose to heed the call to harmonize
their matins with the natural grace
1/15/01

The Wren

Come love arise to greet
the season's pleasures with our present joys
Come out to join the damp confusion of a musty morning where
the last of winter mingles with the first of spring
and gay intrepid daffodils are reveling beneath the empty limbs
Each moment is too tenuous for us to miss
for we are on a precipice of life
and balance on the line between the dark and light
where we can hear the messages from either side
Hear how the song birds say the day is blessed
while wood doves mourn in hollows of the night
Then listen as the brightest singer of the dawn
the wren
pursues his suit insistently beside our path
Would that I had such notes as fresh as his
to sing of love as fully as I feel
2/28/01

From every dampened leaf I drink

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 many wrinkles round the ancient master's eyes
inscribe his sage's mask with primal joy*
8/24/01

This is the time of year I would go walking with my father

This is the time of year I would go walking with
my father to the shore to look on an expanse
of water and to breathe the salt sea air
I had a young man's arrogance
at recently arriving at his father's height
and walked and talked with pride
A man familiar with success my father did the same
But nether of us tried to change the other We
enjoyed our walks for what we shared
We knew the wind and weather from the summers
sailing on the bay
But as we gazed across the water to
the winter coming on the farther shore
it was the challenge of the cold we both embraced (12/2/01)

Across the warp the bobbin wound with silver thread

*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.
12/6/01

I know this rain is not enough

I know this rain is not enough
But O to hear the water gushing through the land
is such a thrill that it excites an expectation out of all
proportion to the present flow
of full infusion of new life in every field
where formerly there was a drought
a rain beyond imagination of a rain
a bubbling mirth that pours from heaven to
a land that has been waiting long to laugh
And after this will there be other rains
and rain on rain until no one can say
this rain is not enough

O give me raw infusions of the wild
and let the clouds above pour torrents in my blood
that I may run with rivers feel the freedom of a beast
who is not leashed or tethered by society
O let me get to the horizon on the heron's wings
and then be carried by his grace
beyond the limits of the unenchanted world
where every species can communicate with each
and in the sounds of nature I can hear
the echo of the Primal Word
12/9,11/01

The daffodils awake like adolescent girls

The daffodils awake like adolescent girls
and toss their heads like hair into the falling rain
to drench themselves in morning showers and
put on the dewy freshness of their youth

Old crows more used to getting wet
tuck in their wings and sit the morning out
with only the obligatory genuflections in
the ceremony of the worship of the sun
3/6/03

Make me the servant of the wind

Make me the servant of the wind
that I may gather what she scatters all around
the whistle in the crevice of the mountain wall
the gentle undulation of the grasses at her touch
exhilaration of the birds in upward drafts
Make me her fool and like a child
whose antics make his mother smile
I will distract her from a mood of discontent
6/1/03

*He said that joy is not a work that you
accomplish like a happy life*

*He said that joy is not a work that you
accomplish like a happy life*
A cold gray dawn in autumn is as good
a time as any to experience surprise
We had the time to saunter to the lake
and there without a warning was a sign of grace
as if we had invoked the spirit of
the heron to restore the light
*He said there is not one of us
whose life has not been touched by joy*
10/28/03

It has come down to scratching where the crows will scratch

It has come down to scratching where
the crows will scratch to pecking seed
and stealing hatchlings from the nest
It is a life of scavenging and theft
when times are hard
Old crows have seen hard times before
They have discovered water in the times of drought
and found protection in the hurricanes and ice
And yet despite the hardships they
have overcome old crows have not
forgotten to be present to the dawn
and by that habit of attendance over years
they have maintained an elevated sense of simple things
11/15/03

What he must do he does with grace

So he will not be noticed by his prey
the heron steps with measured movements through the lake
He takes each footstep with as much deliberateness
as one who stalks the truth with words
and does not wish his object to escape
He has an eye for seeing underneath the surfaces
and when he sets his mind on something there
he can deliver deadly focus to the mark
But he maintains an absolute integrity
and only takes what will sustain his life
What must be done is done with speed and grace
12/24/03

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
11/5/05

Contemplating the Void

Poetry is a hard business
especially on days like this
when the rock-fill in the erosion pit
has been washed out by the storm
The only thing to do is get on with it
Just keep climbing up the mountain
with your head turned toward the dirt
No point in looking up toward the summit now
When the path gets too steep
you can dig your hands in like claws
Sometimes it helps to go on all fours
even if you have good feet

I once climbed a mountain in the morning when
all I saw was mist and my own shadow
I photographed my shadow lying
beside a thistle and a rock
It was a half symbolic picture
but I never figured out which half was which
whether it was about reality or illusion
hard prickly things or ambiguity
Not knowing what I would get
I aimed my lens at the mist too
because I had film and the time
The prints came out real fine
a high landscape with path mist and trees
like those Chinese scroll paintings
where a monk in the lower right corner climbs to a ledge
Beside him the ledge drops off to a chasm
Above left rock cliffs and peaks dissolve in cloud
It is a balance of being and nothingness--
The Way
I could write a poem about that
call it "Contemplating the Void"

I keep marbles in my pocket for days like this
If all else fails I like to have
something smooth to touch
5/6/04

When all the music of my soul seems flat

When all the music of my soul seems flat
I listen for the singing of the sparrow whose
bright notes and ringing voice so fill him up
that when he sings his little body quakes
Although the branches of the Spring are bare
he celebrates because he feels the life in every limb returning
4/2/05

A man and a dog in shared silence

After a hard rain
a man and a dog
listen in shared silence
to water settling on leaves
Together they compose themselves
within the poised anticipation of
the day's last hour
6/21/08

Poems written at Timberlake Farm during the Inner Life of the Child in Nature retreats or on mornings before the retreats

She has become the ear to which I speak
She has become the ear to which I speak
and when I listen closely I can hear her voice
not in the breathy whisper heard in church
but in the rasping tones of nature's raw vitality—
the dissonance of jays and crows across the autumn afternoon
the sound of wind that bucks against its tether in the trees
and springs to freedom as it churns flat water white
Like a lover in pursuit of love's attention
I track her through the broken golden rod
through trampled grass and mud imprinted with clear marks
But when the trail runs thin
or darkened by distraction I misread the signs
then to a field of fallen leaves
or to a creek where I have practiced letting go
I make my way in haste
to focus deep within and wait
and wait
until she rises like a vision of the undulating universe
and oars the air in silence with her great blue wings
10/7/06

Release this dying

Release this dying
like a dead leaf weighted
New life lifts
from the detritus of lost dreams
in the debris of sacrifice
Embrace the hollow of the wind
as if it heralded an old return and new becoming
One must not fight what has been given as one's own

After the wire broke my skin

After the wire broke my skin
and I accepted bleeding as the sacrifice
for turning off the trail
I met old turtle busy doing nothing
He assured me I was meant to go this way
So I proceeded to the beech beside the lake
and listened through the souging wind
to harsher indications darker tones
that rasped above the rippling glare
(a message only I was meant to hear)
"The harshness of the message is
an aspect of the Holy"
11/11/06

A small gray titmouse

A small gray titmouse
rests her head on stone
Nearby her mate in dogwood
branches mourns her passing
Their domesticity belies
the wildness that is there
The wildness makes provision for
these dark transitions
Light passes into dark
and darkness dies in light
Eternity is accessed in
the passion of this dying
I who have my part in it
behold and hold
what lives and dies within such intervals
2/24/07

I ask if I can follow deer runs in the spring

I ask if I can follow
deer runs in the spring
or is the growth of green
too thick for me
I know that centuries of wolves
can wear a path through stone
and marble stairs hold
footprints of the generations
so why would there not be
clear trails in spring
and knowing that the truth is such
that any trail one follows
leads to a determined end
I make the point my destination
4/28/07

Andrew Levitt has been teaching high school Humanities at the Emerson Waldorf School in Chapel Hill, NC for the last 6 years. He is a poet, mime and maskmaker, folklorist, and teacher by trade. Andrew expected to be a writer, but after a short stint in journalism at the *World, Telegram and Sun* in New York, he was diverted by the times and took a Peace Corps offer to teach in Thailand. He returned to earn a Ph.D. in Folklore from the University of Pennsylvania and at the same time trained as a mime under Paul J. Curtis, director of The American Mime Theatre, and then later with world-renowned artist, Marcel Marceau. The magic of the silent art of gesture that makes the visible invisible and the invisible visible drew him in. For over 25 years he performed and taught mime, four of those years as Assistant Professor of Theatre at UNCG and the rest as a freelance artist and artist-in-residence in Connecticut, Georgia, Maryland, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Virginia. When he rediscovered language on his morning walks, enjoyment of words and young people led him to the teaching of literature and back to his early love of the writer's craft.

“Walking Sticks Stand by Our Door”

by

Wendy Burkland Lombard

“The only thing stronger than love is more love.”

- Brendan, age 6

I have been a mother of two boys for the past 8 years, and as they grow older and more able to venture out with me into the natural world, I have found myself remembering my own imaginative and creative time in the wildness of the woods and creeks. My intention and practice this past year has been to engage in a practice of remembering my own inner relationship to the natural world and to create a reflective memoir which weaves together my own spiritual inner awakening to nature with that of my own children.

The reflections that follow here are about how I sense coming into the world with a deep connection to the earth, remember the essence of that connection as a young woman, and experience parenting as becoming an open vessel for my children to experience their own inner lives in connection to the natural world. I begin this journey by deepening into my own senses as a young girl in the forests and fields of Michigan.

A Child in the Forest

“A magic moment, this experience [of the meadow] gave to my life something, I know not what, that seems to explain my life at a more profound level than almost any other experience I can remember.”¹

- Thomas Berry

My own “magic moment” came at 5 years old. I was standing on the side deck of the house looking to the sky and imagining I could ask for the rain to come. I just made this wish into the great sky that holds the earth, and felt I was heard. I don’t remember if it rained or not after this, but reflecting back, this was my first dialogue with a cosmic presence, as I can describe it now. It seems that during this time of being 5 to 8 years old, there was no separation between the universe and me. I was part of the communion with all of nature, from the wild strawberries growing on the hill, to the big white horse I rode, to the little ducklings that followed me around the house, and the soft pine needles on the forest floor. I listened to the silence around me, and I had a sense of belonging to nature and safety at being on the earth.

A few years later, my family moved to a hundred acres of forests and fields in Millington, Michigan. I can still remember the intoxicating smell of the mint leaves, the vibrant red and orange fire of the Indian Paintbrushes floating in the breeze on the hill, the buzzing of the cicadas in the height of summer and the curious snakes surprising me every place I walked. Being barefoot most of the time, I often felt the sharp “picker” weeds and the gritty sandy soil under my feet as I carefully walked over the grass. I ate purple clover flowers. I mixed potions with mint and the Indian paintbrushes because of the magical energies that I thought could be created from them. I sat in the soft pine needles under a grove of white pine trees, felt the breeze and smelled the smells of pine and earth.

¹ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), p. 12.

The “inner” experience of these silent moments in nature holds only feelings for me...of rhythm, sound, warmth, and even moments of fear. I felt a sense of being in synchronicity with the earth, but without intellectual words to describe it, and without feeling a separation from this earth I was playing and living on. As I reflect on this time in nature, it is a pure sensing and knowing experience, of being new to Earth and just “being” without any explanations.

Remembering Essence

“We shall walk together on this path of life, for all things are part of the universe, and are connected with each other to form one whole unity.”²

- Maria Montessori

I am 29 now, walking the sandy paths at GilChrist in Three Rivers, Michigan, staying for 10 days in a brick cabin called Jeremiah. I have come here to take a sabbatical from my busy job and to deepen my own experience of contemplation and spirituality. I hear the buzzing of cicadas since it is the height of summer now and see white lace flowers and other grasses blowing in the field. I pick up a wispy wild grass (I have never known it’s name, but I remember its taste and smell) and hold it in my mouth-- chewing on it, walking through the field as I did so many times when I was a young girl on the hundred acres.

I have this time to sleep in my cabin with the breezes blowing through the windows. Within two days time and feeling rested, I suddenly have a strong remembering of the land and the forest where I grew up on the hundred acres. As I go out the door and begin walking the sandy trail, *I am that young girl again*, looking at my feet, head down, smelling and tasting the grasses, feeling the dirt and the rocks so familiar to me--remembering and reclaiming my inner belonging to the natural world and to the earth. I am free, and I am completely conscious in a way that is familiar yet mystical and brand new.

I have been so tired and used-up emotionally working for my vision in the modern world---high school, college, marriage, and now a career. Where have I been the last twenty years of my life? I realized that it is possible to live one’s whole life entirely in the “head”, meaning to be intellectual and not hear what the Earth speaks. I realize I have been “away” from this experience of forest, the sandy trails, and the buzzing cicadas for many years, locked away in a beautiful office with no windows that open, no opportunity to see the sun rise and set, and considering nature as only something to look at and admire out my grand window.

Being able to have this gift of time in the cabin in the woods to observe the entire cycle of the day and night, of growth and dying, of nature’s activities happening entirely without human intervention is revealing in new ways. This is a glorious remembering of an imaginative and creative experience I knew before I “went in” to my mahogany office. Now I am *remembering the essence* of who I am as part of the natural cycles and the cosmological order.

Awakened to being in my body and being aware of the cycles of the moon, sun, and universe, I am walking the trails with a new, yet familiar awareness. I understand now at a deep level that there is an amazing grand design unfolding and I am part of it. I hear the crickets and cicadas in the height of summer and it is an entirely new way of hearing--an earthy experience that is so alive and mystical. The five senses are a gift and to be living in a body—in a physical form is glorious and energizing. A loving presence to all beings has emerged within ME.

In this deep remembering experience, I know that cosmic consciousness is available when the intention of contemplative time is nurtured, especially in nature where the cycles are readily observed and can be

² In Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*, p. 16.

connected with the rhythm of our own bodies. In these moments of awareness, we become a “communion of subjects” as Thomas Berry so poignantly says. For me, as a young girl, having this uninterrupted time to freely explore nature was the way I connected and awakened to cosmic presence. And now as an adult, going into the woods for extended times and reconnecting with the earth’s rhythms is still the way for me to reconnect. My conclusion is that when we experience an awakened consciousness in relation to the Earth, we begin to love all beings equally, and what follows is an attitude of love, forgiveness, peace, and honoring of the diversity of life.

In the continuing unfolding of my life, I will never forget my essence and connection to nature again, for the experience that is about to emerge for me of birthing two children and being a parent, now requires a certain level of pure presence and deep trust of my connection to the cosmos.

Nature and Children

“The most important thing is the awakening. That joy of awakening and discovery is what it’s like to be a child. The recommitment to the spirit-nature connection must be that kind of process.”³

- Paul Gorman

Several years have passed, and I have left Michigan to come to live in North Carolina. The sound of the woodpeckers, hawks, the buzzing insects, the blue-tailed skinks, the long coiled black snakes, and the red clay soil--everything is a new experience of smell, taste, hearing, and seeing. The tallest pines I have ever seen create a cocoon around my house. I am missing the sunsets and the meadows of Michigan, but I still look for the color in the mist of the evening. I do not ever want to forget my essence.

I am contemplating the possibility of having children. In this dialogue with myself, I have said “yes” and opened myself to the experience of creating and birthing. Magically, mysteriously, and almost without effort, both children are born during a 5 year period of time. The revelation is that I seem to have nothing to do with the changes in my body or the natural process that begins to occur to birth this new life. I have connected with a wise, creative force and it takes over *for* me. I can only LET GO INTO the experience of nature, which sometimes brings great fear, but always with a kind of love that is demonstrated over and over again. This letting go process has been a helpful, loving, learning experience from my time spent in nature. By understanding nature’s grand design, I know I can trust my own body.

As I get ready to birth these children into the world, I watch carefully and notice what is happening with other people who are having the experience with children. My neighbor is a stay-at-home mom with two boys. I notice that they are always outside, hanging out in the rain, playing in the creek, sitting in the car playing with the steering wheel, making cupcakes to give to neighbors, and writing stories to share. I am observing all this and it seems so effortless on the mom’s part. This family moved away just before my first baby was born, but from my observations, I knew how I would want to be with my children—open, free, and creative like she was with her kids.

On the day before my first son’s birth, I watched the water flowing in the little creek near my house. I sat and watched my laundry flap in the wind. I watched the tall pines sway in the breeze. I walked the Zen trail in my back yard. And waited for nature to complete the cycle.

My first son was restless and required hours of walking outside, into the day and into the night. I saw many glorious full moons and he saw them with me. One of his first words at 10 months old was “ma-moo,” and he would point up at the moon. As he became a toddler, we spent much of our time at the edge of the creek in our neighbor’s yard, me holding him steady so as not to let him fall into the water. Even then, he was always leaning into the creek!

³ In Richard Louv, *The Last Child in the Woods* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 2005), p. 296.

When it rained, we were the ones outside, letting the rain soak us and playing in the pothole mud puddles. Other people stayed indoors or drove by in their cars and waved at us.

As my body changed once again with another baby inside, we tried to stay outside as much as possible through the hottest days of summer--letting the sweat accumulate on us, remaining still and listening to the intensity of the cicadas. Playing in the yard meant itchy-ness from the chiggers and mosquitoes, but we stayed out anyway—what other choice was there for my child who was naturally wanting to behold everything? Walking the little trail in our backyard and climbing from rock to rock, we waited and listened in the Silence.

The Pond

“Yet in this little meadow the magnificence of life as celebration is manifested in a manner as profound and as impressive as any other place that I have known in these past many years.”⁴

- Thomas Berry

The babies have turned into toddlers now and we are spending all of our days outside, of course. We have left the forested backyard with the Zen trail and moved to a suburban neighborhood in a nearby city in North Carolina that is growing with developments. Letting go of the house with the creek and the trail was very difficult. But to our surprise this new neighborhood has a pond and a creek in the common area. My youngest toddler wants to run to the pond whenever he can. I take them to the pond whenever I can. We are almost always the only ones there. We go at all times of the day, even at night. This pond becomes like the meadow that Thomas Berry speaks about. We go each day to notice what is changing and what is happening and it is always a celebration of the magnificence of life.

And personally, I am having an experience with the land in this suburban area, which I have never had before, or maybe, I am only now remembering my past dialogues with nature as a child. It's the dialogue with the cosmic presence again. The land seems to be talking with me, telling me things about its history and its purpose, and I am listening. The land feels energized and powerful which is hard to explain if you've never had that feeling. There are quartz crystals everywhere in the red clay soil—they are sparkling and clear.

In my new backyard, which borders on a thru street and now has a fence around it, I am raking, trying to re-create my Zen trail and finding it hard to hear the silence with the busy-ness of the neighborhood. I believe that even if it is a very short trail in a fenced backyard, we can still walk it with a Zen attitude. I rake up a snake's skin during that first week of clearing the trail and it is surprising to hear an intuitive voice say, “Do not fear the dark places. Other people living here do not understand the power of this land and we are glad you are here to help.” I can only note this message in my journal.

We spent many days after this down at the pond, roaming. The children run free and explore many places at the pond. We find a special big rock to stand on and name it Spirit Rock. It reminds me of the big rock near the creek on the hundred acres which my dad named Indian Rock. Somehow naming the rock invites the children to it almost every day and it takes on its own personality. Often we find bones and feathers left on top of the rock. And sometimes papers, cans, or wrappers from humans. It is obviously a meeting place and a place of communion for many in nature.

⁴ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*, p. 14.

The Creek and our Future

“The spiritual is revealed not by traveling to some distant place in the clouds, but by opening to it wherever we find ourselves.”⁵

- Tobin Hart

A fog was settling into the creek bed, a very misty light fog after an intense lightning storm, and there was a clearing in the sky. Now living in a 3rd floor apartment one year later, we put on our boots and ran down the stairs to the wild creek down behind the building. Since the sun was setting, there was a pink and blue color all around us, filtering through the mist. “What colors do you see?” I asked my boys. And then, looking over through the trees, we saw a fire orange color burning through the treetops. I was in awe and grateful myself for this moment. Had I not had my boys to accompany me with their boots into the creek, I might have also missed this time to connect deeply with the mystical beauty all around us.

We spend most of our free time in the creek now behind the apartment. I let the boys wander away from me often, while keeping a safe eye on them. We do not have the luxury of a hundred acres and there are many people who I do not know in this urban area. Sometimes the boys get hurt crossing over a fallen tree over the creek or they slip into the water and their boots fill up. They get muddy and really wet. Sometimes they cry and want to go home, but as a mom, I just try to go with the experience. I could be signing the boys up for soccer, baseball, tai kwon do, and violin classes. All these things my boys would probably like to do in life, and they probably will eventually. But I sign them up daily for the creek. It’s free AND it’s a place they can begin their own dialogue in silence with nature.

Drawing upon my own knowing of the cosmic presence and learning to dialogue with the Earth, I am structuring in these moments as creative free time for my children at a time when nature is disappearing from the neighborhoods and high tech TV and games are replacing afterschool outdoor free play. I grew up going to a regular public school with structured days, but I had the freedom at home to always explore the woods by myself in silence and create imaginary homes and play places. My own parents didn’t have to make sure I played in nature, but times have changed in the last thirty years quite drastically.

Where we live is not the hundred acres I grew up on. The trees are often cut down for new houses, the yards are fenced in, and there is no access to a creek or pond nearby for many people. But somehow we have found a place where we can still walk out to a creek to explore the wildness that is still there. We have decorated our doorstep with the amber quartz crystals we found in the creek bed. Walking sticks stand by our door.

This creek is where the magical moments and direct experiences happen for our family, and this experience will carry us into our deepest connection to and dialogue with the Earth and the Cosmos.

Wendy Burkland Lombard is Assistant Director for the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World in Whitsett, NC. Wendy is a student of Thomas Berry and has served on the Board of the Center for Ecozoic Studies. She has a life-long commitment to bringing nature awareness to the inner life of the spirit and the outer life of service and action.

⁵ Tobin Hart, *The Secret Spiritual World of Children* (Makawao, Maui, HI: Inner Ocean, 2003), p. 60.

The Teepee Practice

by

Ellyn Mullis

I wanted it something awful. For six years I had been staring at this teepee in my favorite catalog, Magic Cabin Dolls. It was life-size and made of white weather resistant canvas. It had wooden poles. Stencil set was included. Paints were optional. The catalog's colorful drawings of happy, healthy children gathered in peace around it beguiled me, and fond memories tugged. In childhood, my neighbors and I had had great and timeless times in our tumbledown forts and secret spots. Wouldn't it have been fun if we had had a real teepee?! What might my two children do with a real teepee?! But the price tag was steep for us-- \$159 plus shipping and handling.

Never mind that I had purchased most of the rest of the Magic Cabin catalog over eight years of birthdays and holidays. We had flannel costumes, velour capes, tiny cupcake tins, lacing cards, Lyra crayons, woodland animals carved from wood, Elsa Beskow books, and silk scarves, the complete set of eight. We had a lot. I just had never spent so much on a single item. Yes, I knew that our children, at six and eight, were due to soon outgrow make-believe play. If I wanted them to play in a teepee, I had better hurry. And yes, we had just gotten rid of an old swingset left by the previous owners of our home. We did need something to fill the spot. But \$159 PLUS shipping and handling? I wasn't convinced that it was waterproof.

Thus, it was with gladness that I greeted the need to do a Practice for this symposium on children and nature. It was a Requirement. Happily for me, the Practice needed to involve my work with children. Well, I am a pediatrician by training, but most of the time these days I am a mother and community volunteer. Except for one day a week at a low-income clinic, my work with children involves Sally, Charlie, and the children I come in contact with because of them. "What nicer—or simpler—Practice," thought I, "could there be than to buy a six foot tall white canvas teepee with wooden poles? I'll set it up in our backyard. There it will serve as a lure, drawing in all the neighborhood children to engage in the sort of outdoor play that I so fondly remember and that the catalog so blithely depicts. "Twill be Simplicity itself. All that I will need to do will be to stand at my kitchen window and watch as the wonder unfolds."

Luckily for me and my notions of economy, Charlie's sixth birthday coincided with this need to do a Practice. In addition to a boatload of gifts that I cannot begin to recall now, he received a seven-and-one-half foot long box from Magic Cabin Dolls (plus a shorter box containing two wooden bow and arrow sets complete with cloth storage bags). I had planned for the beautiful teepee to serve as the focal point for his birthday party but since we could not agree on how to fit it into a Space Shuttle theme, it stayed in its box. That turned out to be just as well because the party got cut short when most of the guests had to leave for Little League games. (Silly me—when will I ever figure out modern children and their schedules?) Thus it was not until the day after the party that we slid the wooden poles into the teepee's canvas sleeves, and chose (that is, I chose) for location a semi-protected spot beneath three pines just beyond view of our kitchen sink. That way, Charlie, Sally, and et cetera could have privacy, but I would be able to witness everything just by leaning forward slightly and crooking my neck.

The teepee's first day was a success. Early June. Bright blue sky. As soon as it was positioned, Sally and Charlie ran inside to don their Native American costumes (a Magic Cabin present from three Christmases ago, still in good condition and still played with). They spent the entire afternoon and early evening hunting buffalo, gathering sticks, tracking quail, chasing butterflies, and digging holes to China. To add to my joy, our one neighborhood pal—an older boy--came by, and the three of them dragged all the American Girl dolls outside (I am embarrassed to say how many) to join the fun. Sally, Charlie, and only two of the dolls came in that night dirty, bug bitten, and happy.

Alas, after this perfect opening day, the Practice did not go so well. Two days later, a big problem presented: the sky turned black. Sally came inside. "What if the teepee gets wet?" she asked.

I went out with her to the deck. "What IF it gets wet?" I thought as I looked up. "What if it gets wet AND mildewed?... What if it gets dirty?... What if spiders crawl inside and build webs? Suppose the wooden poles turn gray and rot?"

Inside my head, the thoughts went on like this for quite some time, but what I told Sally was: "It's not going to rain." We left the teepee up. And the black cloud moved along.

The next morning, however, conditions were moist and so I took the teepee down, leaning it against the wall in the garage. Thus began an up/down ritual that was to characterize the rest of a stormy June and early July.

The next problem to present pertained to the lack of children flocking to our yard—but I was not too worried about that at first. Four years ago when we moved to this small Southern city, we found an affordable house in an upper middle-class neighborhood (large homes, large yards). Almost all of the families are headed by married couples. Many mothers, like me, are at home. Children of primary school age do live here. We just had not met many of them yet. By mid-July I realized that meeting them was likely to be more difficult than I had thought. Children didn't seem to be outside that much. Even if they were, the odds of meeting by chance looked small. In this neighborhood, the houses are a bit far apart for younger children to roam unattended, and there are no kid communal gathering places. We do have a neighborhood pool, but that's hit-or-miss (mostly miss) as to whether other neighborhood families will be there when you are. By mid-summer, these sorts of observations caused me to reduce my Practice's immediate goal to just identifying by sight some of the nearby families. I noted that people in our neighborhood sometimes take walks in the evenings and so I made it a point to be outside then. On occasion during July, a family with young children did walk by our house. "Hello. Hello," said the grown-ups to one another. The children just stared...but once or twice one of the mothers did ask, "Where did you get that darling teepee?"—which I took as promising.

I took it as promising for the future, however—the future of three or four months hence--for by late July, it had become clear that the teepee had not a prayer of bearing fruit until the cooler days of autumn. By late July, another big problem presented—extreme high heat and drought. In August 2007, like just about every other person in the Southeastern United States, we hibernated. Curtains were drawn, lights were kept off. The air conditioner strained, the computer whirred...which I was NOT happy about—but Sally and Charlie were using the word processor to write musicals, so what could I say? They rehearsed endlessly, with many rearrangements of the living room furniture, many costume changes (recall that we own almost the entire Magic Cabin wardrobe), and many extravagant props drawn from all over the house. During this creative but messy burst, the teepee stayed up and often in the late afternoons, desperate for school to start, I would lift the kitchen shade to peek at it. It looked so clean and neat out there, solitudinous and serene. "Don't give up hope," I'd tell it. "In the fall, they'll come. You'll have plenty of company in the fall. How could you possibly get ignored when the air is cool and the leaves golden, the squirrels gathering nuts, and all of life a cornucopia?" In my delirium, I entertained visions of

a neighborhood harvest festival. I wondered if Sally and Charlie could be seduced into writing a musical for out of doors.

But the Thanksgiving pageant was not to be.

For the most part, through a dry but brilliant autumn, the teepee stood alone. Oh, Charlie might have visited it once in September, twice in October. One day in November, I do clearly recollect that he and Sal went out there to make feast dishes from acorns and berries. Otherwise through the autumn, the only visitor was me--and I did not go much. It was too painful.

In May 2007, when I conceived of this simple practice of attention to children and outdoor play, I had no idea that it would cause a major upheaval at my core--not because of the teepee per se, but because of what it caused me to notice, to HAVE to notice. The teepee was merely a focal point, of course--a tangible symbol of something I wanted desperately for my children. When I was a child in the 1960's in a small Southern city similar to the one we live in now, free unsupervised outdoor neighborhood play was What We Did. We built forts, played flyball in the street, dug red clay to make Indian pots, got sunk to our knees in swamps, caught lightning bugs after dark. These outdoor pursuits played a huge part in saving me—as well as others, I am sure—from dysfunction within our households. In the forts we built, the mock battles we fought, the street games we played, the hikes we took, we exercised not only our bodies but our imaginations and reasoning capacities as well. We learned how to figure things out, how to adapt, how to hope, how to survive and maybe mature.

Unlike many children then (or now), our daughter and son live in a mostly functional household. They have two devoted parents, both with enough education and experience to have given up on contemporary ideas of success. My husband is an Episcopal priest. I am a physician mostly at home. We live in a nice house with a huge yard in a neighborhood that is safe. We have enough material goods to be comfortable, no debt except our mortgage, a bit of savings, and we all get along well enough. In many ways, our children have an idyllic life. What they do not have, however, is neighborhood play. In this neighborhood, there are no after-supper kickball games (that I know of), no forts in the woods (the few remaining woodland swaths are clearly Private Property), no honeysuckle feasts, no bicycle rodeos, and no yards torn up by homemade putt-putt courses. I want these things for them. I want them, when they are a little older, to go zooming off on their bikes to horizons a phone call or two away. (“Are Sally and Charlie in your yard?” “No.” “All right, I’ll try Jessica’s house.” “Would you ask if Jacob is there too?”) I want them to come in at night filthy and telling tales of the ball that went down the sewer and how Emily crawled in after it. I want them to catch frogs and exchange cootie shots and fill driveways up and down the street with hopscotch boards. That is why I got the teepee—to be the beginnings of all that. It was meant as an icebreaker, a conversation starter:

“Oh look, a teepee!”

“Sally! Charlie! Take Jessica over to see the teepee!”

“Wow, what a great yard!” says Jessica. “We could play kickball here!”

“Or tag,” says Sal. “Hey, see that opening at the bottom of our oak tree?”

“Yeah, I see it.”

“My mom says that’s where the fairies go in and out.”

“You ever see one? Wow! Look at that teepee!”

“No, but I saw a rabbit once.”

Et cetera. Et cetera. And I’d be at the kitchen window.

It’d be a wonder.

But.

Towards the end of summer 2007, we received a letter from our school principal stating that our school, which is the public school designated for our district, “did not make adequate yearly progress.” In other words, about one-fourth of the children in one of the many “subgroups” (awful word) at our school did not pass the End-of-Grade tests in reading and math. When a school does not make AYP, the “No Child Left Behind” laws stipulate that all children at the school, including the subgroups that passed EOG’s, be given the option of attending alternative schools as designated by the district. Our school, which has an “extremely diverse student body” (code language for predominately nonwhite), was given two options. One was a public school just outside the city limits with a homogenous student population (i.e. >80% white). The other was like ours—in the city and “diverse”. Few, if any, children in the failing subgroup left. About half of the white children (a subgroup with 92% pass rate on EOG’s) left for the homogenous rural school. Their departure was conspicuous, especially in the younger grades. Charlie went from being one of five “like him” in a kindergarten classroom of nineteen to being one of three in a first grade class of eighteen.

On the first day that I volunteered in his classroom, the teepee’s death knell sounded. Suddenly and painfully on that first day, I realized that it did not have a chance. My sweet dream of free outdoor neighborhood play did not have the dickens of a chance. It never had.

Of 145 first graders at our school, Charlie is the only one from our neighborhood. Of 135 third graders, Sally is the sole neighbor child. Of all the children in our large and affluent neighborhood, only three others—a fourth grader and two fifth graders—attend the elementary public school designated for our district. The AYP exodus had no impact here. Every other child in the neighborhood already attended the Montessori school or the Christian school or the charter school, or was home schooled. How were our children EVER going to meet and get to know any of these children? Without shared experience, relationships don’t form. We had already witnessed over the summer many of the known and widely discussed obstacles to shared experience within a neighborhood (out-of-home care, organized activities, parental anxieties, indoor comforts and diversions, few if any outdoor communal places). Throw lack of a common school into the mix. Add the tensions that underlie the multitude of choices...and well. It was over.

But I kept the teepee up. Through the autumn months as shock, anger, bewilderment, betrayal, grief, and etc. tore apart my core, I stood at the kitchen window and stared at it. And it stared at me. When I could bear it, I visited and lay flat on its hard earthen floor, hoping to find some comfort there. The comfort never came.

And so I was glad when December came. On the first really cold day, I took the thing down. My husband put it on a shelf high over the top of the riding lawnmower, and I bought our children Webkinz for Christmas.

The winter and early spring were long, lonely, and brown. “Mom, what can I do?” seemed the constant, heartbreaking refrain. I tried and tried but never came to a place of peace with “school choice” and what it’s meant for our neighborhood, for our children.

Nonetheless warmer days—and rain! --have come again. The dogwoods are in bloom, the grass needs mowing, the birds are noisy...our principal just resigned and rumors are flying...but lo. A few days ago, Charlie said, “Mom, where is the teepee?”

Miracle of miracles, he and the four-year-old boy (public school family) across the street discovered each other! And they wanted to play Cowboy and Indians using the teepee and some toys the boy’s mother had just purchased at Wal-Mart. Their older brothers joined in the fun, and I watched from the kitchen window! “Praise Jesus!” shouted I. “Four boys in our yard shooting each other up with cap

guns, water pistols, and plastic bows and arrows! We have reached the Gloryland!” The next day, another neighbor boy came by. Our one neighborhood pal, he had enrolled last spring at the charter school, and we had not seen him much this school year. “Hallelujah!” sang my heart as he showed Sally and Charlie how to navigate the Webkinz website. (Until then, they had been treating “Mr. Jackson” and “Natalie” as plain old stuffed animals.) I didn’t care what they did! what they played with! whether they were inside or out! So what if my Practice was a failure?! So what if the teepee had not been a lure or a place to watch wonder unfold?! It was a blessing just to have a neighbor child in the house.

But the Practice was not a complete loss. Actually it did lead me to the noticing of some wonder this year—not tons and tons of it but enough. This wonder, of course, has been at school.

Now I don’t want to overstate the case. It is to be expected that our smart, white, well-supported children are getting good educations. The public schools, especially the ones with diversity to the degree that we have it, have had to develop methods of tending to a variety of aptitude/skill levels. They call it “differentiation”. It is not perfect—but for the early grades, it’s going well enough.

It is also to be expected that classroom behavior problems (a stigma associated with poor nonwhite schools) would not be an issue. The schools have expertise in this area. Again it’s not perfect—but overall I suspect that the behavior problems at our school are no worse than in more affluent schools. In some ways, they might be easier to handle.

No, the wonder has not resided in the academic progress or the behavioral plans. The wonder has been in—and this, you MUST take note of—the wonder has been in the peacefulness of the place. All these children of different skin colors, different native tongues, different accents, cultures, socioeconomic standing—they are all under one roof, and they are not killing each other off. Think about that.

Nor are they trading blows, practicing avoidance, hurling slurs, nor sneering—at least not to any major degree. Given the racial divide in the culture-at-large, there is bound to be some unpleasantness...but it’s not much. Overall the students are not doing anything except acting like a bunch of children at school.

Moreover, most of the time—and this, too, is a wonder (really it is)--most of the children seem “all right” with being there. In the classroom, they sit next to each other. They do their work, both individually and in groups. They talk to each other--even if they recognize differences (which they do—they call it “light skins” and “dark skins”), and they make eye contact with each other (a BIG deal as anyone who works with “less than’s” can tell you). In fact, the most apparent lack of peace seems to be within demographic “subgroups”. The bullying, teasing, power plays, gossip, and trading of illicit information—all the social reasons that people give for not wanting to attend “culturally diverse” schools—it’s just not there in any major way except within the subgroups (including the white middle class one).

I know this peacefulness will change. I hear how middle school is awful.

For now, though, it is a wonder. All over the world, people are dying (or worse) for differences that Sally, Charlie, and their classmates take in stride.

But the Teepee Practice was supposed to relate somehow to the inner lives of children in nature. A poor public school in the South seems rather far afield—except in this peacefulness. Here, in this school of children left behind, it is imprinting on young souls that people of differences can live together in peace. Furthermore, individual or tribal identity can be maintained and people can STILL live together in peace. We live in a world that could be blown to smithereens by ethnic strife. Truly it could. Our

weapons are that big, that bad. I would put, therefore, this early imprinting of peace at the forefront of any efforts regarding children and nature. If we do not, the day could come when we have no children left—not any children, not anywhere, in nature or not.

As for the teepee, it's in the garage. I've put a picnic table in its spot. Sally and Charlie are out there now, with a loaf of bread.

Ellyn Pearson Mullis is the mother of two elementary school-aged children, the wife of an Episcopal priest, and a one-day-a-week pediatrician at a clinic for the under- and uninsured. She graduated from the College of William and Mary and the University of Virginia School of Medicine. She trained in pediatrics at Johns Hopkins Hospital and in neonatal intensive care at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill.

“I am a We star”

by

Marie Nordgren

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

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

My practice began with an enthusiasm that captured my whole being. I organized my day to include an early morning nature walk and after school stroll around the pond to “bring my day to the natural world” and listen for what the natural world may have to say to me. I was inspired, engaged in the project and expectant. I was going to be in communion with nature. I would know Mother Earth and she would know me and this relationship would inform my entire life - teaching, parenting, relationships and my inner being.

Joy, mystery, amazement and awe characterized my early practice. I was disciplined in my walking and pond reflection. I collected an image everyday in a beholding exercise: An alpaca lying on its side in the sun being held by the earth and blanketed with warmth and light, mushrooms and wheat grass sprouting from an old wheat straw bale, the moon cradled in the branches of a tree. I asked questions of the natural world and sat in silence expectantly. I contemplated the images and questions and made efforts to integrate these experienced into my stories for the children and conversations with family and friends. For a time, this held my interest and inspired my days. But in this grasping mood of acquisition and use of images and experiences as product of my efforts, my “cupped palm” became full. With my collection of images in hand and held tightly, I became less disciplined in my walks and journaling. General busyness became my focus along with teaching, house hunting, moving, grieving, and worrying. Something about my practice or intention was not working.

Golden haired, blue-eyed Nora, just four, dreamily strolls through the vegetable garden. She comes to stillness in front of a broccoli plant that has blossomed into yellow flowers. She stands in her dreamy state gazing at the plant. Silently they stand, golden haired girl facing a golden flowering plant. Minutes pass with no movement. Then, Nora takes a long deep breath, sighs and the spell is broken. She

turns and skips off to the holly tree, climbs its branches and perches on a limb 10 feet above the ground. There she sits in the tree for the remainder of playtime, happy as a lark.

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

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

Notebook entry by Rudolf Steiner, 1918¹⁰

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

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

Marie Nordgren is the founder, director and a teacher at The Children's Garden Preschool, a nature and play based early childhood program. Her training is in Waldorf early childhood education from Sunbridge College. Most recently she has been participating in The Inner Life of the Child in Nature program at The Center and studying with the Choreocosmos School of Cosmic and Sacred Dance. Her three grown daughters and husband of 28 years, Carl, are also a never ending source of new learning experiences.

¹⁰ Urieli, B. L. and H. Muller-Wiedmann, *Learning to Experience the Etheric World* (London: Temple Lodge Publishing, 1998), p. 41.

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

by

Lisa Marie Peloquin

Part One: The Letter

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

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

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

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

The United States, as a decidedly age-stratified society, channels teachers and learners into distinct educational trajectories and environments deemed appropriate for specific stages within the life course. Considered progressive and cumulative, students are assumed to move through stages of cognitive and emotional development that establish the building blocks of identity and social roles. My efforts to complete the application materials for the “Inner Life” brought awareness to my internalized assumptions about the most rightful educators and students to participate. My attention focused on the

language of the program description –my fascination with diction was at once a sociological reflex to consider the forces of history and a testimony to my sincere need for belonging.

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

Ultimately, my perception of undergraduate students as a vulnerable, if not endangered, population catalyzed my decision to reject conventional definitions and expand the umbrella of “childhood” to include twenty some-things. In *Last Child in the Woods* (2005), Richard Louv diagnoses a “nature deficit disorder” of epidemic proportions within Western societies. With progressive industrialization and urbanization, youth lose opportunities for direct exposure to nature and consequently suffer from increasing rates of obesity, depression and anxiety. Undergraduate students, comprising what recent social historians have termed “the Net generation,” exist within social worlds more inhabited by virtual representations than grounded, lived relationships.

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

Teachers, “Professors,” Knowledge

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

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

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

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

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

Nature as Teacher/Teachers in Nature

The practice of teaching/learning is framed by specific norms of the body within physical space. Universities provide controlled, sanitary, and rationally organized environments for the pursuit of education. The spatial and normative dynamics of universities testify to the enduring hierarchy of the mind over matter and the separation of bodies from nature. In contrast to the “Inner Life’s” intention to reunite children with the natural world, the architecture and landscaping on most college campuses clearly attest to pronounced pressures in the opposite direction.

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

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

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

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

Part III: Opening Self and Society with the Natural World

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

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

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

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

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

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

Despite legitimate intellectual intentions, this professor must manage her presentation of self and other to navigate a context of potent, negative projections. To a sociologist, stereotypes represent the ways in which reigning paradigms of thought and shared cultural beliefs cast humans into narrowly defined images. Individuals cling to stereotypes when they continue to describe a world in limited ways despite empirical evidence to the contrary. Clearly, the last time I had looked at my birth certificate, I had entered this material world during an historical era of profound *backlash* to the hippie movement. Furthermore, I had never witnessed a psychedelic light show or “love-in” occurring anywhere close to Whitsett, North Carolina. The corporate cooptation of countercultural social movements bolstered by mass media representations serves to divorce the *hippies* from their environmental ethos and to reduce them to unemployed, anti-intellectual hedonists. This synthesis of the *hippie* and *nature-lover* with culturally held stereotypes of the “useless” was evident within written reflections after class. Essays were replete with blatant, if not unrepentant, confessions that prior to the actual experience, students expected the class would be “stupid,” a “waste of time” and to “irrelevant compared to real work.”

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

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

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

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

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

Part IV: Continued Reflections

As a participant in the “Inner Life of the Child,” I was blessed with a co-creative community dedicated to the development, transformation and strengthening of life-giving principles. The conversations, meditations and process of the “Inner Life” allowed me to deeply question the ways in which connection with nature may serve to catalyze and support valuable teaching and learning. From my perspective, the quality of education ultimately remains measured by the ways in which “knowledge” serves to ameliorate the suffering of all living beings. My work with Timberlake Farm allowed both

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

Lisa Marie Peloquin holds a Ph.D. in Sociology from Duke University. She has applied her sociological training and bilingual skills in work with Latino immigrants and migrants in North Carolina, adults diagnosed with mental retardation and mental illness, and alternative health care centers. Entitled “Vibrant Weave: ‘Holistic Healing’ and the Embodiment of Community in a Southern Mill Town,” her dissertation explored how contemporary healing practices and green lifestyles serve as a valuable lens through which we may re-think the nature of culture, power, and the self. As an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Elon University, Lisa teaches courses on women and gender studies, contemporary social theory and embodiment. She has also pursued independent studies in Ayurveda and yoga. Lisa presently serves on the Board of Directors for The Center of Education, Imagination and the Natural World.

“Land Eats Clementine”

by

Kumiko Sakai

As a toddler teacher in a Montessori school, my practice has been to explore how the natural environment helps the younger child’s inner life develop. I have focused on the child’s imagination in nature. To observe the child’s imagination is to discover the child’s inner life.

Richard Lewis said about the child’s imagination:

It is a poetic image that has everything to do with how a young child animates the world, and sees life in everything that exists outside of herself. It is a perception of the living dynamic qualities in the universe

Since I have read *Living By Wonder* by Richard Lewis, I have recorded my students’ conversations to understand their imagination in the natural environment. My students exactly prove his philosophy. The child of toddler age animates the world without any consciousness of natural phenomena.

When I work with the children, I teach through who I am rather than teaching the children what to know. If I am myself, then I can feel the tree in the woods. If I “should be” something, then the tree cannot see me. I’m training myself to be myself in the woods. I don’t have to show what I know. The woods at the Timberlake Farm Earth Sanctuary have told me this. This approach is in keeping with Maria Montessori who said that you don’t have to “teach” the children.

I have limited time to prepare for what each child needs, but in the woods, everything is prepared for them. The woods provide the right environment for every child.

During the wintertime, we can’t go into the woods as much as the other seasons. However, when we do go into the woods, children focus on discovering particular winter characteristics such as frost, iced puddles, and a variety of shapes of branches.

Inside, I create the classroom environment in which children are able to connect with nature still. The sensorial area that we have in the classroom helps children to develop their knowledge by using their five senses.

I provide a “smelling” work for the children. The children pick the herbs and then put a saltshaker on the herbs. They have already learned the smell of rosemary, lavender, and thyme.

In the practical life area, children are drawn to the purposeful work, such as grinding crackers for the birds, and picking corn from the cob for the gerbils.

In our food preparation section, the children enjoy peeling the clementines. After they are finished eating the clementines, we collect the skins and then, the skins are taken to the compost pile.

The children learned the concept of composting. Some of the children said:

“Land eats Clementine and it likes it.” 2 years and 6 months

“Land is very hungry. It needs to eat something.” 3 years old

“The earth needs food like we do.” 3 years old

A child gets a feeling of personal worth when he or she does meaningful and productive work. The children learn that they can maintain their environment and be useful in the society by connecting with nature.

In the spring, our toddlers learn how to grow plants in our garden. They pick sunflower seeds from our dried sunflowers, and then they plant them. They water the sunflowers every day to see how the plants will grow.

In the summer, the children use vegetables, which are produced from our garden, for food preparations such as peeling carrots, making lettuce wrap sandwiches, and making herb potpourri. During summer camp, we open a farmer’s market to sell our products. One year our toddlers picked lavenders and made potpourri to sell.

We also have a wooden area behind our school where students can experience the nature environment. There is a trail in the woods that the students can go through by themselves. Also in the woods, parents created big primitive instruments and mazes by placing natural stones.

My goal in all these practices is to create a living circle of life.

Kumiko Sakai was born in Japan and is presently a toddler teacher at the Greensboro Montessori School in Greensboro, NC.

Research: Mother Nature Has Some Ideas About This, Too

by

Colette Segalla

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

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

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

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

At CEINW, the co-research process gave us, as participants, opportunities to experience ourselves in communion with the natural world. This is qualitatively and substantively different from being outdoors, not in communion with nature but as human beings “outside” of our usual place indoors. When one communes, one is a *part* of nature, whereas when one “goes outside” one is *separate* from nature, one is visiting a place not usual to our daily lives. The opportunities to experience ourselves in communion with nature contributed to the dynamic of reciprocity between the researcher and the research. Opportunities for both collective and solitary silence also contributed to this reciprocity, as did

the time that was given to reflection, to creative discussion, and to creative expression. The format of our gatherings, which followed the “rhythm of the day” as opposed to an agenda, and an open space for comments rather than a linear progression from one person to the next, grew out of the intention for these gatherings to be more like creative play than “workshops.” In play, not only is there potential for creative outcomes, there is also potential for enrichment and enjoyment of the players. All of these, in addition to the reading, writing, listening to and communing with knowledgeable people, contributed to a research process that gave back (and continues to give back) to the co-researchers through its direct impact on our own personal and professional lives. I’ve found that I’ve experienced my own spiritual evolution through this process. Such growth does not necessarily occur when research is seen and approached as an objective process with informational outcomes.

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

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

Qualitative Research

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

Given that humanity faces the most dire of consequences in human history for our behavior toward and relationship with the planet in which we live, it is clear that this is the time to break out of ineffective or destructive ingrained habits and practices of contemporary society, and adapt ourselves to a new way of being amongst one another and with the living organism of planet Earth (Berry, 1988). This will require nothing less than a transformation of industrialized society toward an “ecologized” society, or one that recognizes and cares for the interdependencies and interrelationships amongst not only people but animals, plants and all inanimate but critical elements in the planet (Berry, 1988). To this end, my aim is to contribute to the necessary shift in consciousness already underway by dedicating myself to

discovering better ways to conceptualize and initiate human beings into the experience of life as part of a matrix of interdependent participants. Education is one of the most important aspects of this long initiation process and offers beautiful opportunities for the genesis of a more fully aware collective humanity.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

based on prescribed information. There is opportunity for a qualitative difference in interaction between adult and child when a capacity such as wonder is beheld as a unique and spiritual aspect of being human.

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

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

Other examples of spiritual states of being include the experience of being in a “felt space” of mystery (Hyde 2005). This comes about when the capacity for wonder and contemplation lead one to a phenomenological experience of being in a different place than the “reality” of the empirical here and now. The coalescence of wonder, contemplation and imagination enables the child to enter into and feel the mystery of some of life’s unanswered questions, be they existential questions or the mystery of the sphinx. This state of being is akin to being in a “felt space” of the sacred, where awe and reverence blossom within the child, setting the stage for an experience of reciprocity between the child and the sacred environ.

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

A spiritually imbued orientation to life is an outcome of the nurturance of the child’s spiritual capacities. The spiritual developmental process, rather than stages, is more like having access to a soul-

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

I made a point at the beginning of this essay to note the way in which I became involved with CEINW because I believe it represents a principle at work in the type of co-research and the creative process of education that the Center brings to light. That principle is that this work serves a larger purpose that has its own ways of ordering things which may at times be beyond our conscious awareness. As mentioned, my meeting with Carolyn and therefore with the work of CEINW, was a “chance” meeting through a mutual friend. But even the chance meeting with Carolyn came after a “chance” meeting with our mutual friend at a public event following at least a couple of years without contact between us. So these multiple layers of “chance” that led to a fruitful connection and the furthering of my life’s work were not random events but are acknowledged as events that line up with the perhaps even unspoken intentions of the participants and the unseen design of a work that is much larger than any of the participants. One might say this type of thing happens all the time and yes, it does, but when the principle behind it is acknowledged, even if it’s not completely understood, and embraced as being at play in the larger work, that’s when a space is created for things to unfold a little bit differently, perhaps bringing to this space a little bit more potential for unexpected but certainly fully hoped for fruitful results. Although Carolyn never knew, before she called me, that I was even considering entering a graduate school whose motto is “tending the soul of the world,” I can certainly see how this larger purpose was influencing events in my life and gracing me with the good fortune to be put in touch with people who were so carefully nurturing this same purpose in the lives of our children and the natural world. I am, indeed, filled with gratitude.

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Colette Segalla is a full time graduate student of clinical psychology at Pacifica Graduate Institute in Carpinteria, California. Colette entered graduate school with the intention of furthering her work with both children and adults, after ten years as a teacher and several years working with adults in the corporate sector. She taught her first three years in a public middle school in Durham County before seeking a teaching philosophy and methodology that was more in line with her view of life. She then found out about Maria Montessori and fell in love with her philosophy and approach to education. Montessori’s respect for the uniqueness and potential in each individual, in addition to her belief in the importance of developing a sense of interdependence within the child, resonated deeply with Colette. It was with this same love of the uniqueness and potential within each individual that she entered graduate school in order to further her work with both children and adults.

The Evolution of a Science Teacher

by

Randy Senzig

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

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

Tricolor Herons found food at the edge of the canal and refuge in the trees. In the dark green waters with white water lilies and water hyacinths were red-eared sliders resting on the bank and long nosed alligator garfish swimming. As the afternoons turned into weeks and weeks into months I began to notice changes. Arriving one day I found a group of earth-moving vehicles parked in the field behind the trees and wax myrtles. Soon a bulldozer began to chew up the south end of the canal and spit sand into the far end of this watery refuge. Daily, foot-by-foot, the bulldozer and its waste of sand clanked forward. I saw the destruction each day as the shadows lengthened and the canal shortened. I also noticed that the animals, especially the birds, were not leaving but moving closer and closer together at the north end. Population density increased. How could there be enough food now? What life had already been lost under the tons of sand? Day followed day as the struggle continued and as I observed.

This particular afternoon, as I drove home, would be different. The canal was over half filled with the bulldozer’s sands and the birds were pushed wing to wing at the north end. Cars and drivers traveled unaware of the destruction of nature just a few feet away. My car slid to a stop as it left the four-lane thoroughfare. The shadows marched toward me as I open the car door and walked toward the canal bank. The white lime sands colored my pants as I knelt down. I felt the sadness rise from this tiny community. There across the canal no more than 30 feet away a Great Egret stood alone- a good distance from the others. As my eyes moved along the opposite bank counting the many birds, I came to this grand bird regally standing there as lord of the land with long white plumes falling from his breast. Our eyes locked. We were at the same level. We stared at each other, for a time. I don’t know how long but it seemed to span epochs. Across a great chasm we called to each other. As the thick fog rose on communication between Human and Nature, we stood in a common world, the Egret and me. Looking deeper into his eyes I saw my own reflection and asked, “what can I do to help?” The reply was “teach the story - my story, the story of the insensitive destruction of my home and that of my fellow beings, the

story of living side by side, humans with nature, interwoven and interdependent sharing the same air and the same earth and the story of possibilities. This was a catalyst that changed the way that I teach. Helping children to look at all life and their environment differently than previous generations became my passion. It was a moment that taught me the importance of reflection in our lives and of the importance of Thomas Berry's *The Great Work*.

It is through the sharing of Thomas' "the Meadow across the Creek" that I began to fully comprehend the meaning of my egret encounter. After exploring what Thomas felt about the meadow, I began to see that my experience was a life changing experience. Being a scientist, I took Thomas' words to heart: "While we have more scientific knowledge of the universe than any people ever had, it is not the type of knowledge that leads to an intimate presence within a meaningful universe."¹¹ It took an encounter of being in the presence of other beings to hear the voice of nature, and to feel the connection between us. Thomas also writes "...no effective restoration of a viable mode of human presence on the planet will take place until such intimate human rapport with the Earth community and the entire functioning of the universe is reestablished on an extensive scale."¹² I have accepted the voice of nature to teach this message to my students.

Richard Louv writes of a new disease among children and young people that he refers to as "nature deficit disorder."¹³ Many years ago on an Everglades field trip there were two female students who, after disembarking the bus, refused to leave the sidewalk for a hike along a trail in the Everglades. They were visibly afraid. After encouraging them to walk on the trail I asked questions trying to find reasons for this behavior. They told me that they had grown up in an apartment complex in Miami where signs proclaimed, "Do not get on the grass" and the playgrounds were covered with asphalt . . . so they knew that there were dangers in grass and other natural surfaces. We got through that and were able to go on the hike together.

And Rachel Carson spoke of the need to have an adult to share nature with.¹⁴ As I reflect on her work, I have come to understand that my Grandfather was that adult to me. I dug holes around the fruit tree as he told me about Native Americans' way of fertilizing fruit trees, followed him into the neighborhood to collect oak leaves to mulch and compost the azaleas and camellias, and watched the sun rise as we would encircle and herd up hundreds of fiddler crabs to bait our hooks for sheephead fishing on the jetties of the St John's River. He would tell me that "you have to learn these things" - they make you part of this life. So, I grew up, went to college, found professors passionate about science and I fell in love with the science of ecology.

My formal science education was standard science. We studied processes, structure and function. I learned it all in the lecture room and in the lab. My university training was very typical and analytical. I used the scientific method to understand the parts and functioning of the earth. But, I was the happiest and most excited when my botany teacher took us out in the fields and forests of South Georgia or made us go to search for new plants to add to the herbarium. In my senior year the department introduced a new course – Ecology. I was hooked. I had found relationships in university work and science. The very relationships that my grandfather had taught me years before were now being explained in a science text and in class. Now, it began to become clear.

¹¹ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), p. 15.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 19.

¹³ Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature Deficit Disorder* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin, 2005).

¹⁴ Rachel Carson, *The Sense of Wonder* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), p. 55.

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

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

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

The practice that I have started in my classes is one that ties observation of the natural world to the development of individualized environmental ethics. The practice is based on Thomas Berry’s idea that we must “reinvent the Human for the 21st Century”.¹⁵ The unit that I am developing starts with observation activities designed to have the student in the field learn to observe by using the senses. Through various activities that use and stimulate the sense of smell, touch, sight, and hearing, the student becomes aware of his natural surroundings. Through these low stress activities students can have the unstructured time to observe and reflect on the natural environment and their relationship to it.

¹⁵ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*, p. 159.

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

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

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

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

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

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

When we are studying the world biomes, I have the students work in groups to develop oral presentations. They have to use technology, so they prepare power point presentations, create a piece of art about the biome, and prepare note cards for the speech. But there is a twist to this assignment. Borrowing from John Seed's "Council of All Beings," each student is required to make a mask of one of the biome's animals. The animal mask is worn during the presentation where the student is to become the animal and speak of the biome from its point of view. To set the stage that first day, the room is darkened, some instrumental music is played, the students are asked to close their eyes and come with me to a distant place where animals talk and all beings are heard. As I walk around the darkened room, waving a large pelican wing to send a gentle breeze to touch each cheek, we enter the new place and begin the reports.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"... these classes have changed my way on thinking." Chris

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Randy Senzig has taught science for 31 years in North Carolina and Florida public schools. He holds a NC Science Teaching License as well as being a NC Certified Environmental Educator. Randy is a NCSU Kenan Fellow, the 2006 NC Environmental Educator of the Year, his high school's Teacher of the Year, NCSTA District Science Teacher of the Year and has received many grants to promote outdoor education. He was the co director of NCSU Summer Environmental Camp. His article, “A Letter from a Teacher of Young Women,” was published in *The Ecozoic Reader*. His website, *Birds in the Schoolyard* promotes outdoor education. He wrote the Wake County Environmental Science Curriculum. Randy has studied at the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World, pursued graduate studies in Conservation Biology at Florida International University and earned a Masters in Education at the University of North Florida.

***Children of the Mystery:
Why We Need a Pedagogy of the Sacred***

by

John Shackelton

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

~ Thomas Berry

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Part I

A Culture of Control

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

~ Thomas Berry

Pedagogy as Pressure

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

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

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

Knowledge as Power

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

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

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

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

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

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

Going back to my youth, I now reflect that the words that floated in smoke seem to have passed the test of history better than those that were stamped on brass. We are where we are, historically and ecologically, because we have treated knowledge as a commodity—the same way we treat the Natural World—as a major resource to serve our human projects. We have not approached knowledge respectfully or revered its sacred nature; we have probed for it as a means of controlling our destiny; we have treated knowledge as servant to our purposes, and now we are in a dangerous place.

~

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

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

This phenomenon of *methodological invisibility* is illustrated in the following example from Morris Berman in *Coming to Our Senses*.³ A researcher in Medieval sainthood approached his project with a very modern research tool—the computer database. He listed a number of well-known saints and

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

collected data about them such as country of origin, social class, if they had a spiritual ecstatic experience and age at the time of it, whether they were credited with miracles and the classification of those, etc., etc. The researcher entered his data, crunched the numbers, and, *ipso facto*, he had a picture of the typical Medieval saint with which to enlighten the understanding of other scholars. Dr. Berman knew this researcher and assures us that he had no trouble attracting grant money.

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

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

~

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

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

We often hear a distinction made between knowledge and wisdom as though the legitimacy of the one should not be questioned in the absence of the other. However, can “knowledge” that leaves us foolish be properly called *knowledge*? Perhaps it would be more accurate (and even useful?) to say that what we've been calling knowledge—no matter how sophisticated, empirical, or abstractly conceptualized—is really more like information. I suggest that this thought brings us closer to the truth. The database on sainthood was information, accurate as far as it went; one might even argue that the facts in it were not merely culturally based but actual. Nevertheless, the interpretation of the data and its use for such a purpose was deeply culturally based. I suggest that the kind of “knowledge” that does not bring wisdom requires quotation marks because only one species operates as though this kind of “knowledge,” and it alone, is really knowledge. Our doing so has not made us superior, only more dangerous.

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

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

Part II

A Communion of Learning

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

~ David Abram

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

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

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

Before the Big Bang was the Big Silence.

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

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

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

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

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

The primitive mechanics of energies and forces
that made form and Beauty. And it was Good.

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

New molecules appeared from older ones, heirs of Silence and Rest,
Chaos and form, fire and water.
They bonded in the water's warmth in fecund embrace
Increasing in complexity of form until a mass of them became One
And began to feed
And divide
And multiply.

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

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

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

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

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

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

We moderns stand proudly upon our learning as evidenced in such things as our success in eliminating diseases like polio, crossing the vast ocean in a mere few hours, sending messages around the

globe in fractions of seconds, placing steel-clad feet on the moon, and taking practice shots at the human genome. Yet, in the face of the grand Epoch of Cosmic Learning, we are as an oil lamp proclaiming its brilliance to the sun.

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

Lessons from the Learning Earth

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

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

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

Part III

A Sacred Mirror

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

~ Morris Berman

The dominant culture holds up to every one of us a mirror in which we see ourselves falling short in comparison to what it tells us we should be—slim, smart, stylish, in control, and having lots of money. What most people see in that mirror makes them anxious, fretful, insecure (Is this the real “invisible hand” of the market?). Our culture sets our children up for this, focuses on them even more intensely in their teen years, and finishes its work in fearful and compliant adults who then pass on to their children . . .

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

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

Children of the Market

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

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

If the above is true, then how did we get here? Thomas Berry says we’ve lost communion with creation. David Abram suggests our pathologies are rooted in loss of reciprocity with the living Earth. Morris Berman helps us see that we’re looking in the wrong mirror. They are all quite right, and no matter how we word the thing, it all comes down to this: we’ve wanted to be in control, so we chose a way of knowing that we thought would serve that desire, and we cut off both our natural connections and inner Witness to the Other ways of knowing that won’t serve our purposes.

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

Children of the Mystery

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

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

The Road Not Yet Taken

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

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

But must things continue that way?

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

Then, what if children did not learn in school that knowledge is a commodity, but experienced knowing as inseparable from being known? What if children in show-and-tell shared not just their latest material acquisition but that Visitation in the snow, and teachers were encouraged to recognize such experiences and celebrate them? What if the formal education of children valued the Natural World, revered Earth, and engaged the body’s ancient knowing so that when children swayed in the breeze

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

with the daffodils or communed with the dryad of a weeping willow or danced with the falling October leaves, these communions would count as learning?

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

John Shackelton has been an educator for over thirty years. He has taught every level from second grade to college freshmen and served as head of three alternative schools, most recently Rainbow Mountain Children's School in Asheville, N.C. He has one published novel, *The Lowly Papers*, a story of Appalachia, and he is currently writing a non-fiction work, *Pedagogy of the Sacred*. Several of his articles touching on the relationship between education and the mistreatment of the planet are available at www.rmcs.org, the Rainbow website.