



Chrysalis

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

That contemplation whereby humans sink deep into the subjectivity of their own beings is a primary way of experiencing the totality of things and of so constituting a truly functional world order. This is the order of interior communion, not the order of external manipulation or compulsion. Each aspect of reality is discovered in a mutual in-dwelling which is the supreme art of life. Nothing can be itself without being in communion with everything else, nor can anything truly be the other without first acquiring a capacity for interior presence to itself. These come together in some mysterious way. Thus the deepening of the personal center becomes the deepening of the capacity for communion. Since all things gravitate toward each other, a person has only to permit the inner movements of his own being to establish his universal presence to all the earth.¹

~ Thomas Berry, “Contemplation and World Order”

Dear Reader,

In *The Sacred Universe*, Thomas Berry writes that “a sense of the sacred requires recovery of ourselves, a return to the depths of our own being.”² Thomas was clear that we need to move below the surface of our rational words, definitions, concepts and good intentions to a place of *dwelling* ever more deeply in the inner authenticity of our own being, even as we *indwell* more deeply with Earth.

¹ Thomas Berry, “Contemplation and the World Order” (1978), http://thomasberry.org/wp-content/uploads/Berry_Contemplation_and_world_order.pdf

² Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe: Earth, Spirit, and Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Columbia University Press), 55.



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Thomas invited us into an inner relationship with the natural world more profound than that of study and intellectual explanation – he invited us to a place where the deep and intimate layers of the soul become active and bear fruit. He wrote that we are on the cusp of experiencing “knowledge as communion” rather than “knowledge as knowing about.” In *Evening Thoughts*, Thomas writes, “knowing is a communion of subjects rather than a simple subject-object relationship.”³

Nigerian philosopher Bayo Akomolafe calls this “with-nessing” and “making sanctuary” – or bringing aliveness and attentiveness to the world around us. Making sanctuary is an active practice of “dwelling together with.”⁴

The key to the Great Work is not a philosophical, metaphysical or historical system, but rather a practice of presence with the world as a “communion of subjects” through awakening deeper levels of consciousness. The practice of “sympathetic presence,” practiced over a period of time, becomes an aptitude – an orientation toward life in which self is transformed into Self – into an alignment with the sacred nature of the world that guides thinking and action. In this sense, it is an inversion of the human will from self as autonomous personality to Self as participant with the world.

As we imagined a program for educators at the Center, these words from Thomas were at the heart of our imagining: the deepening of the personal center becomes the deepening of the capacity for communion.

This is why we spend the whole first year of our “Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice” program for educators inviting participants into presence with the natural world from a place of deep inner listening and communion.

³Thomas Berry, *Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as a Sacred Community* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2006), 54-55.

⁴Bayo Akomolafe, “It’s Time: Let Us Make Sanctuary.” (<https://www.bayoakomolafe.net/post/its-time-let-us-make-sanctuary>)

And it is why we work with letting go, letting come as a way of forming a practice for the second year of the program. It is our hope that educators return to the depths of their own being and return to a sense of belonging with Earth/Universe as sacred community as the foundation for birthing what is uniquely theirs to bring into the world.

In this issue of *Chrysalis* we bring you two essays written by graduates of The Inner Life of the Child in Nature program who have continued a deep practice of presence with the world as a “communion of subjects” over many years.

Katherine Ziff, in “Wish for a Garden,” and Bill Wallenbeck, in “Held by Earth and the High Desert,” both begin with childhood memories that have imprinted themselves indelibly in their hearts, memories that begin a continuous thread of interior communion. We then journey inwardly with Katherine in the steep foothills of the Appalachian Mountains of Athens, Ohio, and Bill in the Datil Mountains of New Mexico, as they enter into ways of deepening this capacity for communion over time – an evolving process of “dwelling together with.”

As you read their essays, I believe you will feel this deepening in your own soul, as Katherine and Bill invite us to join them on two journeys where the deepening of the personal center becomes *the deepening of the capacity for communion*.

In Peace,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Peggy Whalen-Levitt".

Peggy Whalen-Levitt,
Director

Wish for a Garden

by

Katherine Ziff

Four years ago I began to wish for a garden in which I could grow vegetables and flowers. Maybe history was calling, for I was born into a family of people on my father's side who planted vegetable gardens every spring, and on my mother's side were gardeners who tended beds of perennials and hedges of camellias. Now, reflecting on my childhood, I think maybe the plants were calling as my early years were marked by brief yet foundational experiences of inner presence with the natural world.

Selwyn Village was, in 1955, a new community of duplexes and two-story apartment buildings in Charlotte, North Carolina. Designed in the post-war housing boom, the rental residences were situated on large lawns planted with many trees, all laid out in a park-like setting with curving streets. My mother and father moved with me to Selwyn Village when I was two, a choice made no doubt because they had grown up in Charlotte and it seemed a good place for my father to transition from military service to a civilian job. I have only traces of memory of our apartment – a sunny kitchen, wooden floors, a neighbor who made banana pudding for us. One memory, though, lives within complete and crystal-clear: the joy of taking a walk by myself to the bus stop. Somehow, slipping past the watch of parents and neighbors, I walked out the front door and headed down to the sidewalk by the road. Reaching the bus stop, I was filled with the excitement of taking this independent journey. And transported by the natural world around me: blue sky, the sunlight warm on my skin and bright in my eyes, above me in the trees the sbbh sbbh of their green leaves as they fluttered in the breeze. Oblivious to the buses and cars on the street, my small self was transfixed nearly breathless by what I saw, felt, and heard from the sky, sun, wind, and trees above. I wasn't there but half a minute before my mother arrived to scoop me up, but those seconds of the sensory joy of nature and freedom have stayed with me.

Early recollections such as these are, in Adlerian psychology, stories of simple incidents in childhood which one is able to bring to mind in present experience as mental images or as focused sensory memories. They are thought to provide a snapshot or story of one's lifeline or life pattern, painting a picture of both present and past. My walk to the bus stop foretold a life of freedom to explore and experience nature as joyful and accessible.

A couple of years later, old enough now to be allowed to go outside by myself, I headed to the creek in Latta Park across from my grandmother's home in Charlotte. Bent on gathering violets that were blooming on the creekbank, I wanted to surprise my grandmother with a bouquet. This experience with violets growing by a

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

My wish for a garden had become a longing. Our home in Athens, Ohio is situated in the steep foothills of the Appalachian Mountains on the “eyebrow” of a ridge above the Hocking River. Our hillside land is shaded by Black Walnut trees, features a small meadow of Black Raspberries and yellow fall-flowering Wingstem, and provides a dinner plate for deer that browse through the neighborhood. It is no place to grow vegetables! How, I wondered, might I embark on vegetable gardening? Then I happened to see a notice about a community garden near our home. I learned from the garden sponsor, Community Food Initiatives, that one plot in the garden space was available and for \$25 a year I could have it! So on a chilly, damp day in March of 2019 I met with the garden supervisor and formally received my 8’ x 12’ rectangle of earth, ready for me to make something of it.

*One more early childhood recollection remains a marker illuminating inner presence with nature - seashells on a beach after a storm. By this time I was five years old and my family had moved to Greenville, North Carolina. As the Atlantic coast was only an hour’s drive, we often took day trips to the southernmost spot on one of the barrier islands known as Bogue Banks. Accessible by ferry, this wide sandy beach where the Bogue Sound met the Atlantic Ocean was empty of anything created by humans except for the Coast Guard station. A hurricane had just passed through and, as is often after a big storm, the day was sunny with clear blue skies. My parents left me to explore while they raked for clams and set up their lines and nets for crabs. This inlet where two waters came together in the daily back and forth of tides was an exciting place of shifting currents, rolling waves easing into ripples on the sound side, and sand bars where on an incoming tide you had to be mindful so as not to be stranded on a vanishing strip of sand separated from shore by deep tidal pools and strong currents. On this day, at the edge of the tide line a great abundance of seashells had been loosened by the stormy seas, gathered up, and brought forth by the waves onto the beach. Luminous with sea water, all kinds of whole shells were heaped up – red calico scallops, slipper shells or fairy boats as we called them, striped whelks, blue and purple banded tulips, coquina wings, sand dollars, periwinkles, mother of pearl lined pen shells, and a white quartz stone studded with bits of emerald sparkle that fit just so in my hand. With a sea breeze, the salt spray, ocean waves still rolling and crashing with the strength of the storm, the warm sun, and the water’s edge piled with treasures – I felt at one with all this as if nothing else existed, a part of the exhilaration, power and abundance of this meeting place of land and sea. Gathering up as many shells as I could carry in my hands, I took them home to form the beginning of a little collection of seashells. Soon after this I began to read and was given one of Herbert Zim’s little “Golden Nature Guides” for children, *Seashores: A Guide to Shells and Other Natural Features of American Coasts. Illustrated with colorful**

paintings and full of information about the creatures living in the ocean and the plants nearby, this little book opened for me a descriptive window of science in relation to the natural world.

These childhood moments marked a beginning path of inner presence with the natural world illuminated by freedom, discovery, abundance, generosity, beauty, safety, faithful companionship, and communion with nature. Creating a foundation that has allowed me to weave science, art, imagination and metaphor as sources of wisdom.

What to do with this small garden space that was now mine? How to decide what to grow? What should be done for the soil? I thought of the work of Machaëlle Small Wright at the Perelandra Nature Research Center in Jeffersonton, Virginia. Many years earlier I had learned of her methods, and she was still at work teaching and publishing on working in partnership with nature. Co-creating a garden, she called it. So I set to work listening to nature, to the specific energy and being that was becoming this small garden. Putting aside my lists and diagrams and frost dates, I wrote an intention for my partnership with nature in this garden:

I want this garden to be
a peaceful place
where I learn to grow
flowers
&
vegetables.
And in this process
I want to learn to grow
healthy plants
that provide
healthy food and flowers.

My life journey with nature began with the joy of experiencing and gathering flowers and seashells, and later blackberries, wild strawberries. In college I took botany and horticulture classes with C. Ritchie Bell, founder of the North Carolina Botanical Garden, where he taught us methods of botanical science, undertook to have us appreciate the practical uses of plants, and encouraged us (with “extra credit” assignments) to experience plants directly. I dyed wool yarn a deep golden color by boiling it with onion skins, made gumbo file with dried Sassafras leaves, and every week for a semester rode my bicycle down and back up Laurel Hill Road in Chapel Hill to help build an herb garden for the new Botanical Gardens conceived by Dr. Bell where I met a volunteer from Pittsboro who shared with me her thermos of a most magical beverage: iced Lemon Balm tea sweetened with honey.

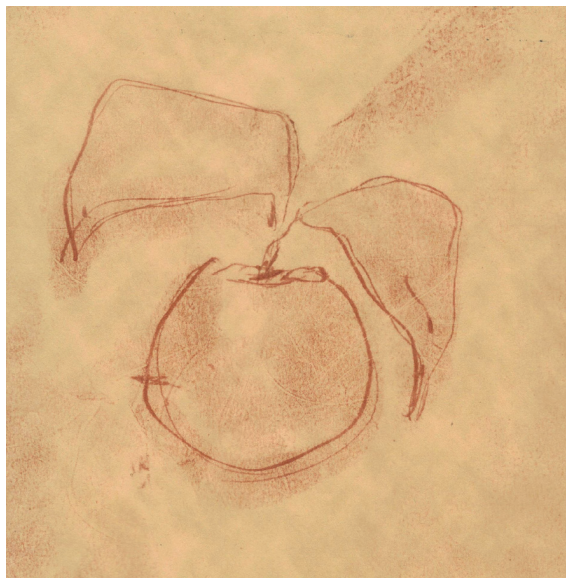
Many years later, in our new home in Athens, I began to get to know the physical form of plants and flowers. One morning I decided to walk down to the river and draw the plants I

had seen growing there. Dragging a log over to a stand of Milkweed (*Asclepius syriaca*), I sat down with pencil and sketchbook to draw these plants as they are at midsummer – tall towers, their round magenta flower heads nodding and their big leaves flowing in every direction. But my drawings were stiff and I was not able to show how the milkweed plants bent and wove together. So for instruction I turned to Betty Edwards' *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain* for her lesson on pure contour drawing and tried this out in the field down by the river. Facing a milkweed plant and turned in the opposite direction from my paper, I allowed my gaze to focus on a stem and then a leaf. Tracking with my pencil an edge of a leaf and very slowly allowing my pencil to record my perceptions of the edges with a very slow line, I resisted the urge to turn and look at my drawing. Slowly following the edge of the stout stem of milkweed plant with my eyes and pencil, I noticed that as it encounters the leaf stem the line curves up and then down under the weight of the leaf, and then as the edge undulates out revealing both top and bottom of the leaf and out to the small point at the tip, then back up, the leaf intersects with that of another plant. The resulting marks were nothing like an actual milkweed plant but rather were deep, intuitive marks made in response to being with the plant with eyes and hand. This method of pure contour drawing enabled me to truly see what I was drawing and allowed access to a seemingly far distant yet deeply connected ideational source of material patterns and forms. Over time I was able to draw flowers and plants that portrayed their living form, like the drawing of the Pawpaw flower below.



Pawpaw Flower from Blind Contour to Finished Drawing and Fruit

Having learned something about seeing and portraying the physical form of a plant, I undertook to know the spirit of plants via Touch Drawing. This way of recording a visual image from nature encourages a fine tuning of an inner capacity to be in relation with the natural world in its wholeness. Originated by Deborah Koff-Chapin (1996), Touch Drawing is an intuitive and contemplative way of knowing. I think of it as a knowing of the heart. It is done by rolling water-soluble oil paint on a board, floating a piece of tissue on top, and making marks with hands, fingers, wrists, fingernails. Technically this is a monotype technique, but there is something about the immediate touch of the hands to the work surface that draws forth perceptions and images. Having learned about Touch Drawing in some way that I do not recall, I ordered a little booklet and some painting supplies. A few weeks later I set up the materials in my studio and looked out the window for inspiration. There beneath me was an apple tree we had planted. In its first year of apple-bearing, the tree was covered in ripening green apples. Fixing my eyes on one of the apples I began to draw with my hands and – a sprightly apple danced right onto my paper! Touch Drawing opened a door to listening to the spirit and voice of plants and then entire landscapes.

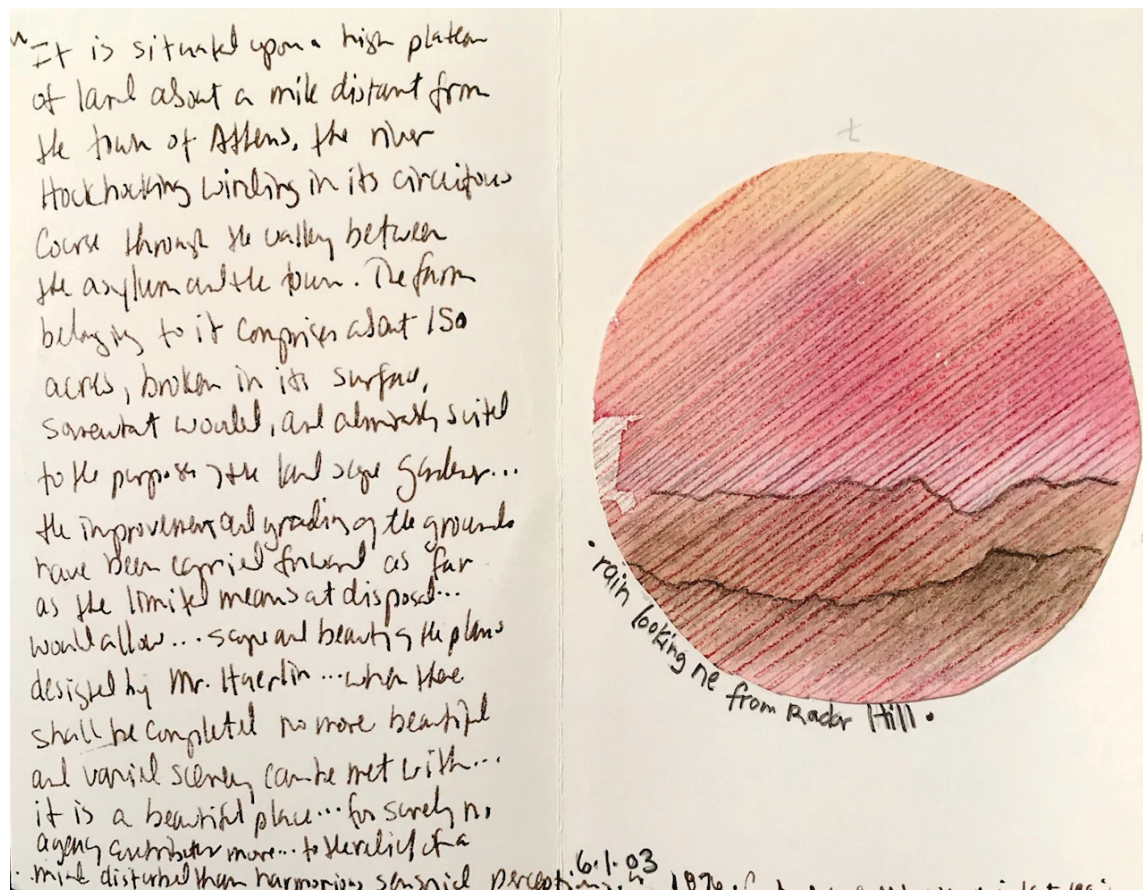


Apple Touch Drawing

By now I had taken up doctoral studies in counseling, and it was time to choose a dissertation topic. My mother suggested that I take a look at the history of the Athens State Hospital, established in 1868 by the state of Ohio for people in southeast Ohio with mental illness. The hospital was open until 1993 when, the transfer of its ownership to Ohio University completed, the large complex of Victorian architecture sat mostly empty and mysterious above the town of Athens. The hospital became my topic and later a book *Asylum on the Hill: History of a Healing Landscape* published by Ohio University Press.

To construct a historical organizational case study of the old hospital, I worked from the ground up to build categories of analysis with many bits of information from letters, reports, patient files, hospital records, news articles, and interviews. Having identified categories, I now had a completely different task: what story wants to be told? The story was revealed, not by continued searching and identifying and analyzing, but by listening to the landscape. For eleven years of dissertation and book writing I walked, listened, and walked some more on the old hospital grounds. Consisting of forests, meadows, old fields, and the remnants of the old hospital farm, orchard, and dairy operation, the grounds offered 700 acres all criss-crossed by paths and trails open to the public.

At the same time I had begun a practice of mandala making and meditative painting in the morning, at first light when all was quiet. Choosing a very small accordion fold notebook for this work, I was able to keep up a small weekly practice of drawing and painting that reflected and supported my research process. What emerged, the story that wanted to be told, was a narrative of land and nature and people connected by an ancient thread of holistic healing.



Asylum Landscape and Description from Superintendent

For this hospital, built on a bluff above the river with 18 million bricks handmade from the clay of its site, was designed to provide nineteenth century American psychiatry's gold standard of mental health care: the Kirkbride plan for moral treatment. Originated by a Quaker tea merchant in late eighteenth century England, moral treatment proposed to treat its patients with orderly routines, beautiful views of the countryside, private rooms, exposure to the arts, a built environment with abundant natural light and plenty of ventilation, outdoor walks, gardens, useful occupation, and personal attention from a physician. A central feature of moral treatment was therapeutic place – or the healing properties of a landscape. The idea of healing landscapes has been around for millennia, in the West from at least the time of Asclepius and the Asclepian healing temples built in the Mediterranean world high above the sea offering views of nature, groves of trees, sacred waters, and spaces for patients to dream of images and symbols to guide the physicians in their treatment.



Apple Blossoms From a Remaining Apple Tree

Twenty years have passed since I began all that walking, the dirt paths are still there, and so are a very few of the old trees – an American Beech that has been there for two centuries, a huge Ginkgo, and the last remnant of the acres of Apple orchards planted and looked after by staff and patients - an old apple tree.

That first year in my garden I listened to nature and planted onion sets, potatoes, beans, and flowers – Cosmos seeds given to me by my a gardener friend and Marigolds around the edges of the garden. From the garden I learned optimism – that tiny slips and seeds want to grow and flourish. In my garden journal I wrote “Yesterday I dug an onion – warm, sweet, beautiful and about three inches in diameter. It seems a miracle that it grew from the tiny slips that sat in the garage for

a while last winter.” By August the exuberance of the garden was palpable and for the first time I felt a part of it, reveling in the beauty and vitality of the physical plant forms.

Having learned to see plants and to express them with art making, I turned to listening to them. In doing so I have followed a path of western science illuminated by plant studies scientists such as Monica Gagliano (*Thus Spoke the Plant*), Patricia Viera (*The Green Thread* and *The Mind of Plants*), and Machaelle Small Wright (*Co-Creative Science*). To which I have incorporated William Bloom’s (*Devas, Fairies and Angels: A Modern Approach*) recommendations on receiving plant consciousness - giving free rein to the playfulness of one’s imagination yet at the same time holding an inner stance of mental detachment – as well as my early training as a mental health clinician which was both person-centered and Jungian. I have paid particular attention to practicing Carl Rogers’ definition of empathy: the ability to understand another’s experience in the world, as if you were that other, without ever losing the “as if” sense. In my garden that means finding and holding a listening and perceiving space while working among the plants and paying attention to what comes to mind when I think “what’s next?”

2020 was my second year with the garden and the plants were becoming companions. That spring I wondered “what does the garden need that I can provide or facilitate at this time?” For guidance, I got out a little deck of nature cards with short sayings prepared by Machaelle Small Wright and drew two:

Natural Balance: Discovering and then acting within the laws of nature’s balance
and

True Wisdom: Moving forward in balance from a foundation of knowledge gained
through life experiences

Figuring that I had much to discover about Natural Balance and was only beginning to build a foundation of knowledge through my experiences in the garden, I decided it would be best to ask nature what the garden needed. I asked, listened, and perceived:

The tomatoes need food
The beans are in balance
The potatoes need enrichment
The onions and garlic need time
The flowers need light

So I fed the tomatoes with a bit of organic fertilizer, sat with the beans, hilled up the potatoes with compost, reminded myself to be patient with the onions and garlic, and did a little trimming to make way for the sun’s rays to meet all the flowers.

Green Bean and Garden Sage soon stepped forward as plant teachers, and it has taken me three years to really make their acquaintance. Both began with gifts of small packets of seeds – Green Bean from our public library and Garden Sage from United Plant Savers. Planting the Garden Sage seeds in a bare spot, in a few months I noticed a tiny Sage plant growing beneath the tomatoes. By now, she has grown and spread into her full self, whom I think of as the Châtelaine of my garden. She illuminates the garden with healing, good will, and dignity. Her scientific name, *Salvia officinalis*, is from the Latin *salve* – to be well, in good health, and all right. That same season I planted the Green Bean seeds and within a few days they had sprouted and made their way into the light of day. In a month there were beans to harvest.

In the winter of 2021 – actually while walking in a Children’s Garden with a light snow falling, waiting my turn outside our community center for a first dose vaccination - I began to imagine an arbor of Green Beans, tall and long enough to provide shade and sturdy enough to support the vigor of Green Bean vines. When the community garden was being prepared for Spring, I noticed a set of arches in the discard pile behind the garden shed. Hauling them over to my plots, they created a perfect arbor- eight feet tall, seven feet long, and made of heavy gauge wire. Green Bean (*Phaseolus vulgaris*) obliged by covering the arch with his (for I think of Green Bean as the Green Man personified) beautiful thick vines which yielded nearly fifty pounds of beans over the summer. I would pick beans in the morning and, returning in the cool of the early evening, there were more yet to pick. This abundance brought to mind one of the oldest recorded human tales around– Jack and the Beanstalk. Re-reading Richard Chase’s *The Jack Tales*, I was reminded of how in his Appalachian version of the story Jack made something substantial and marvelous from the small handful of dried beans his mother tossed to him as a play toy.

My garden has grown to four plots, and last spring animals came to raise their young – two tiny rabbits stashed in a fur-lined burrow beneath the Butternut Squash vines and a nest of Field Sparrow eggs in the Lavender. Recently my son joined this community of gardeners. I see him at the Tuesday afternoon garden “work parties” where fellow gardeners mostly keep to themselves though occasionally share vegetables and gardening tips. When he arrives he breathes deeply and announces that now he can relax from his busy day. As I write this we have just finished planting garlic in our respective gardens, a couple of days ahead of Fall’s first frost.

As I finished writing this piece with the edge of Winter approaching the Ohio Valley, I drew two Nature cards to help me understand what I can do next for my garden. The answers:

Process & Procedure: Organization
and
Empathy: Moving forward with care.

Time then to clean and organize my work bucket, finish mulching the garden paths, set the seed catalogs on a shelf, and rest for a while with the knowledge that a new garden season awaits. In mid-winter I will begin to open a space, that I cannot yet perceive, for listening with my garden to see what is to come.

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Katherine Ziff is retired from child mental health clinical practice and from teaching, having recently served on the faculty of the Counseling Program at Wake Forest University. She was born by the ocean in Jacksonville, NC, raised in Winston-Salem, and has lived for 23 years in the foothills of the Appalachian mountains in Athens, Ohio with her husband Matthew. She holds a doctorate in counselor education and is the author of two books published by Ohio University Press: *Asylum on the Hill: History of a Healing Landscape* (2012) and *ArtBreak* (2016) which is a reflection on her work with children with whom she co-created a child-centered group art studio program. Katherine was the recent recipient of the first United Plant Savers Deep Ecology Artist Fellowship. She has also co-curated a year-long exhibition: *Visions of Home: A Celebration of Gullah Art & Culture* for the Wake Forest University Museum of Anthropology (2017). Katherine now focuses upon her garden and her work as a flower essence maker and practitioner, having completed her flower essence training with the International Flower Essence Society. At present she is listening to nature and to the flowers while writing and illustrating a flower essence almanac for her home of southeast Ohio. Katherine is a graduate of The Inner Life of the Child in Nature program, class of 2012.

Held by Earth and High Desert

by

Bill Wallenbeck

As I write on this cool Sun-warming November morning, I do so from a quaint little farm in Zebulon, NC. No vegetable crops here, just the produce of art, joy and the laughter of children playing and creating at Jamie's Art Farm Camp. It was from this beloved haven in February 2020, that I would once again surrender to the spirit of the peregrinati and head into the West in search of transformative, resurrection ground. My posture as "A Do Nothing Still" was shifting.

Rooted still

A sage planted on a free way
 Wisps of wild sweet life catch a passerby
 As rains pour down upon the red clay
 Nostrils flare stopping deadness
 In their spinning tracks
 Where are you from
 How did you get...
 What do you...
 Who are
 You
 ?

Have you ever walked in the western high desert or high plains, where the alchemist awakens the sage with rain, releasing an aromatic elixir so powerful you're unexpectedly brought into the welcome of other realms? Sensuous scents of wet red clay, wild sage, fresh rains and winds all rising up into your breath and nostrils, declaring with their being, "The Glory of God fills the earth!" and often our noses.

Before leaving Zebulon that winter, I put a period to an unclosable poem, "Returning Ever Turning." It's opening lines:

Life is a rhythmic round-a-down
 A hanging helix of eternal now
 Still the lighted corkscrew turn
 Returning ever turning

Dark the curving matrix lights
Stark the wounds and healing nights
Writhing cries of what's not learned
Returning ever turning

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

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

Roaming these sacred grounds I caught my breath, relaxed into my body-self, falling into an authenticity of being that surrounded me: horned toad, sage bush, blue belly fence lizard, arroyo, king snake, wind, jack rabbit, cloud, grasshopper, rain, snow, tadpole, frog, feral cat – all easily only themselves. These wanderings were not a prescribed “practice,” of course, but in a military child’s life of constant dislocation were my most constant belonging, where I found solace, familiar friends, inspiring mystery...a sense of home.

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

Here are two.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Inscendence

Leaving North Carolina that 2020 winter, heading west to Ghost Ranch, Abiquiu, New Mexico, I was a bit anxious about this deep dive into the wilds. Familiar with Animas Valley Institute through the writings of its founder, Bill Plotkin, a long awaited moment, I once again jumped off the written page, out of the mind (so it can seem) and into an embodied adventure of Soulcraft.

It was the Center's "Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice" work that introduced me to Thomas Berry and the The Great Work. At its core, the awakening to the dream of the Earth is a mutually enhancing human-Earth presence.¹ As I understand "inscendence,"² Thomas is creating language to describe a missing and essential element in our awakening. We are being called into mystical journey using re-imagined nature-based practices to reawaken pre-rational, intuitive intelligences present in us and the phenomenal world.

In Plotkin's nature-based map of the human psyche, the West is the direction of change, of the "Dark Muse-Beloved...the dimension of our psyche that revels in night, dreams, destiny, death, and the mysteries and qualities of the underworld."³ I lived much of my adult life in the East where my work and path was out of balance, far too weighted toward the higher, "other-worldly," transcendent realms. Gratefully, my ever westward heart has mirrored a greater enjoining mystery and the descent of the soul.

¹ Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), 106.

² *Ibid.*, 208.

³ Bill Plotkin, *Soulcraft Musings*, Part IX, 250.

Wind and willow, tear and trail
Blow the storm, seek the veil

Feel the earth, touch her thighs
Hold her warmth, kiss her skies

Open your heart, relax your mind
Sweet the marrow, deep the find...

High Desert Refuge

Shortly after my time at Ghost Range, I was held in the welcome of a beautiful pinion pine-juniper woodland in the Datil Mountains just above Datil, New Mexico, population 50 humans, about two hours southwest of Albuquerque. This high desert forest, at close to 8,000 feet and a part of Cibola National Forest and the Mogollon-Datil volcanic field, overlooks the Plains of San Augustin to the southeast.

Meeting Eric Metzler, an Albuquerque physician also in his first Animas program, was one of many synchronicities. On hearing of my attendance at the Living School (Center for Action and Contemplation), Eric commented, "You may know my wife." And so I did. Carolyn, an Episcopal Priest, was on the staff offering spiritual direction to incoming students. As we parted ways, Eric encouraged us to check out their Airbnb property, "Yurt With a View."

On leaving North Carolina, I had given up my apartment and committed to a season of sacred wandering. As the pandemic spread, camping and housing options shrank, and with no home to go home to, you guessed it! Just six weeks after the Soulcraft immersion at Ghost Ranch, there I was, living in a 20 feet round haven. And so my Beloved Muse and I continued our dance in the wild.

With such a great love astir, all was perfect. No plumbing, no power lines, no internet, little cell phone service, a small wood stove for heating in single digit winter temps, no oven, no microwave, cooking on a basecamp style two burner unit, a small propane powered refrigerator, two small solar lights, four oil lamps, an outhouse, shared for a time with a neighbor – a very likeable Brown Desert Rat – all of it a delight. And, yes, three gallon jugs, filled with water from the Metzler well – ice-aged water drawn up from a pristine desert aquifer millions of years old.

The night-dawn-day and day-dusk-night shiftings often held me before uncapturable things: exploding light breaking against the darkened earth, shooting under fading night's white cover, turning to brilliant shades of red and yellow, and shape-shifter clouds, thrilling the imagination, warming the heart.

The distant shimmering desert valley vistas blend into sky scapes of reflected earth tones, ever changing hues of red, blue and white, subtle changing tones of pink and turquoise in sunrise and sunsets. As Sun falls west and Moon rides up the eastern edge of the world, the desert falls into deep shade, juxtaposed against an eventual black sparkling night cover, a milky way necklace of star and planet jewels reachable by the naked eye, all of these inviting me into the imaginal realms.

Throughout the silent hours, discourse abounded with brash raven, ever chatty pinyon jay, drumming flicker, trill and hum of humming bird, cry of eagle, screech of owl, elk a bugling, whimper of roadrunner, shrilling rat, chipping chipmunk, piercing howl of coyote, rattle and hiss of viper or quiet cottontail, hare, mule deer, lizard and so many others. Shy and infrequently seen only on night cameras – javelin and cougar.

The dominant voice here? Ehe, wind, who whirls and races at times 30-40 miles an hour, shaking yurt, soul and forest. On random nights her holy howling rocked and rode us all to the edge of Earth and space...in and out of dreams.

Life's longing within me led to steady practices of journaling, study, *lectio divina*, service, prayer, meditation, silence and solitude layered one upon another, my head always leading the way, followed by a growing heart and, struggling to find its place, body or embodiment. Throughout, what was it about the Celtic stories and myth that I loved so much? I'll tell you, they never lost their feet. Never cut off from their own fleshness, from eros, our sensual, instinctive, pre-rational intelligence, never from Earth, from Mother's skin, her wisdom, her healing community or the holding of the whole. Holy Agape Eros was everywhere, in every realm, in everything. Energy, mercy and love flowed up, down and all around.

“Dark nights of the soul,”⁴ brokenness, shakings, deep drafts of vulnerability, are usually unchosen descents of the soul. Behind the chaos, the terror of imagined loss of control, we can feel we are losing everything. And we are losing: illusion, immature ego protections, terror driven from hiding. And in exchange: breath, humility and a growing compassion. Hidden shadow defenses once needed in childhood sense a possible safe release into light, into a compassion big enough to hold, heal and honor them.

Human-Earth presencing has no circumstantial boundaries. It can be experienced in unchosen moments of loss, or tumult or serendipity, as with Moon and a 9-year-old boy in Vacaville, CA. Fortunately, today, through many teachers and visionaries, platforms have arisen, like the Center, where we are engaging the mysteries of soul through guided human-Earth presencing practices. We can choose to join her in the work of awakening.

In Earth's – Sophia's – merciful brilliance and mutuality, we can come into an awareness that she is here and ever present. It is Mystery guiding us on a path of surrendered falling into a more alive,

⁴ reference to “Dark night of the Soul,” a poem written by John of the Cross.

balanced embodiment as mind-heart-body earthling beings, fully receiving and transmitting life-giving love, an Eros Agape energy.

In the Company of Rabbits

He (or she) became known affectionately as Buddy. A young desert cottontail whom I imagined had been separated from family and safe warrens by the recent heavy rains and considerable water surge.

We met on the road a short way up from the yurt. Instead of the instinctual flight to safety as I approached, he hopped from some high desert Broom Snakeweed down toward the road into a small depression near a 10-12 inch diameter open drain pipe.

Stopping about 8 feet away, I squatted down and in gentle tones greeted him. His movement was like a lost skittish canine, moving a bit toward me, then away again. We took measure of each other for two to three minutes, then slowly rising I continued on, saying as I left, “So glad to meet you. I hope to see you again, maybe on my way back down.”

Forty minutes later as I returned, he hopped into view, as if anticipating my return. So warmed by this little one’s presence, my heart and voice spoke high praises. Wishing Buddy a good night, I retreated to the safety of the yurt. Hearing the coyotes howl that evening raised my thoughts of our shared fragility, impermanence and reciprocity.

The next morning after coffee and quiet, I headed to the outhouse. As it came in view, I noticed some movements by the adjoining woodpile, most likely a grey-footed chipmunk. I opened the outhouse door, turned and lifted the toilet seat lid. And there below, the sweetest little bunny sat staring up at me as if to say, “Pardon me Papa Rabbit, not meaning to interfere at such a private moment, but just saying ‘Good Morning.’”

I gasped, caught completely off guard yet tickled pink. Shortly after, a local resident mentioned something about a rabbit pandemic. Seriously? Or is this a wild tale told in the midst of a world being turned upside down by Covid19 and conspiracy theories? Sure enough, in the digital *New York Times* appeared, “A New Viral Outbreak is Killing Rabbits.” R.H.D.V. Type 2, a deadly and highly contagious virus having begun in New Mexico in March 2020, was spreading throughout the southwest to nearby Texas, Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, California and Mexico.

“The illness is caused by Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease Virus Type 2 and does not affect humans or other animals, only rabbits, hares and perhaps pikas, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. It is not a coronavirus.”⁵

⁵ “A New Viral Outbreak is Killing Rabbits,” May 18, 2020, www.nytimes.com/.../virus-outbreak-rabbits.html

And so it was, cottontail and human, mysteriously together amidst deadly viral outbreaks devastating both of our communities. It was likely that some of Buddy's quirky side was due to the impact of RHDV - if not the illness itself, certainly the abandonment it brought.

There we were, having morning coffee or evening munchies, each with his own favorite grass, well, or greens. Sitting in my camp chair, Buddy nibbled from yards away, creeping ever closer, more nibbling, closer still, making it look like he was just coming for the preferred fare, like we all do. But I think, all the while, it was simply a hunger for the fare of loving company.

Presencing Earth is about this hunger. The deep longing for the experience of what we know in our core to be true – we all belong here, within this mutual love affair, this sacred interdependent entanglement of life, a “communion of subjects.”⁶

Over the summer when a short-term yurt guest came, I went adventuring. On returning from the Gila National Forest and a beautiful and wild trek through Aldo Leopold Wilderness, Buddy was gone. On previous getaways and returns, while initially not visible, Buddy, in a day or two, came out of hiding to greet me. Not this time. Was there a happy reunion with one of his own or did he bring another kind of happy to a hungry neighbor? With sadness, I offered thanks and a farewell, speaking aloud into the forest.

Mystery would send a second companion from the Leporidae family. Days later, walking with Carolyn up the road a bit from the yurt, I stopped as she continued on toward her home. A few yards away, she stopped and gestured to the right. About 15 feet away, a set of independently twitching rabbit ears. Not the bogus 1919 version, these were nature's originals. Carolyn went on, I remained quiet in the middle of the dirt road. This slightly larger Buddy, with a different color pattern, hopped out into the open road and slowly but directly came on, stopping 3-4 feet in front of me. What is going on here? Both delighted and shocked, I introduced myself, mostly with smiles. As I went to squat down, he responded, “Too much, too fast!” and off he scampered. And then, like his predecessor, he made the yurt his daily haunt and we became company to one another.

In the fall, with Covid19 infections slowing, I made plans for a visit with family. I spoke with my cottontail friend, telling him of my plans and that I hoped he too might find some returning family. On my last evening as I went to join him, there off to the left another cottontail (slightly larger, female perhaps) came into view. Happy was I!

Through winter and into spring 2021, sadly, I saw very few desert cottontail friends and one I found dead and frozen in a drain pipe close up against the yurt. In sadness and in honor I released him to Eric, who offered him up to the Ravens.

⁶ Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, 82.

Human-Earth presencing will expand your perimeters, for such is the nature of compassion. And so will grow mutual enhancement, joy, belonging and grief. Entering these mysteries and camaraderie, there is shared joy in the midst of loss, isolation and sadness. It is often that the light of wisdom comes in darker shades and that our most profound longings are most clear in the brilliance of the darkest lights.

Dreams, Moon and Turtle – one of the many gifts in this mutually-enhancing human-rabbit-Earth presencing – brought new insights about my mythopoetic self. Down a mysterious rabbit hole and out I come, Turtle Rabbit! A story for another time.

Closing Images

In a post event reflection to my Soulcraft circle that first spring of the pandemic, I wrote of a rare transmission received from what I refer to as “Here,” as I crossed a street in Southern California about 10 years ago:

“Nearing the sidewalk that spanned above and across the Santa Ana Freeway, ‘the 5,’ one of the busiest roadways in the world, as my foot raised up, time slowed, suspended. I heard a clear inner voice say, ‘Walking, I am the size I am.’”

Having honored and held this without a need to find “the” meaning or somehow explain, I went on to say that I often try too hard. Yah? Flawed, yes, and there flows within a longing, a deep desire for moving forward, for transformation in me, us and our world.

I can rush, push nervously ahead often with little real confidence, trying to fix something, something outside my skill or to do more than is mine to do. The question comes to me, “Can I humbly honor my size? My human two-footed walker size?”

If I do, I find my walking pace, an unhurried, fitting gait, and the confidence to love, an inner authority to be my being in the world. And then, and only then, out of such an embraced human size I will be able to honor your size, each size, your gait, each gait, being grateful for each and every particular liveness, human and more-than-human and for all. In this is my small and rich participation in, with, for and from Life and the Great Turning,⁷ the Great Work.⁸

I am an earth walker, a two-footed perpendicular transverse caught by and between Heaven and Earth, longing to be a fully integrated receiver/transmitter, amplifying the reality of Her Vibrations. In this sacred communion, the intimacy of Earth-human presencing, immersed in the authenticity of the more-than-human, this particularity, this genius of the fullness of each self, can begin to safely, then eagerly, re-emerge.

⁷ “The Great Turning” is a concept of Joanna Macy. See www.joannamacyfilm.org

⁸ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way Into the Future*. New York: Bell Tower, 1999.

“Waiting forward,” is an expression of my contemplative stand in the world. My imagination holds the following image:

I am facing the Sun falling in the West, walking upon Earth, able to see her curvature and her peaceful turning upon her axis. She moves under me, empowering each stride. I am held moving, as it were, in place, with the shadow of night and moonlight upon my back and shoulders.

While immersed in the abounding beauty of this primary revelation text of Creation, I was given another small, lettered text that I had only cursory knowledge of, “Four Quartets” by T.S. Eliot:

“At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is...”⁹

Evenings became *lectio divina* with these two “texts,” sitting outside the yurt, beholding unspeakable beauty of Earth, tears flowed many times as I read aloud for all to hear and join in. It was a symphony of divine orchestration, with Earth composer/director and Eliot soloing with a master poet’s voice. Such a deeply felt participation, a shared knowing, a powerful affirmation of human-Earth bonds.

In this sacred union with the Cosmic Mystery, “we live and move and have our being,”¹⁰ embracing our size and our proper humble place in a nourishing Earth. It is here that we come to a compassion and humility that opens our being in a way that makes room for the other, for each one and their size, their gift of being in the world.

It is here, too, in this deep respect and acknowledgement, that grief and sorrow erupt and find their rightful place in Earth’s healing process. With a depth of mutual love and gratitude, our grieving becomes a process of painful surrender to reality, an emptying that makes room for new creations.

A significant element of the forest’s beauty is its diversity, including many darkened fallen piñon pines and dead bare, “hand of god,” upright junipers. Stressed by drought, forests have become vulnerable to many potential dangers. The bark beetles, normally a stabilizing force of good here, facing the same climate disruptions of food and water shortage, in survival mode are infesting and killing trees at a high rate. The deadly blight spreads. With intuited loving assent, I began an honoring ritual of hand cutting and harvesting, providing me and others with warmth in frigid winter.

In many ways, this was a season of practiced gazing: sitting with my elder Juniper, Keeper of the land she told me, my feet planted upon the desert soil, gazing upon the high desert landscape before

⁹ T.S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton” (Number 1 of “Four Quartets”)

¹⁰ Acts 17:28, Second Testament

us. Held by the invisible tether, we gazed upon rising and setting Suns, Moon, planets and stars, held in Beloved's return gaze, Her presence the still point from which I and all are kept.

Gazing, dreaming, imagining, seeing all spinning round as all does! Earth round her axis, Moon round our Mother, all our neighboring solar system planets along with us spin round the Sun Star in helix like pattern, even as Sun Star so travels spinning round the Milky Way Galaxy Center. All while she with them, millions upon millions of galaxies, move outward from the Center of Creation, Big Bang...or, is it Three Dervish Dancers!

Imagine THAT Center, the Present One, the "I AM THAT I AM," the Un-Nameable, the Mystery... "the Glory of God" filling the Universe, spinning ever out and in and over and through the tapestry of evolutionary movement of life's formings!

Largely untutored beyond the page, happily worn, clumsily I surrender to this walk of aligning of heart-mind-body soul with this Beloved Gaia, this Cosmic Christ, this Mystery!

As all moves and spins, I too come to center, that interior "still point" and find Her there! Our eyes meet as one, we dance and return ever turning at the pace that coexistent loves do. Sacred body-heart-mind aligned with the Divine, the Numinous, in descending and ascending energy flow, we are fully ignited, aflame with life and waiting into next things from the heart of Life!

Sunrise

Alive, She rose, marbled red, oranges and blues ablaze!
God lit my candle! And I had none to light. Generosity abounds!

Each one a holy dervish alight!

So in the still place the fire flames, though the waxen body wanes and
turns and turns, ever down; our centers hold their appointed lights.

Bill Wallenbeck is father of four wonderful children – Amy, Melissa, Luke and Ben – and proud "Papa" of two precious grandchildren, Wren and Calder. A steady and irresistible call, after 28 years in pastoral ministry, led into a growing simplicity and exploration of what it is to be human, fully alive, compassionate and participating in the sacred communion of life. Bill is a graduate of The Living School at the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He has served on the Educator Council of the Center and is a graduate of the Inner Life of the Child in Nature Program, class of 2014.



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