



Chrysalis

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The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World*

Dear Reader,

We always pay close attention when life comes full circle at the Center. In 1995, Thomas Berry retired to the foothills of North Carolina to be near his family and the land he had known intimately as a child. It was in the foothills that eleven-year-old Thomas Berry experienced a moment of grace in a meadow near his home that became a touchstone for his life and work. It was in the foothills that the seeds of his vision for a sacred earth community were sown. And it was to the foothills that he returned to live the last fourteen years of his life. Thomas was fond of telling us that at the end of life, there seems to be a desire to return to our beginnings.

In this return to his beginnings, we were graced by Thomas Berry's presence as we formed a work for children deeply rooted in his meadow across the creek experience. In his last year, we were graced by these words: "The Center is a perfect context for the continuity of this work with children and the sacred. It has brought joy in the last years of my life, for the children have always been closest to my heart."

During the earliest years of our work we were also blessed by the presence of an intern, Jessie Towle, who had been studying at Genesis Farm with Miriam McGillis in New Jersey, a Center formed around Thomas Berry's vision. Jessie came to live and work with us for several years as she completed a BA in Sustainable Community Development with an emphasis on Ecopsychology from Prescott College in Arizona. During these years with the Center, Jessie became a soul mate of Thomas Berry, spending many hours in conversation with him, as she worked with us at Timberlake Earth Sanctuary. And in 2006, Jessie wrote a beautiful piece for *Chrysalis*, entitled "A Sense of the Sacred in Education,"¹ in which she described the formation of a charter school near Genesis Farm called the Ridge and Valley Charter School.

Ten years later, Jessie joined the faculty of this school and in 2019, with other faculty members of Ridge and Valley, became a member of the Center's Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice program, 2019-2022. This has turned out to be a remarkable "full circle" linking, through Jessie, of two Thomas Berry inspired initiatives devoted to children.

¹ Jessica Towle, "A Sense of the Sacred in Education" (*Chrysalis*, Fall 2006), 7-15.



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Back in 2006, Jessie gave us the following picture
of the formation of Ridge and Valley School:

In rural New Jersey...a group of dedicated
parents and community board members have
worked diligently for the past six years to
create a school for children that reflects the
deeper consciousness that they believe is
necessary for moving into the future in a
"mutually enhancing" way. The publicly
funded Ridge and Valley Charter School,
named after the bioregion it dwells in, opened
its doors in 2004 to the first group of K-8
students. Ridge and Valley has been greatly
influenced by the work of Thomas Berry and
Brian Swimme, as well as Genesis Farm, a
center for Earth Literacy, which many of the
parents and board members have been
connected to and inspired by.

The charter school was developed with
Earth Literacy as its core value. Earth Literacy,
as described by Miriam McGillis, founder of
Genesis Farm and former board member of
the charter school, is the idea of "enabling an
education that helps people understand that
they are embedded within and dependent on
the whole evolving universe in its inner
spiritual capacity, as well as its outer physical
process."² She goes on to explain that "you can
have wonderful environmental education
where new awareness and skills are gained, but
that is not Earth Literacy."³ Earth Literacy
marks not only the physical evolution of the
universe, but the psychic evolution as well. I
asked Miriam how the term 'Earth Literacy'
came into being. She told me the story of
how, in the late 1980s, Genesis Farm hosted a
group of parents who wanted to start a charter

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

³ Ibid.

school. Even back then the idea lived to have a charter school that could teach children through a similar context in which adults were educated at Genesis Farm. At that time, Thomas Berry was a regular presence at Genesis Farm. He came often to give talks to the community on various subjects. On this particular occasion, he was talking with this group of parents about their charter school idea, when he commented, "Children are no longer earth literate. They don't know who they are. They don't know where they are in the universe."⁴ Miriam remembers that moment well. The thought of Earth Literacy struck a chord with her and she called the next course she taught at the farm "Earth Literacy." It is this idea of perpetuating Earth Literacy that helped create the inception of the charter school and is the primary context out of which the children begin to understand the world they live in.⁵

And here we are, coming full circle more than sixteen years after "A Sense of the Sacred in Education" was written, with an issue of *Chrysalis* featuring three Ridge and Valley teachers who have been part of our Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice program. In the pieces that follow, you will be brought into the inner landscape of their work with the children at Ridge and Valley Charter School:

"Deeper Knowing" by Ieva Alverson

"The Grounding Nature of Sit Spots" by Alyssa Garner

"Tending the Future" by Jessica Towle Krause

We have now forged a bond of intimacy between the Center and Ridge and Valley, all part of Thomas Berry's vision for one sacred earth community.

Pax Gaia,



Peggy Whalen-Levitt, Director

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Jessica Towle, "A Sense of the Sacred in Education" (*Chrysalis*, Fall 2006), 12-13.

Deeper Knowing

by

Ieva Alverson



“The deepening of the personal center becomes the deepening of the capacity for communion. Since all things gravitate toward each other, a person only has to permit inner movements of his own being to establish his universal presence to all the earth.”¹

~ Thomas Berry

Dear Thomas Berry,

It has been so nice to meet you through your writings. I am sitting by a sibling of your cherished Great Red Oak at Riverdale, who is deepening roots at a school whose foundational principles were built upon your teachings and knowings.

¹ Thomas Berry, “Contemplation and the World Order,” 11 (a paper available on the Thomas Berry Foundation website at http://thomasberry.org/wp-content/uploads/Berry_Contemplation_and_world_order.pdf)

This school holds the possibility of inner movement through its unconventionality. Since 2004, quite a few children have moved through this land and hold memories of running down the hill to the Lower Meadow, gathering autumn olives in Autumn Olive land, sitting and listening to each others' "check-ins" during daily Circle practice, sharing cornbread from fresh ground corn grown down the road, starting seeds in the closet under grow lights or winter beds to prepare for planting, planting and harvesting garlic, and opening to the four directions sequence as a school with the waking sun.

These are only a few rhythms of what the school day "looks like." Our daily life begins with arrival. Children are dropped off at the deck and walk to their respective classrooms named after the parts of the universe, from small to large: Stardust K/1, Nova 2/3, Constellation 4/5, or Galaxy 6/7. The school is shaped like a half moon and the back of most classrooms face what we call "The Octagon." This is a natural setting for meeting, learning, and playing. The school property is about 18 acres.



The Octagon Weekly Assembly, 2022

One of the goals of the school is for Earth to serve as the primary teacher. When put into practice, this has been one of our biggest challenges and awakenings. My own practice has taken about 10 years to infuse and intend in this way.

I'd like to share with you a little of my daily practice and how it trickles into the daily life of the children I spend time with. I am discovering my inner movements. Part of my practice is shifting language from industrious to harmonious. I discern the intent behind my actions. For example, what do I mean when I... "take" a walk, or "explore" a habitat, or "show" children types of leaves. These are things "to do." Within these activities, deeper knowings and experiences are accessible.

The first connection for me has been the practice of honorable harvest. Children are hands on. I realized there is space and time *before* they get their “hands on” berries, dandelions, spruce tips, frogs, spiders, and so on. This space has proven to be sacred and amazing.

I spent time contemplating how nature’s innate intelligence reflects a child’s true nature. How can we begin to practice understanding nature as a communion of subjects? What offerings does chickweed hold for the human? Instead of identifying and gathering, we held more space between identifying and gathering the harvest. If the harvest was to occur at all. First, we spent time practicing the concept of honorable harvest, until this practice becomes a way of life.

Robin Wall Kimmerer writes, “*The canon of indigenous principles that govern the exchange of life for life is known as the Honorable Harvest. They are “rules” of sorts that govern our taking, so that the world is as rich for the seventh generation as it is for us. The Honorable Harvest, a practice both ancient and urgent, applies to every exchange between people and the Earth. Its protocol is not written down, but if it were, it would look something like this:*

*Ask permission of the ones whose lives you seek.
Abide by the answer.
Never take the first. Never take the last.
Harvest in a way that minimizes harm.
Take only what you need and leave some for others.
Use everything that you take.
Take only that which is given to you.
Share it, as the Earth has shared with you.
Be grateful.
Reciprocate the gift.
Sustain the ones who sustain you, and the Earth will last forever.”²*

Upon the first chickweed and purple dead nettle growths in spring, we ventured to notice where they live on the land. Once identified, we paused, circled around and greeted the annual arrival - Welcome Chickweed! After we greet Chickweed, we take another pause to notice. Notice where it’s growing, what the air and soil temperature feels like, who is growing or moving around Chickweed? Next, we help lead the children into the questions they can’t see the answers to. How did Chickweed know when to grow? Where’s the seed? Between the questions, there is silence. Within the silence I listen, and am still learning to listen to Chickweed’s answers. This is the work, the Great Work your life’s writing offers to the next generation. Honorable Harvest shifts perspective.

This is also the shift in teaching. Within the process of creating and developing relationships with Earth’s living beings, children’s awareness changes towards what they spend time learning about. Also how they approach and interact with Chickweed or an Autumn Olive Tree. Using new

² Robin Wall Kimmerer, “The Honorable Harvest” (*YES Magazine*, Winter 2016).

language has been an adjustment, a new mindset to really think about what the feeling is behind the words I am choosing. When we relate, we care, and our hearts open.

Honorable Harvest has become a daily practice for me, which has shifted my language and attitude at school. Relationships create connection. When a child acknowledges, with words or in their mind, Dandelion's existence as part of the community, the shift in vibration happens, energy is exchanged. The way my class plays and interacts in the fields and meadows carries a gentle flow that wasn't visible two years ago.

Honoring all harvests,

Ieva



The garlic fields in the Upper Meadow of Ridge and Valley Charter School

Ieva Alverson lives in northwestern NJ. Her life is full of wondering and wandering. She believes conflict, contrast and silence hold the answers to questions and life's purpose. She holds an MA in Special Education from New Jersey City University (2002) and a BA in Elementary Education from Caldwell College (1996). Ieva is in her 24th year in elementary education. Currently she fills a guide/teacher position at the Ridge and Valley Charter School (since 2007). The school's mission is to provide children with an education for a hopeful, sustainable future and is inspired by cultural historian Thomas Berry and evolutionary cosmologist Brian Swimme, Genesis Farm co-founder Miriam McGillis, parents, and many, many others. The school's vision of elementary education is to empower children to stewardship based on a deep love of the earth and respect for the planet's systems and interconnectedness.

The Grounding Nature of Sit Spots

by

Alyssa Garner

“Sit down and listen to the Earth. What do you notice? What do you feel?” I have been saying these words to my young students each week as part of our Sit Spot ritual for many years, but not until recently have I begun to realize the importance and significance of the simple routines and rhythms that are an essential part of my work with the students.

When I first decided to be a part of the Inner Life of the Child in Nature class, I wasn't sure where my journey would take me. I came into the program with an open mind, ready to work on my own personal practice in order to deepen my practices with the children. As an educator of kindergarten and first grade students at a school focused on Earth Literacy, I was hoping to get some new ideas and tools to deepen my students' connections with the Earth. Although I have learned and implemented many specific practices into my personal life and work with the children, what I have gravitated towards the most is reflecting on and documenting our existing practice of weekly Sit Spots.

When I traveled to North Carolina for our first retreat together, it was not only my first trip to Timberlake Earth Sanctuary but also my first trip away from my two young children. My time walking alone on the land felt powerful, because I was able to intimately connect to the land in a way that was typically not possible with my two kids tagging along. I focused on my own intimate experiences and let the Earth guide me throughout the day. I returned to New Jersey with a newfound inspiration to develop a practice for myself, something I had not prioritized in my life as a mother. Throughout the winter, I managed to develop a practice during my school day where I truly felt like in short moments I was able to connect to the land. Unfortunately my routine of a practice came to an abrupt halt in the spring of 2020 when schools closed due to the Covid-19 Pandemic.

In my application for the Inner Life program I wrote, “I am open to an unknown change, learning about things I don't even know about now, and welcoming the uncertainty that comes...” I had no idea about the uncertainty that I was about to face over the coming years. The closing of schools and the transition to blended learning pushed me to grow and change and face constant uncertainty that continues even today. For the 2020-2021 school year, in the moment, I felt like I was barely scraping by. How could I think about developing a practice with children while learning to navigate this new way of schooling? Masks, social distancing, zoom calls, remote learning – all of these foreign terms soon became my everyday lexicon. Now reflecting on this year of uncertainty, I realize how much I grew and was able to develop and even deepen my practices with the children.

As guides of young children, we were tasked with developing curriculum that simultaneously could be implemented in an in-person, fully outdoor school setting and at home with varying

degrees of parental support. Sit spots became an anchor for my students and me. As students transitioned in and out of in-person schooling, everyone was able to stop for ten minutes out of each week to simply be present with the Earth. The first grade students in my class for that school year were the same group of kindergarteners I had guided the year before. They were familiar with sit spots and had worked with me to develop a strong, weekly practice the year before. In their first grade year, I provided prompts for each week of sit spots and the students journaled through words and pictures to document their journeys. Some of these prompts included:

- “What story is happening at your sit spot today? Can you imagine what the beings are doing at your sit spot? Is an ant searching for food? Is a flower reaching for the sun? Tell the story of your sit spot today.”
- “Look as far away from you as you can. What do you notice that is far away? How does that make you feel?”
- “Spend the first minute or two at your sit spot with your eyes closed. Then open your eyes. What is the first thing that you see? How did you feel with your eyes closed?”
- “Gratitude for your sit spot. While at your sit spot today, think about all the things that you are grateful for. What gifts has your spot given to you? How have you grown while sitting in your sit spot?”

The students deepened their awareness skills and mindfulness throughout the fall. As we approached winter, the students were beginning a new experience to prepare for a Council of All Beings. I incorporated some of the practices from the Center for Education, Imagination, and the Natural World such as Deep Noticing, Trail of Beauty, Listening and Beholding as part of the preparatory work. The children each listened closely to the Earth to find a being from the bioregion that was speaking to them and they would then represent at the Council of All Beings. At this point in the year, the whole class was now working from home, but the children continued their sit spots as they were reflecting on the beings that were speaking to them. Through their sit spots and other practices, each student was able to choose a being. As we continued sit spots throughout the spring, we worked on noticing our being or imagining what our being might be doing if they were there. We became our beings and embodied the spirits of our beings through our sit spots and other activities throughout the day. In the spring of 2021, the children mostly returned to in-person learning and were nearing the end of our two years together. Our weekly sit spots became second nature and we let go of some of the prompting and allowed for more freedom to notice, feel, and be present with the Earth. The year was full of uncertainty and the challenges of teaching during a pandemic seemed insurmountable at times, but we had finally made it to the end and it felt like a sigh of relief for summer to arrive.

Looking forward to a summer reprieve, I struggled to think of my “practice” for the Inner Life course. What do I need? What can I offer? How can I get the most out of this course? I racked my brain for things to do. What can I fit in my schedule? As I spent time reflecting on what would be the right practice for me, I kept thinking about our first couple of gatherings together at Timberlake.

Everyone was so eager to hear about the work that we already do at our school. How do we teach the children to be present with the Earth? How do we incorporate Earth Literacy into a public school setting? What seemed ordinary practice to me seemed fascinating to others. When I was at Timberlake, I felt proud of my work with the children and was able to realize how special it is. I soon realized that refining my practice, reflecting upon my work, and sharing it with others may be the right practice for me. Instead of coming up with something completely new, why not work on documenting the great work that we already do? With that in mind, I wanted to focus on something concrete within our whole curriculum framework. I could have chosen from numerous school activities that would all fit within the scope of the Inner Life course, but Sit Spots was calling to me.

The way time passes is an enigma to me, but somehow we returned to school in the fall of 2021, and it almost felt back to normal. There was a fresh group of starry-eyed kindergarteners ready to learn and experience school for the first time. With high expectations for documenting the process of Sit Spots, I welcomed these tiny humans to our school community. Each year when I loop back to kindergarten after teaching first grade, I forget how much support the children need. From zipping coats to tying shoes, from sharing resources to sharing feelings, initiating our sit spots experiences took a back seat. Our Zoom calls for the Inner Life were a good reminder for me to get to work. Slowly but surely I began to introduce Sit Spots to the children, but this time I did it with more intention, reflecting on how I wanted to document this experience for myself, my colleagues, and anyone else who may be interested.

The first step for us was to choose our spot. Although sit spots can be done anywhere, having a consistent spot in nature helps the children develop a connection to their place. They notice more subtle changes and get to know the beings around them. We chose a place called “The Four Directions” where we weren’t too close to a road but also had plenty of room to spread out to our own private spaces. I introduced Sit Spots to the kids using the stories from *Kamana for Kids, Book One: Awareness*.¹ Using the stories about Running Deer and Moon Bird who find their own secret spot, the students learn awareness skills (Owl Eyes, Deer Ears, Raccoon Touch, and Dog Nose). This year in addition to asking the children to share what they noticed and felt at their Sit Spot each week, I added an additional prompt to “Listen closely at your Sit Spot. What message do you hear from the Earth?” Some children share what they notice with their senses while others listen deeply to the messages that the Earth is sharing and have profound experiences.

Each week our Sit Spot routine includes a few different elements:

- We begin by standing in a circle and singing an adaptation of the song “Place of Power.”²
- After the song, we lower a veil of silence. We reach up to the sky and pretend to pull down a curtain all the way to the ground.
- After the curtain touches the ground, we quietly walk to our spots, fox-walking to try to make as little noise as possible.

¹ Bob Repoly and Barbara English, *Kamana for Kids, Book One: Awareness* (Duvall, WA: Wilderness Awareness School, 2009).

² Anne Hill, “Place of Power” in *Circle Round and Sing* (Serpentine Music, 2006).

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- At our sit spots, we encourage the children to make sure they are faced away from the group, sit or lay down, and try to stay quiet. When we first do sit spots, we set a timer for around seven minutes. As the year progresses, we slowly increase the time until it reaches ten minutes or longer.
 - At the end of the sit spot, I ring the chimes two times and then begin to bang a drum slowly to indicate that everyone should return to the center in a circle.
 - Once in a circle, we lift up the veil of silence by reaching down to the ground and raising the imaginary curtain back up. At this point, the children move into a circle and begin to share their experiences.
 - Each child takes a turn sharing what they noticed, felt, or any messages from the Earth. Afterward, they each draw a picture of their experience in their special sit spot journal, and I record what they say to go with their drawings.

Although it took me a while to get started setting up the Sit Spot routine with my students this year, by the end of autumn, I had managed to create a weekly Sit Spot routine. On weeks when we were unable to have Sit Spots, the children asked for it and could feel its absence. When we, once again, had to pivot to remote learning due to Covid, the children were able to share their Sit Spot routine with their families at home. This year has also been different than other years in the past in that we have been getting many new students throughout the year. Each time a new student enters our class, they seem to immediately join in with our Sit Spot routines with the helpful guidance of their classmates.

Throughout the past three years there have been many inconsistencies in the lives of everyone, including these young children. To be able to provide them with the consistency of a Sit Spot routine, while also connecting them to nature has brought me joy and satisfaction. The children feel confident and comfortable when entering into silence. They notice beings in the natural world that they may otherwise overlook. They are able to embody the Earth and hear the messages that the Earth is sharing with them. And now, with their solid foundation of a Sit Spot routine, I am looking forward to guiding these children again next year to deepen their connections.

Sit Spots are currently a consistent routine during the students' first two years at our school. As I move forward, I hope to share the importance of Sit Spots with the rest of the school and encourage other class groups to develop a weekly Sit Spot routine. Doing Sit Spots throughout their nine years at the school could instill a lifelong practice of being with the Earth. The children would be able to go deeper and further develop their practices even more. Personally I hope to continue to reflect on Sit Spots and work with my colleagues to refine and improve my work as a teacher. And perhaps some people reading this in the future will feel inspired to begin their own Sit Spot practices for themselves or with their own groups of children.

Alyssa Garner has been a Guide at Ridge and Valley Charter School in Blirstown, NJ since 2011. Earlier in her career, Alyssa led outdoor adventure trips for students in Maryland, worked as an environmental educator at Shaver's Creek Environmental Center, and was a Park Ranger in the Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area. Passionate about service to others, Alyssa worked as a teacher trainer focusing on literacy development during her tour in the Peace Corps in the South Pacific nation of Vanuatu. Alyssa enjoys camping, hiking, and introducing her two young children to the wonders of the natural world.

Tending the Future

by

Jessica Towle Krause

Part One – Inside of Me

Somewhere inside of me,
I can sense.
the incomprehensible, wholeness of things.

The deep abiding elegance, and terror
of being a part of this life.

This unique planet...
just a tiny spec in the cosmos.

I am listening...
Tenaciously, tending the image of a future
of which I will not be a part.
that I don't belong to.

Still...I am here now...
and the story is telling itself,
unfolding each second.

The way forward needs tending.
For the children.

To climb, or clamber
through.

Tending.

My practice over the last three years has simply been to hold a door open to the numinous. To keep my glance poised in such a way that I can see the ripples in the still water, trusting the water didn't move itself.

My interests have always been in the wild and the sacred. And, like many before me, I have been trying to expand the possibility of humans experiencing deep reverent moments in nature.

This inner orientation has been inherent in me for as long as I can recall. While I have never tried to say what it is, I have always been searching for ways to help that quality incarnate, or be contained. Like most wild and powerful beings, the numinous does not like to be held or forced. It visits in glimpses. Its ways are mysterious and difficult to hold.

I imagine we as people prepare rituals in order to provide habitats for that presence; to tend reverence, to lure it in, and coax it to stay longer, or even just to call it in at will. The tending of that force that has guided humans to become priestesses, priests, shamans, sadhus, or medicine people, is a way of constantly trying to hold that presence and share it with others. What I know is that this way of knowing has been deep within me for as long as I can remember.

It wasn't until I met Thomas Berry that I took these thoughts seriously. He recognized who I was on a very deep level. He was a soul friend for me. He was 83 and I was 20. He helped me put a container around my perceptions, challenged me to deepen my understanding and encouraged me to develop my knowledge.

I had so many very deep and sincere questions. Often, when I was able to hold the door to the numinous open, I found myself in deep rapport and “communion” with other beings. Snakes, bears, turtles, a jaguar. What was most fascinating to me was that aside from sharing a physical space with other beings, we were sharing an inner space – a space that I didn't necessarily know how to get to without grace, but often found other beings arriving there too. Often, they were just as startled as I was to realize we could share a deep interior space. One time I recognized that the animal itself was having a numinous experience also, it wasn't just mine. That really shifted my understanding. These experiences were not just typical animal encounters with the wild, but experiences of truly sharing inner reverence together.

These experiences have stayed with me and led me to wonder if it was possible to somehow guide others to experience the natural world in ways that surpass our normal waking consciousness. I challenge myself often to maintain that deep connection amidst raising a family, teaching, and trying to survive.

Can certain experiences or rituals actually help tend that force within us? If so, can that force be maintained for others to enter into? Can we work with the living earth to help bring out that force within it too?

I have been exploring ways to create an experience for an intangible thing like awe or reverence with the natural world to land in the hearts and minds of others. I think there is truly a great spirit in all things, but what is needed is an inner orientation to be able to see it. It is an inner poise or posture. A way you position yourself.

I have learned that I have not only been creating the rituals for myself so that I can hold the door open for myself, but *also* so that others can be, or not be, resonant with these rituals as the movements, motions and texts are available. What makes things stir is when the inner practice of the

practitioner is salient and able to communicate. That's what holds the door open. The rituals are guidelines, signposts, reminders, outcroppings, etc. To develop inner presence you need strength of will, contemplative practice, connection.

The reason it is not easy is because it is powerful. The veils that hide the numinous are important, and lifting the veils every once in a while to see what is there is important. When you lift the veils, it can be illuminating and terrifying.

This way of being is not dependent on, nor even interested in language, so to use language to guide can often be arbitrary and more confusing. The eyes speak the language. I believe there are symbolic gestures, movements, images, and sometimes expansive words, in the right order, that open a door...it requires more than looking at...it requires seeing into.

Part Two – The Practice: Council of All Beings

So this brings me back to the practices I am working on. I am working on many practices that are evocatory. Practices that evoke a sense of the sacred. The practice that I will describe here involves a well known ecological ritual developed by Joanna Macy and John Seed called the “Council of All Beings.”¹ I have worked with this practice as a container that has the potential to open the door to the numinous. Currently, I work at Ridge and Valley Charter school. I teach 5-7 year olds. I have adapted this process to be an 8-week long program that is part of my first grade curriculum and adapts to the New Jersey core curriculum standards.

When I work with children in the natural world, my effort is to engage them in experiences where they may enter into the extraordinary depth of life. My goal is a true and deep connection. I want to offer them a way to inhabit their connection. I offer them ways to hold their minds so their gaze can move from their own self to that of the other. That gaze opens the door to the numinous. To really see into.

The first part of my work is setting the tone for what the Council of All Beings is. This is the most important part of the work. I speak of it in a reverent way, as an invitation to participate in a grand experience. I explain to the children that we are going to have a Council in the forest in a few weeks, and that we are being asked to speak on behalf of another being. That being could be an animal, plant, fungi, reptile, amphibian, mammal, or any other being that we share this earth with. I tell them that the important part is that we are able to represent and speak for that being at the Council.

The other part is that I share with them the importance of speaking for a being who lives among them in their bioregion. I tell them that they must spend a long time listening inside themselves to hear the voice of the beings that would like to be spoken for. I remind them that there are many ways to figure out which being needs its voice heard. We practice sit-spots every week. I remind them that their being could visit them at their sit-spot. Or they may imagine or dream about their being. They may find feathers or other offerings from their being. They may just feel close to a

¹ John Seed, Joanna Macy, Pat Fleming and Arne Naess, *Thinking Like a Mountain: Towards a Council of All Beings* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Catalyst Book, 2007).

particular being. Either way they have to take a week or two before they are allowed to share who their being is. Once they have come up with ideas, I ask them to go to their sit-spot to really sit with the idea.

This part of the work is done during our science, or KLE (key learning experience) portion of the day. Once the decision has been made, I ask the children to please stay with that being. Once they have committed to that particular one, they must stick with it.

This time of the year lines up with our non-fiction units in reading and writing. I call upon my local librarian and set up a field trip to the library. She blocks off time for us and culls books on the chosen beings in the library and puts them in a room. She then meets with them and introduces the topic of non-fiction books and shares with them how to find books and do research.

The children spend a few days studying their beings and reading what they can at six and seven-years-old. Later in the week, 6th and 7th grade students mentor the children in how to do research. They help them focus on important things to know about their being and teach them how to take notes. They help the children discover all sorts of information on their being. How it lives, what it needs to survive, etc.

After they study, they begin writing their first non-fiction chapter book about their being. They write All about it. The final chapter is “what my being wants to say.” During this process of writing chapter books, they also begin designing masks of their being. They make simple sketches at first and then develop more elaborate plans, including size and materials. Myself and others help them build their masks out of paper mache and various other materials, depending on who their being is. This can take several weeks, depending on how elaborate the masks are.

Then it is time to decide where the Council will be held. I always have a general idea of where the location will be in mind. I take the children on several field trips to explore the land and different locations, and have them consider what kind of place will be special for the other beings to gather. Once we have narrowed it down to a couple of locations, the children decide by consensus circle which location it will be (a practice they are used to doing at our school). They express their reasons and come up with a decision.

Then I prepare that particular land with important intentions, prayers, and props to help the children move into that ritual space, where they can be invited to move just beyond themselves.

Some props that I use for this age group have held deep significance and have helped hold the container.

The Mirror

An outdoor mirror so they can view their original self in the woods before putting on the mask.

The Bridge Between Worlds

Once they have looked in the mirror, they put on their mask and look again, acknowledging their commitment to speaking on behalf of the other. Then they cross a bridge between worlds. I tell them that once they are on the other side they enter their being’s life so they can speak for it.

There is a drum beating as they cross.

Sign – Welcome to the Council of All Beings

Once on the other side of the bridge, they get to a sign that welcomes them to the Council. They walk in quietly and find their seat with their being's name painted on it on a tree cookie.

When they arrive, the human, the original human, is seated already waiting for them. This person is usually masked and carrying an energy of seriousness, and significance.

I welcome all of the beings to the circle and to our Council. I turn my attention to the human representative and tell them that we are gathered in this place to share some of our wisdom and some of our concerns with them. I ask the human if they are willing to listen very carefully to the voices of the beings gathered, and to share those concerns with the rest of the humans.



I ask everyone to then imagine the ancestors of their beings sitting with them. I also ask them to imagine the future ones of their beings sitting with them, so that past and future voices can be considered.

Then, I invite the “beings” to say their name into the circle. Each child is welcomed by the group. For example, they might say, “I am Fern, and I speak for all of the fern beings.” The rest of the children would respond, “Welcome Fern!” This would go around until each being has introduced themselves.

Following the introduction we would have two rounds. For example, in the first round, a child

that too many humans are picking me for decoration. Can you please ask them to stop?” The human might respond by saying, “I hear you Fern, thank you for sharing. I will tell the other humans.” The child would place a rock into the hands of the human while sharing their grief/concern. This gives a tangible presence for the child to hold. It also gives them a structure to hand over their concerns.

In the younger grades, we never teach children about the degradation of the natural world. So, their concerns will vary enormously based on the type of information they have been exposed to.

After each child has shared their concerns, a song is sung, or smudge is burned, or some type of acknowledgement is made. We then move to the next round of gifts.

Each child has a stone or shell that they walk up and give to the human whenever they feel called. They share with the human the gift they will offer. For example, Fern might say, “Human, I have been around for millions of years. I am one of the oldest inhabitants of this planet. I offer you the gift of stability, and perseverance over time, so that you may continue to live and grow.” Again, children will have extraordinary and surprising things to say as they give the human their shell or stone.



After every child/being has gone, the Council is thanked for their attending and sharing their voices. A Conch shell is blown, or drum, or chime to signify the ending. The children exit, and cross

back over the bridge, and return to being children. We then play outside and drink tea from the local plants. I don't try to process the experience with them or ask for reflections for at least a week.

Part Three – Thoughts From the Children²

“A Council of All Beings is when people speak for their animals because their animals chose them. I learned that one of the bear's gifts to humans is medicine. I think black bear chose me because we both like eating salmon and berries. Black bear wants me to always remember its strong spirit. The most special part of all of this was when we got to look in the mirror at the face we were born with, but it was outside and it was very colorful in different directions.”

~ Noah, age 6

“The Council of All Beings is that you choose an animal that you study about and you learn. If you don't know much about it then you maybe can come to Ridge and Valley Charter School to learn more. We choose a being that we see and know. I chose a rabbit because two days ago I heard a rabbit crossing by my house. We said our concern and we said our gifts. I shared my gift of energy that is inside of me to hop and run. The best part was to cross the bridge between worlds. One side was the human world and the other side was the animal world. We looked into a mirror and pulled down our paper mache masks and quietly waited for the others. We waited in the forest of Ancestors. We touched our hands to the earth to bring the ancestors of our species, then we brought our hands to the sky and thought about the future ones too. I definitely enjoyed this and liked to wear my mask.”

~ Wrenn, age 7

“The Council of All Beings is when we gather around at Genesis Farm with Sr. Miriam and we talk about our creature. When we went there we gave her a stone when we shared our gift and our concerns. At the end we had tea with her. We picked a creature. Mine was a hummingbird and I spoke for it because it's my favorite creature. It's serious, it's not like playing around or anything. The most important part was meeting with Sr. Miriam and having tea because we got to harvest all of the plants and I think the plants really like being picked and used.

~ Ivy, age 7

“The Council of All Beings is when you show up to Sr. Miriam's as a being in your bio-region, and share your gifts and concerns. Sr. Miriam is the girl that speaks to all animals and she cares about all animals so she likes to know what they think about. I was a snowy owl because I see them when they migrate through, and I think they chose me. The bio-region is the world where you live. We did research in books and our seventh grade partner helped us”

~ Miranda, age 6

² We are grateful to these children for giving us permission to include their reflections.



"The Council of All Beings is something which an animal chose us, and we speak for our animals. We hear their concerns, and we also hear what their gifts are. I will always now speak for raccoon, for the rest of my life, and that won't ever fade away. I won't forget, because I love it. The reason I chose raccoon is because I was dreaming about raccoon, I was seeing them on the side of the road. Its spirit was talking to me. My dad started seeing them too. My mom doesn't like them though. She only likes the baby ones. The most special part of the whole thing was getting to do the Council and giving the gifts to the Human."

~ Indira, age 7

"The Council of All Beings is this thing where you pick an animal in your bio-region, and you say something that you are happy or sad that is going on in your bio-region. You say it from your animal's voice. For example the opossum wants people to leave bugs on their lawns so he can eat them. The opossum doesn't want bug spray on lawns either, that makes them in danger. They eat ticks so they are good to have around. If there is not enough opossum they will be gone, and unless we make a time machine, they just might not come back. I don't know if scientists can figure out a time machine. The most special part of the Council was getting to know my animal."

~ Henry, age 7

"The Council of All Beings is when a being chooses you. You look in a mirror as yourself, but then you pull down your mask and see yourself as that being. Then, you walk across the bridge. The Council is important because we want people to know that other beings are important, and they need trees and things to live. I was able to speak for my being. I loved talking to Sr. Miriam. Making my mask was challenging because I made a mask and didn't like it, so

I had to make another one. An important moment for me was when I pulled down my mask because it felt so magical. I am always going to remember my mask, and what I said to Sr. Miriam. My being's gift is to eat mice, because there would be too many if I didn't eat them. I told the Human they should leave the dirt as it is, no concrete, because I need the earth to live. You learn that you are not just one person, you are a bunch of creatures, they are inside of you."

~ Finn, age 7



"The Council of All Beings is where you make a mask for the animal that chooses you, and you speak for your animal. I learned that we have to take care of the earth. We need to stop doing things if they are not good. I chose muskrat because it was running across my yard and it saw me and nodded its head, we have the same personality. It was magical. I felt like I chose it, and it chose me. Muskrat wants me to remember that I did the right thing. When you speak up for another, it's the right thing. I was visioning my animal in my mind. It was telling me things, things it wanted me to say for it. The most special part was talking to the Human. She supported us. She was listening when all of the animals were talking about what they needed. When I grow up I want to be someone who goes into the wild and helps with animals."

~ Abby, age 7

"The Council of All Beings is when you speak for your being. We speak for them because they do not speak human. We have the power to speak human. I learned that you should respect your being because they are alive, and you are too, and you should help each other. I dreamed that the eagle chased me. I knew it wanted me to speak for it in my dream. I saw it and it flew around next to me and my goat. I heard someone say "goodbye." The eagle wanted me to remember that moment in the dream. It chose me because I am smart, like it. Giving our gifts to the Human was the most special part of everything."

~ Caliah, age 7

“The Council of All Beings is when you listen really deeply, and a being picks you. You spend a lot of time making a mask, and you go somewhere really special, and you cross a bridge between worlds, and then you go to a place and someone is there to listen while you are speaking for that creature. I was the Ridge and Valley bio-region. I felt like it asked me to speak for it. Crossing the bridge felt magical, and I felt that once I crossed it I was my being. I learned that any being can call to you if you listen very deeply.”

~ Djuna, age 7

“The Council is a ceremony where we have a being that chose us and it speaks for us and we speak for it. We have a Council where we tell our gifts and what we need to live. We tell the Human so we can warn them what we want them to be thinking about. What you do is you have to listen very closely to nature, and you see if something keeps showing up. I chose duck because whenever I go to the river with my dad I always see them swimming. When I am at the Council of All Beings I feel like I am holding a very special ceremony in my heart.”

~ Olive 6

Part Four - Reflections

“The human venture remains stuck in its impasse. Children who begin their earth studies or life studies do not experience any numinous aspect of these subjects. The excitement is diminished. If this fascination, this entrancement, with life is not evoked, the children will not have the psychic energies needed to sustain the sorrows inherent in the human condition. They might never discover their true place in the vast world of time and space. Teaching children about the natural world should be treated as one of the most important events in their lives. Children need a story that will bring personal meaning together with the grandeur and meaning of the universe.”³

- Thomas Berry

No matter what I am teaching as a guide, when I have successfully carried the children through the threshold, they know, and I know. The inner resonance of my own preparation creates enough spaciousness for the children, while the ritual itself holds the container. The invitation somehow goes out to the whole universe to conspire with the moment. The door opens. Sometimes one glimpse through the door, where reverence and awe are magnified, can carry a child for the rest of their life. Always returning to the memory of that glimpse. As Thomas says in the above quote, “it gives them the psychic energies needed to sustain the sorrows.” I believe that to be true. As we prepare our children for an unknown future, with many complex and scary storylines, I feel it to be of great importance to share the numinous. To find ways to hold open the door.

³ Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), 130-131.



Jessica Towle Krause grew up in the ridge and valley region of New Jersey. As a teenager she discovered Genesis Farm after searching for a deeper context of meaning in her life. She spent time studying cosmology at Genesis Farm in the hopes of gaining perspective about the role of the human in the natural world. She went on to work in North Carolina at The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World and Pickards Mountain Eco Institute, where she had the privilege of working with amazing mentors in the fields of cosmology, education, anthroposophy, wild edibles, medicinal plants, and sustainability. In 2005 she got certificates in permaculture and natural building while living in the Patagonia region of Argentina. After traveling, studying, and working in various places she returned to her bone country, the ridge and valley bioregion to continue this work at Genesis Farm, and later joined the Ridge and Valley Charter School community in 2016. Jessica has many passions, including raising her two wonderful boys, hula hooping, acro yoga, studying plants, and just being in the woods. She holds a BA in Sustainable Community Development with an emphasis in Ecopsychology from Prescott College in Arizona.



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