

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

2017-2019



Edited by
Peggy Whalen-Levitt

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The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World
Greensboro, NC

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Foreword



The 9th class of the Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice program began at the TreeHouse at Timberlake Earth Sanctuary on November 18, 2017. One had the feeling of homecoming as the participants climbed the TreeHouse steps and entered the kitchen where hot tea, muffins and clementines were waiting. There was a spontaneous bond of intimacy for this group on the very first day that only deepened over the course of our two years together.

During the first year of the program, we were called into presence with the natural world in a deeply listening and receptive way. We were invited to “hold at bay” our habitual ways of “knowing about” and accumulating information. We were asked to attune to the natural world as a “communion of subjects” and to bring these moments of communion into contemplation.

Midway through the program, we met over the course of two days to engage in a process of letting go, letting come – “Letting go” of all that separates us from Earth as Sacred Community and opening up an inner spaciousness where something new could come in as a practice for our second year together – “Letting come.”

We took time to get in touch with our foundational holiness, our first nature, as a place to begin. We surrendered to our deepest identity connected to Source and listened to what would flow from there. We took guidance from Frederick Buechner’s view of vocation as “the place where your deep gladness meets the world’s deep need.”¹

¹ Buechner quoted by Parker Palmer in *Let Your Life Speak* (San Francisco, Wiley, 1999), 16.

During the second year, we gathered in listening circles to midwife the evolution of each other's practices. And, by April of 2019, we stopped to reflect on these practices and give them voice in words.

Through this fourfold process of Presence to Earth, Contemplation, Practice and Synthesis, we engaged in a work that shifted our locus of meaning and willing from the humanly constructed world to a sacredly given world within which our being and work gained new depth, meaning and purpose.

The final phase of our work together, giving voice to this process and the practices that were birthed, was the most difficult of all. Old forms of writing no longer served. We had to go deeper to bring more fully into consciousness and expression what had transpired during our two years together. What you will read on these pages is a sacred gift. Together, this group speaks the holiness of a new way of being in the world.

Peggy Whalen-Levitt, Editor
June 9, 2019

Transforming Education

by

Carla Cota

Here is the vast, savage, howling mother of ours, Nature, lying all around with such beauty, and such affection for her children, as the leopard; and yet we are so early weaned from her breast to society, to that culture which is exclusively an interaction of man on man.

~ Henry David Thoreau

Introduction

Enveloping ourselves in the rhythms and forms of nature can be transformative, educative and healing. A bevy of studies has added to a growing literature on the mental and physical advantages of spending time outdoors. That includes recent research showing that short micro-breaks spent viewing a nature scene have a stimulating effect on the brain. Our identities too are intricately woven with our natural surroundings. The subtle yet powerful influences of place, space and culture mold us, but can often go unrecognized. As much as the natural world not only shapes us, we shape place. Our understandings of these intimate feedback loops are paramount to healthy relationships with the whole community of life. Yet despite this research, our society seems to be teaching people to avoid direct experience in nature and thus it has become difficult in understanding ourselves through the stories of place, not only through awe-inspiring nature spaces, but also wild urban areas, and everywhere in between.

Regrettably, these actions are grievously distributed and effectively frightening not just children but grown-ups straight out of the natural world and beyond. Instead of exploring the outdoors, or experiencing the vivid life stories all around us humans seem to be spending less and less of their lives in natural surroundings and even less time with actual human beings. All this is causing their senses to narrow, physiologically and psychologically, and this fundamentally reduces the richness of the human life experience (Louv, 2008).

Yet, as most of us can attest to, once you set out in nature, even a playground or a city park, the response is immediate – an unmistakable wave of energy comes over us when we step outside and there is an ease and fluidity of acceptance, excitement, and joy. Therefore, it is imperative that a broader healing process takes place between the damaged relationships with the natural world and the inhabitants. This healing is in our self-interest not only because the data suggests

that it is better for all humans, but rather because our own mental, physical and spiritual health depends on it, not to mention the future of the Earth. Given a chance to reintroduce and re-raise our youth to absorb the natural world and conceptualize their place and space identity, we will almost certainly change the configurations and conditions of our cities, homes and daily lives. In this written practice, an approach to reawaken our senses is proposed. A model that is not only holistic but also intuitive with children and adults alike. A culturally responsive pedagogy in the form of a theoretical yet applicable concept called “the funds of knowledge and identity”.

Funds of Knowledge & Identity

The funds of knowledge were developed by renowned scholars (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005) who postulated that the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills which all humans share can be traced to one's household. These funds vocalize the experiences of our lives through the processes of everyday in which families, communities and friends, unconsciously or consciously, engage one another. The aim is to utilize these everyday occurrences as a tool to further understand the perceptions, perspectives, and life stories as they pertain to cultural preservation and transformation. Scholars have likened the term “funds of identity” to culturally bound stories, technologies, documents, and discourses that people internalize and construct in order to make sense of the events in their lives. Combining funds of identity with knowledge can be used as a method to peer into the dynamic emotional lived experiences of humans, thus these seminal works have provided the foundational tools allowing us to delve deeper into the everyday activities of our lives, particularly the hybridity of cultural practices, and to ask what has led us to the place where we find ourselves (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014).

Discovering the sociocultural dynamics of funds of knowledge and identity serves as a means to share history, cultural identities, ancestry, and shared historical experiences, and ultimately to create cultural codes for meaning-making. (Gonzalez et al., 2005; Saubich-Esteban, 2011). The implementation of these funds will be addressed via a hybrid form labeled eco funds and space, place, and cultural funds in which the utilization of the main idea, that people are competent and have knowledge, is applicable in multiple iterations.

Eco Funds

Incorporating pedagogical practices that are supportive of students' everyday knowledge is the primary utility of the funds of knowledge. Applying these different types of funds and discourse augment the learning experience of the students and the learning community, as well as the learning outcomes. Joining these diverse funds of knowledge is not an easy task, yet practicing a hybrid version of this method will expose hidden abilities.

Children intuitively have a deep sense, a strong connection and an inherent fascination with the manifestations of the natural world. Weaving the dynamic role between households' funds of knowledge and the great outdoors is a way to glean those funds in a holistic exploration. Eco funds attempt to develop a learning practice with ecological principles along with culturally responsive teaching that bridges the funds of the outdoors with the cultural flexibility of the group. Connecting our instinctual relationships with the outdoors with the fundamentals of ecology will form the foundation of those "funds" just as an ecosystem functions on Earth. The pedagogy acts as an apparatus to enhance what we understand about the world around us with scientific principals of ecology and basic biology.

In accepting that everyone can describe, articulate and express their experiences in nature these, therefore, become the active layers and the foundational instrument in which a multitude of variations of learning in nature can take place. The distinct difference is they flow from each person's unique fund, and much like ecosystems that form a complex web of interconnectedness and adaptations, so too would such moments — thereby highlighting the educational, the socio-cultural and ecological experiences we share simply by our lived experience. These distinct ecosystem funds act as a reservoir of specific interactions which can then transfer across an unlimited array of learning environments and engagements, and accumulate "funds" that can add to a broader depth of knowledge. What follows would be an intuitive strand of discourse that could be used to apply the biological, chemical and physical understandings of our environmental world by intertwining these natural funds of knowledge or eco funds with scientific fact — thereby bridging two valued elements back into the lives of humans- linking ecological principles with sustainability while also aligning with the cultural assets of the group.

Space, Place, & Culture Funds

Funds of knowledge merge with culturally responsive teaching in several ways. This form of pedagogy already recognizes and responds to cultures, while also endeavoring to offer equitable access to education for all students (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Extending this theory with the funds of knowledge joined with Ecofunds intends for these cross-disciplines to engage learners while respecting their cultural integrity through communion with the natural world.

It is through the framework of funds that the exchanges of cultural information establish a type of cultural measure by which values and beliefs are held together and molded. Cultural information is the reflection of cultural norms and values and is independent of autonomy and cultural development. Examining our identity in the spaces we live while seeking to answer who we are is a timeless endeavor. The significance of humanity seeking a better perception within these spaces is a valued fund and, by igniting our consciousness, we participate in a collective identity, while at the same time archiving histories. In the case of understanding ourselves

through the stories of place, Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1997) describe cultural variances by the understandings of how “us” and “otherness” relate to people’s desire for identification. Using this conceptual outline aligned with the funds of knowledge engages students collaboratively in the ‘difficult, chaotic effort of learning’, through explicit ability teaching and guided reflection (Weimer, 2013).

Future Thoughts

Pedagogy is a way of bridging life stories that help us to understand the ways of past, present, and future. If the past is a part of a knowledge base, then looking back can inform our understanding of the present and the future. Similarly, we can look at human behavior and the consequences of that behavior from history. Negotiating identity with the natural world, along with cultural relevance, are the tools for cultural and biological translation. Articulating the hybrid forms of the funds of knowledge through the eco-funds and space, place and cultural funds allow humans to vocalize lived experiences. With the interconnectedness of each of the variables mentioned above, this lens provides a different perspective of our communities, whose absorption of the familial and communal may reveal added levels of the ways humans adapt ecological, educational and cultural values that can transform our world.

By developing a new language within the framework of funds of knowledge, the relationship between theory, society and nature may bridge the gap between understanding and representing the wider world. It seems only fitting then, to view our global interactions as a symbiotic relationship in which we are reliant on each other for the success of our collective future. The growing revulsion against the endless wars, the military machine, has manifested in mass protest. We see this protest around the world, such as in the Arab Spring, the Green Movement, and the Occupy Movement, as well as in protests against brutality directed toward people of color. We see also the insistence of women and the LGBT community all over the world who no longer tolerate abuse and subordination.

It is our duty, our human right, and our requirement to be a voice, a movement, a picture, a story, and a media outlet and to remember and remind ourselves that inequality and hegemony are grossly present in the world today. We need to awaken a higher consciousness of class conflict, racial injustice, economic inequality, environmental and international arrogance. There is the past and its continuing horrors: violence, war, prejudices, monopolization, political power in the hands of liars and murderers, building prisons instead of schools, poisoning the press and the entire culture by money, to name a few. Instead, we can choose to make a difference, ensuring a dialogue that includes the voice of educators, students, parents, and the entire community. This is where innovation and resolution will be birthed.

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Carla P. Cota was born and raised on the southern border in the state of Arizona. Currently, she resides in North Carolina with her husband, two daughters and her parents. She is an experienced educator, teacher educator, researcher, scholar, and educational consultant with a demonstrated history of working in higher education, high school, secondary and elementary schools. Her background includes teaching and scholarship in the areas of science education and socio-cultural education. Carla holds an MA (2008) MA (2011) in educational anthropology, and science education from the City University of New York and a Ph.D. (2018) with a focus on immigration and education and bicultural education from The University of Arizona. Currently, she is the Founder and Managing Director for The Center for Orchestration Teacher Ascent (COTA). The mission of the Center is to bring to every classroom a distinct pedagogy by working with preservice teachers using a hybrid model of the Funds of Knowledge and Identity – a method which is centered on heightening teacher skills and instruction by transmitting the foundational tools for implementing the funds of knowledge in three distinct areas: Ecofunds, Stempfunds, and cultural funds. When not working, Carla can be found roaming the trails and woodlands with her family, reading, writing, gardening and traveling this tremendous and beautiful Earth with those she loves.

Creating Art Inspired by Nature

by

Hollis Gabriel

Creating art inspired by nature is an interesting challenge. Why bother? Nature is the world's most dynamic, glorious art imaginable. Perhaps one wishes to capture the awesome magnificence that nature is constantly gifting us with. A sunset, impending storm or skeleton of a tree against a winter blue sky – one longs to hold it, grab it, put it in a box, to keep and enjoy at one's leisure. No, this is not possible – our natural world evolves, changes, dissolves and you move on to sleep or work or to other impending business.

So I wanted to co-create with nature. An uninvited partnership – I the scavenger, nature the gift giver. I have always been a scavenger. I have, since childhood, spent hours in the sand or a tidal pool or forest floor filling pockets, bags or towels with treasures, often disappointed the next day when the beauty and sparkle they had in their home environment is gone. Yet, I loved to paint them with nail polish, create sculptures and jewelry, then return them to the shoebox where they slept until my next scavenge when I would add to their numbers.

I have been lucky enough to scavenge on beaches and rainforests in Australia and other exotic places around the world. Yet, while doing this art practice, often my most precious finds are in my backyard or at the little park across the street. There I have found a flat rock where I can sit by the creek and spend time mindful of the sights, sounds and smells that surround me. I spot dead vines and twigs, small rocks and stones which I carry home to transform or to sit at the altar I have created to honor my Connor.

I can now sit in silence, thanks to my time at Timberlake. For almost three years, silence, for me, always filled with a deep almost unbearable sadness. Now it is easier for me to be mindful and I am grateful for that. I can sit, scavenge and then create, often in the breeze and sunshine on my deck, without the radio constantly yapping at me.

My small yard has many different trees and I love looking up and seeing a myriad of leaf shapes, most spring green and translucent – glowing with the sun. Birds are constant visitors loving the freeze-dried worms I offer them. They are friends, their calls and songs making me smile! Squirrels entertain me and carpenter bees amaze me. In time I get restless and gather my treasures and start to create using gifts Mother Nature has supplied me with. I give back love, prayers, water and fertilizer.

Sometimes I have a specific idea for a piece of “art”, or I just play – arranging objects in a design I like.

Sometimes I grab my phone and take a walk, looking for things I want to capture. I have done this on my travels and have thousands of wonderful photos that I occasionally look at, but it is more the process of capturing the marvel that quenches my thirst.

Sometimes I go to the park or sit in the woods and just rearrange things, altering a tiny piece of nature’s “stuff”, making it mine for a short amount of time. Then I give thanks and walk away.

Because I decided to make creating my practice, I have become more mindful and deliberate about what I bring home. It makes the search more challenging and the house less messy.

Now that the weather is inviting, I am inspired and I can sit in my shady, green outdoor space and spread out my findings and art supplies and go at it. Like taking photos, it is all about the process – planning, choosing, designing and then playing. It is easy to lose track of time and find the sun has moved across the sky and I haven’t taken a break, except to occasionally go hunting for another stick or acorn or rock.

While visiting Vancouver in March I spent time at their fascinating anthropology museum and was inspired by indigenous North American made totem poles. I am doing some research and hoping to create a miniature totem pole using as much found material as I can. I plan to incorporate images of critters that visit my yard: birds, bats, squirrels, foxes, rabbits, and snakes.

I am very much a city person. I love walking the streets, watching people, visiting museums and galleries and eating at fun eclectic ethnic restaurants. I enjoy going to the theatre, markets and specialty grocery stores. I thrive on meeting and talking to people, sharing a small piece of their life with them. A quick interchange, a connection, a smile, sometimes even a hug. The idea that our lives, never before known to each other, have somehow come together and then will separate and continue on their very unknown paths intrigues me.

I always, however, seek out the natural world as it can be found in urban settings. I have found astonishingly beautiful natural parks in China’s cities of millions as well as small waterways, gardens and waterfalls in Rega, Latvia. Neighborhood oases in city, rainforest and beaches mere minutes from Melbourne, lavish gardens large and small everywhere in England, roughed rocks and hills spotted with olive trees in Portugal and old and decaying parks in Moldova. Humans cannot live a full, healthy, happy life without the reminder that Mother Nature is our Queen.

We are fortunate to live in a green, lovely, parkful city. My heart is sad when I see how rapidly we are plowing down forests and building housing and large ugly storage units. I have taken this sadness and anger to some of my art. The decline of our respect for Mother Nature and the primal need for us to be supported and surrounded by what she gives us are present in my practice.

I have loved this practice and find the more I do it the richer my thoughts and planning are. I am loving finding projects that require research. I hope to do pieces based on ancient Gods and Goddesses focusing on those whose conception answered ancient questions about the earth's mysteries.

I also am planning an outdoor memorial for Connor. I hope to finish or at least start before June.

My time at Timberlake with this fabulous group of people has been extremely special to me and I have taken away much more than I have given. It came at a time in my life when I was in desperate need. I thank each one of you for the beautiful gifts you have given me and I will be forever grateful for this experience.

I am not a writer. I am a procrastinator. I have been in awe of the writing of the members of the group – so smart and deep and beautiful. Very self-conscious of my writing skills and not including writing in my practice, I have put off this assignment. Now that I am almost ready to push “send” I must say I have enjoyed the process and have let go of judging the finished piece.

With gratitude and love,
Hollis

Hollis Gabriel was a teacher for decades with a specialty in integrating the arts across the curriculum. She shared this passion of teaching through the arts leading numerous teacher workshops. After Hurricane Katrina, she retired and moved to North Carolina where she became an artist creating mobiles, paintings and sculptures. Hollis has traveled extensively. She loves meeting people, visiting museums, exploring cities, reading, experiencing nature, sitting in her garden and creating art.

The Prayer of Trees

by

Catherine Hines

The trees began calling to me many years ago. I found myself paying close attention to individual trees, noticing them in a different way. The stately oaks and hickories in the yards of older homes, the maples blazing against the blue autumn sky, the graceful curving branches of the dogwood trees. I became aware of details I hadn't seen before, observing the familiar trees in new ways. I began looking forward to winter, which had always been my least favorite season, because I loved seeing the leafless trees. Without foliage, standing naked and exposed, they offered a glimpse of their true, vulnerable selves. And they invited me to develop a more intimate relationship with them.

When I enrolled in The Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Practice and Presence (ILCN) program in 2017 and began developing a practice of presence, trees played an essential role. I would begin my daily meditative walks by leaning against "6-Trunk Tree" and breathing along with her. I blazed my own path through the woods, marked by trees that I came to know as good friends – "Leaning Tree," "Eye Tree," "Grandfather Tree," and "Window Tree." When it was too cold or rainy to be outdoors, I greeted the dawn through my bedroom window, in the company of the overgrown holly tree that hugged the corner of my house.

In 2018, as we began the second year of ILCN, I said goodbye to my beloved holly tree and the house where I had lived for 16 years. I moved 70 miles east to a neighborhood bordering a national forest where I'm surrounded by maples, oaks, and hickories. It was the trees that called me here, and I knew those trees would be central to my second-year ILCN practice.

In the process of "birthing a practice" we were encouraged to use deep heart listening to hear what is coming into being, and through my heart I heard the voice of the trees and the call of prayer. And my practice, "The Prayers of Trees," was born. The trees wished to share their prayers with me, and I trusted they would guide me as I expanded my understanding of prayer and discovered my own unique way of praying.

Trying to capture in words the essence of "The Prayers of Trees," is proving to be quite a challenge. My usual approach to writing doesn't seem to be working, and I find myself getting frustrated. It's time to set the assignment aside and take a break. I go outside and sit on the ground, surrounded by my beloved trees. As my breathing deepens and my thinking slows, I get

a clear message that my customary writing strategy isn't working because it's too linear. I'm attempting to follow the Way of the Hunter: identify a target, maintain an intense, single-minded focus, and follow the shortest path – a straight line. I'm encouraged to shift away from that linear paradigm and embrace the Way of the Gatherer: a meandering, non-linear approach guided by intuition, focused on process rather than final outcome, and allowing space for serendipity.

And that's when I have an AHA moment! This is what the trees have been teaching me this past year – to open up, trust my intuition, recognize those serendipitous moments, and fully embrace the Way of the Gatherer.

What I offer in these pages is a sampling of my gatherings – quotes and passages that resonated with me and deepened my practice, experiential moments of connection and communion, and personal observations, all gathered as part of “The Prayers of Trees.”

The Prayer Tree

As I begin my journey, I stumble upon a small paperback book by Australian cartoonist Michael Leunig titled *The Prayer Tree*. In the book's introduction, Leunig asks, “...just as we have become somewhat alienated from nature and its cycles, could it be that we are also estranged from our instinctive capacity for prayer and need to understand it afresh from the example of the natural world?” And in this question, I recognize that my emerging rapport with nature and my growing relationship with prayer are two paths on the same journey. What began as separate, parallel channels have now merged into a single, intertwined path – a pathway lined with trees.

The closing paragraph of the introduction to *The Prayer Tree* is the perfect encapsulation of the year-long practice that I'm just beginning.

*A person kneels to contemplate a tree ... the person is learning how to pray.*¹

The Power of Prayer

I begin my exploration of the concept of prayer by listening to a lecture series by Caroline Myss called “The Power of Prayer.”² She discusses the mystical saints who devoted their lives to

¹ Michael Leunig, *The Prayer Tree* (North Blackburn, Victoria: Collins Dove, 1991), 4-5.

² Carolyn Myss, *The Power of Prayer: Guidance, Prayers, and Wisdom for Listening to the Divine*, Audiobook (Sounds True).

prayer. They approached prayer with humility, believing that to experience the full power of prayer, one must enter from a state of humility. Wanting to understand this on a deeper level, I look up the word “humility” in the dictionary. It is derived from the Latin root “humilitas,” meaning “grounded” or “of the earth.” Another AHA moment! Grounding myself in nature, being among the trees, is perfect preparation for prayer.

Listening to the Trees

As my journey continues, guides and teachers reveal themselves to me, mainly in the form of the written word. I am continually awed by the perfection of these teachings and the serendipitous timing of the revelations.

I come across a passage about the wisdom of trees written by Hermann Hesse, from *Wandering: Notes and Sketches*.

Trees are sanctuaries. Whoever knows how to speak to them, whoever knows how to listen to them, can learn the truth. They do not preach learning and precepts, they preach, undeterred by particulars, the ancient law of life.³

How might I learn to speak to trees? How do I listen to them? I discover a book called *To Hear the Forest Sing* by Margaret Dulaney.

Listening, true listening, cannot be forced. Listening is an allowing. It is like falling asleep. It is a letting go.

I have noticed that this surrender, this letting go is particularly necessary when listening to someone in another language, or even to a very heavy accent. If I am straining to understand, understanding will not come. If I relax and wait for the understanding, it arrives, as if by magic.

If you wish to learn the art of listening, try and hold the mind still. Hold it gently and wait. There's time enough. There's always enough time, an eternity of time.⁴

³ Herman Hesse, *Wandering: Notes and Sketches*, trans. James Wright (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1972).

⁴Margaret Dulaney, *To Hear the Forest Sing: Some Musings on the Divine* (Pipersville, PA: Listen Well Publishing, 2016), 26.

Mary Oliver's book *Devotions* has a permanent home on my nightstand, and I read her poetry often. As I contemplate Hermann Hesse's words and Margaret Dulaney's advice on listening, this poem from "Devotions" suddenly speaks to me in a new way.

Praying
It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch

a few words together and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but the doorway

into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.⁵

Each of these authors reinforces what I'm learning from my time with the trees. Silence, stillness, gratitude, allowing. Relax and wait for the understanding and it will come.

Interconnection

Our Master Naturalist book club selection is *The Hidden Life of Trees* by Peter Wohlleben. He describes in detail the astonishing, intricate interconnections between trees. Trees communicate and cooperate with each other through a complex underground system of intertwined roots and fungal intermediaries that has been dubbed the "wood wide web."⁶

When I began my practice "The Prayers of Trees" I envisioned getting to know the trees that surround my new home as individuals. I planned to choose one tree each week to sit with in daily meditation, listening to what it wished to tell me, and getting to know it intimately. I chose as the first tree a towering white oak that, based on its size, was likely the oldest tree in the backyard. I imagined that this grandfather tree had accumulated years of wisdom to share with me. As I settled in for the first of my daily meditations, I was delighted to see a ring of mushrooms encircling the base of the oak. It had rained heavily the previous day and these mushrooms emerged overnight. As I marveled at this magical fairy ring, a vision of the complex

⁵ Mary Oliver, *Devotions* (New York, Penquin Press, 2017), 131.

⁶ Peter Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees* (Vancouver: Greystone Books, Ltd., 2015), 10-11.

fungal network and underground root system connecting all the trees in my yard briefly flashed in front of me, and I received a clear message that I should relate to the trees as a whole, rather than individually.

The following day, I discovered this passage from Thich Nhat Hanh.

You carry Mother Earth within you
She is not outside of you
Mother Earth is not just your environment

In that insight of inter-being, it is possible to have real communication with the Earth, which is the highest form of prayer.⁷

The trees are a deeply interconnected community of which I am part. By recognizing and acknowledging that connection and wholeness, I am learning how to pray The Prayers of Trees.

Seeing the Trees

A friend sent me a short story titled “I Know Who You Really Are,”⁸ in which the author describes a method for deep connection that she learned through her cat. While holding the cat one evening, she looked directly into its eyes and said “I know who you really are. I see that you’re a wonderful spirit in the body of a cat, full of love and wonderful beyond imagination.” She was astonished by her normally aloof pet’s reaction. The cat didn’t take its eyes off her the rest of the night and she felt an unusually strong connection between them. She tried the same thing with her other cat and the reaction was similar.

The author decided to try this with people that she met the following day. She made eye contact and silently said words similar to those she spoke to her cats. The reactions she received were remarkable, both from people that she knew and complete strangers. She experienced a sense of connection unlike anything she’d felt in the past.

I am inspired to incorporate this into my communication with the trees, and I feel our connection deepen and strengthen. The trees have become an integral part of my life, and I begin and end each day in communion with them. Now, in late spring, I am constantly reminded of the benevolence of the trees. I’m grateful for the shade and cooling they provide, and the

⁷ Thich Nhat Hanh, <https://educateinspirechange.org/inspirational/thich-nhat-hanh-quotes/>, Quote #24.

⁸ Unpublished short story, used with permission of the author who wishes to remain anonymous.

variety of wildlife they shelter and feed. And I sense that they, too, know and see me for who I really am.

This poem was inspired by the Southern red oak in my front yard.

She Waits for Me to See

I notice her, of course.

She dominates the front yard and her commanding presence fills the view from my kitchen window.

She is my faithful companion as I greet the dawn from the east-facing porch

And her presence outside my office window is a welcome distraction during endless conference calls.

She waits for me to see ...

Her trunk, deeply textured, a mosaic of muted gray, brown, and soft green.

Her lower limbs, thick and heavy, with outer branches sagging wearily toward the ground.

Her middle limbs twist and turn awkwardly, marking the years she struggled to claim her space, to find light wherever she could.

The sharply broken branches, souvenirs of storms she weathered and survived.

She waits for me to see ...

As my gaze travels upward, the tree's form changes dramatically.

Her uppermost branches reach skyward in smooth, graceful curves

The slender branches creating a perfectly symmetrical rounded crown

A delicate flower blooming atop a gangly, unsightly stem.

She waits for me to see ...

And finally, I do see.

The years of perseverance, struggling to survive, weathering storms and suffering loss.

Then the blossoming, rising above and opening up to the light, in beauty and grace.

The heroine's journey, reflected in a tree.

My life, all lives, the story of humanity, the tale of the Earth.

And the hope, the promise of the crown, reaching toward the sky and bathed in light.

I finally see ...

Catherine Hines' early career choices were guided by her interest in math and science. She received a BS in Chemistry from the University of Pittsburgh and a Doctorate in Optometry from the New England College of Optometry. During optometry school, Catherine cofounded the school's first peer tutoring program and discovered her passion for teaching. After completing a residency program in Philadelphia, Catherine returned to Boston and joined the faculty at her alma mater, where she specialized in ocular disease and focused on innovative teaching methodologies. When Catherine relocated to North Carolina, her focus shifted to administrative and regulatory aspects of optometry, but her passion for teaching and education continued through a variety of volunteer activities. She taught computer labs as a PTA volunteer, served on the Board of Directors for a K-12 charter school, developed and delivered jewelry-making courses for at-risk girls and young women, and served as a docent at the Carolina Raptor Center. During this period, Catherine's spiritual awakening led to in-depth explorations of transpersonal psychology, archetypes, and shadow work and she was drawn to earth-based spiritual practices. Catherine's volunteer work at the raptor center ignited a desire to share her deep appreciation of nature with others. She became certified as a Master Naturalist through the Central Carolinas Master Naturalist Program and enrolled in the North Carolina Environmental Educators program. When she discovered The Inner Life of the Child in Nature program, she immediately resonated with its intersection of education, nature, and spirituality. Catherine is currently enrolled in the program, class of 2019, and is enthusiastically exploring new ways to bring this work into the world.

Practicing Love, Beauty, and I-Thou

by

Etsuko Kinefuchi

My first introduction to Thomas Berry was through Cormac Cullinan's *Wild Law*. The book was published in 2003, but I did not discover it until 2013 when I was gathering materials to develop a new course on human rights in Communication Studies. But before telling further about my encounter with Thomas Berry, I need to begin with why I came across Cullinan's book in the first place. A couple of years back in 2011, Japan was hit by a magnitude 9 earthquake that triggered massive tsunamis, which in turn disabled the cooling systems of the nuclear power reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station in Fukushima, Japan. With no cooling capability, three of the reactors operating at the time experienced nuclear meltdown. This disaster, dubbed as the most serious nuclear accident since Chernobyl, was a catalyst for the transformation in my academic life.

Until then, my research sought to examine how communicative practices maintain oppression and marginalization within and across cultures and how we may create better relationships through communication. Yet, I never thought to ask these questions in humans' relationship to the Earth. The nuclear meltdown just 100 miles from my hometown shook me hard. It forced me to learn how nuclear power became an unquestioned and even embraced part of the modern industrial culture. It forced me to see what sacrifices – humans and the natural world – are made everyday to operate this technology, let alone as a result of accidents, and how much nuclear waste is produced – waste that must be managed tens of thousands of years into the future. What I came to realize is that, in order for nuclear power (and many other technologies we use today) to exist, the natural world and certain people (those who bare the risk of radiation exposure) must be deemed disposable. They share the same fate.

For me to frame human rights properly, then, I needed sources that help me and my students see human rights from an ecological perspective. Luckily, I stumbled upon Cullinan's book. It was in the forward of *Wild Law* that I first heard the voice of Thomas Berry. Western civilization, Berry observed, pursued scientific and technological advancements at the expense of the inner life where cultural creativity, life-giving soul, resides. Affirming Cullinan's idea of the Great Jurisprudence, Berry argued that we need a legal structure and political institutions that "will know that our way into the future is . . . through the living forces that brought us into being

and are the only forces that can sustain us in the coming centuries.”¹ Berry himself wrote in 2001 a groundbreaking document, *The Origin, Differentiation, and Role of Rights*, in which he laid out, with remarkable clarity, the inherent rights held by every component of the Earth community and the interdependent relationships between differentiated components. Berry wrote, “The universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects. As subjects the component members of the universe are capable of having rights.”² Of course! Why have I not thought that every being on this Earth has a right to clean water and air and a suitable habitat? Having been immersed so deep in an anthropocentric notion of “rights,” Berry’s words were ice-cold water splashed on my face. And they called me to pay attention to the context, the relationship that was there all along but was outside the perceptual frame I took for granted.

So, I was delighted when I discovered that Thomas Berry was not only a native of Greensboro but had returned there to spend the last ten years of his life. It was ironic that I had to learn about him through a book by a South African environmental lawyer five years after his passing when he and I both lived in the same town. Though I deeply regret that I never had a chance to meet him in person, I found the gift of The Center for Education, Imagination, and the Natural World where his wisdoms are kept alive every day. In *The Dream of the Earth*, Berry (1988) wrote that the earth is “the primary college” or “the immediate self-educating community of those living and nonliving beings that constitute the earth.”³ It is this sense of education that the Center unfolded to me.

As someone who was trained to deconstruct discourses that produce toxicity, oppression, marginalization, and inequality, my default epistemological stance since graduate school had been to look for what is wrong with this world. While this critical paradigm allowed me to tune into the complex and often invisible ways power functions through communication and produced a moment of solidarity with the like-minded folks, it did not lead me to a sense of hope or empowerment. Producing a critique without offering a real sense of alternative only leaves us disempowered and disconnected. But, before I can offer any alternative to my two children, my students, or any audience, I needed to awaken myself to the presence of the universe all around me and inside me. The Center provided me with a space (physical, psychic, and intellectual) and a wonderful community to do so.

In the welcome packet for the first day of the Inner life of the Child in Nature program in November 2017, Peggy Whalen-Levitt included the words of Thomas Berry from the very first

¹ Thomas Berry, Forward, *Wild Law: A Manifesto for Earth Justice* (Devon, UK, Green Books, 2003), 15.

² Thomas Berry, “*The Origin, Differentiation, and Role of Rights*,” <http://www.ties-edu.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Thomas-Berry-rights.pdf>

³ Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco, The Sierra Club, 1988), 89.

conversation a group of educators had with him in October 2000: “You establish yourself with the universe before you do anything.” How do I develop this sense of presence in the universe? How do I re-member myself in and with the natural world? How do I begin to cultivate the sense of sacred that Thomas Berry spoke of? As I was trained to see cultural ills, it seemed to make sense that I focus on the opposite. This meant, for me, love and beauty. To pay attention to the beauty around me and to recognize love as a fundamental mode of knowing. Love is something that academics shy away from (unless of course it is the subject of your study). It is not empirical. It is not systematic. But how can we know others without love? If the role of academia is to help make the world a better place through knowledge, discovery, invention, and education, how can we do that without love? This was also the sentiment of late paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould as he lamented the anthropogenic extinction of species (his example being *Partula* – a type of snail – on Mo’orea): “We cannot win this battle to save species and environments without forging an emotional bond between ourselves and nature as well—for we will not fight to save what we do not love (but only appreciate in some abstract sense).”⁴

This resonated with me with one modification; “forging” assumes the absence of the bond. But the bond is there. It is forgotten or buried as we chose to live among noises that ironically further separate us from the other. In the words of James Finley that Peggy shared with us, most of us fall victim to “the tenacious nature of forgetfulness” from which we need to be awakened again and again. To love another is to see them in the realm of I-Thou. Separation, isolation, and disconnection are the language of the modern industrial culture. The language of I-It. I-Thou sees the world in relations. You and I are unique individuals but are also a part of the same body. Your fate is connected to mine. It is recognition that you are valued as you are. You are beautiful as you are. I see you.

To put this relational mode of knowing into practice, I proposed “a morning practice of being love” as I started my second year of the Inner Life of the Child in Nature Program. I proposed that I find a time to quiet my mind to recognize and give thanks to what is present (the sun, the earth below me, birds, trees, my ancestors...) and the light/love I receive from them. Sometimes this was to also be guided by quotes that help me center. Behold this light and share that with others I encounter that day and let the light guide my teaching and interactions. This was not always implementable in the limited morning time when I juggled getting my girls ready for school and myself ready for work. I was and am surrounded by noises both physically and mentally. But, if I am completely honest, I was not convinced that it was the practice for me.

⁴ Stephen Jay Gould, (1993). *Eight Little Piggies* (New York, W.W. North & Company, 1993), 40.

Perhaps it was because the way I planned to “share” my practice with others was rather a one-way act and not recognition of each encounter as I-Thou.

So, over the next several months, my “practice” became rather a simple act of slowing down and paying attention to my surroundings. At different points of my normal days when I am outside, I try to bracket noises and be present to what is around me with conscious attention to love, beauty, and I-Thou. I do this during my morning walks to my oldest daughter’s bus stop, my walks around the neighborhood, my weekend walks at the Triad Park, and even my short walks on my campus that I take from my car to my office or from my office to other buildings. I jotted down what I experienced through my senses. When it came to the time to write this final piece on my practice, however, the social scientist in me tried to take over the process. I wrote and erased and wrote and erased. So, I returned to the packets of readings Peggy shared with us over the last year and a half, and I decided to write poems – something I had avoided all my life especially in English. I took inspirations from the beautiful poems by Andrew Levitt in *Heron Mornings*, the words of Thomas Berry, and other writers, including the members of my dear cohort. But they are also intimidating. I just do not have the vocabulary to express the beauty I see and the experience I have. But that may be just my ego talking, trying to shield me from embarrassment. Perhaps it is time to let it go.

Morning Walk

Cool air envelopes me
Gentle breeze brushes my face
Welcoming me to a new day
Incessant birdcalls and birdsongs
Calling out to something deep inside me
They calm me down
Unlike human chatters
The sun filtering through the leaves
Illuminating the bounties of colors
I did not see before
Towering oak trees
Moving along with wind on the top
Utterly calm at the bottommost
Let go of judgments, they say
But be grounded in what you love

On days I do not have to go into work early, I walk with my oldest, Mina, to her bus stop about a quarter mile from our house with our dog Rinn. On the way back, I take time, letting

Rinn guide the pace. When I can afford it, I make this walk home longer by taking detours. I try to open my senses to what is around me. The poem above expresses the co-presence I have felt during these walks.

Walking on tree roots

Mommy, let's play a game
How about walking on tree roots?

O.K., that will be easy
The roots are everywhere!
Hop to the left
Hop to the right

Look
These are really bumpy
These are so thick and long
A long jump
Tiny steps

Uh-oh
We are in trouble
No roots here
They are just hiding under the ground
I have a great idea, Mommy
I will carry a piece of branch
Where the root goes hiding
We can use it as a bridge
I love the idea, Maya

What do the roots do under here?
What do *you* think?
Probably they go everywhere
Crisscrossing
Touching
Like holding hands

My girls and I often come up with games to make things fun – while we are in a car, walking from a parking lot to a store, waiting for our food at a restaurant. Waiting for a school bus to

arrive. When we walk on pavements, we follow cracks or lines imagining that it is a narrow path and the rest is water. Walking on tree roots was a variation of it. On a sunny warm Sunday at the end of March, my youngest, Maya, and I walked on tree roots through a trail in the Triad Park, a 7-8 minute drive from our house. Maya wanted to come with me when I said I was going for a walk with Rinn on a trail at the park. Normally, she wants to spend most of the time at the park on the swing or climbing on the manmade climbing rocks. But this day, she wanted to walk in the woods. I wanted us to engage with each other and with the trees in a fun way. So, that day at the park, Maya and I hopped from one root to the next, sometimes getting help from a fallen tree branch as a temporary bridge. We made it through the whole trail. A short trail of about a 20 minute walk turned into 45 minutes of hopping. Using the roots above the ground as a clue, we both imagined the root networks that connect the trees that surrounded us. We imagined the community of the trees all helping each other. Sending nutrients. Sending a note about an incoming danger.

Sakura

I am here, she says
I almost passed by her
Seeing does not guarantee *seeing*
But I *saw*
Perhaps Silence was within me
And around me
Showing me the thread
That connects my heart
To the heart of sakura

Here she is
All limbs amputated
One of them freshly gone
Almost a stump

I am here, she says
Lush with pale pink flowers
Like long bouncing hair
With her chin high
With her back straight
Greeting every passersby

I am here, she says
I see you, I say
You are so beautiful
You are loved

Spring is my favorite time to be on my campus – a campus designated as a “Tree Campus USA.” In spring, flowering trees are everywhere. But out of all the beauties abundant throughout the campus, what left a mark in me this spring is not the gorgeous rows of cherry blossoms on College Avenue or the breathtaking redbuds or the commanding dogwood trees. It was the first week of April. I was on my way to a meeting, walking the path in front of the Curry Building. And there this tree stopped me. My immediate thought was sadness. All of her main branches were gone. Why did they have to amputate her? She looked shorter than me with one main branch, also amputated, sticking out a couple of feet from the trunk. If there were no blooming flowers, she may be best described as a tall stump. Yet, I felt a strong pull and had to stop there. I felt her presence telling me how alive she is. I must have passed by this tree hundreds of times before and never noticed that she was there. It may be that I noticed her this time only because of the flowers. Still, there was something else as well. A presence. A connection. My encounter with her that day activated a relationship (at least in my heart) that makes me responsible for being present to her. As Martin Buber says, “Love is a responsibility of an I for a You.”⁵

In the beginning of the Inner Life of the Child in Nature Program, Peggy introduced us to the notion of Silence by Robert Sardello. I struggled to understand what it is even in the second year of the program. Maybe I was looking too hard without letting it come. It is only in the last several months that I am beginning to feel its presence. Sardello wrote:

*The most basic experience of Silence is intimacy. We feel an intimacy with the world, as if we are within everything around us rather than behind or alongside things that we are then looking at. This mantle of touch brings us to the living truth of our being. We know who we are in a completely non-self-conscious way. We feel how we, in our individuality, are part of a vast and mysterious world process.*⁶

I am beginning to feel this intimacy through a conscious attention to love, beauty, and I-Thou. Being present to the natural world around me is helping me not only to re-member myself

⁵ Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (trans. Walter Kaufmann) (New York, Touchstone, 1970), 66.

⁶ Robert Sardello, *Silence: The Mystery of Wholeness*. (Benson, NC, Goldenstone Press, 2006), 36.

with the rest of the biosphere on this Earth but also to think differently about what it means to be human and how we should live and relate to each other.

Etsuko Kinefuchi grew up in a farming community in Niigata, Japan and has lived in the United States since 1989. She is an associate professor of Communication Studies at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Her current research calls for a transformation of intercultural communication studies from a Western, industrial, anthropocentric discipline to one that addresses the questions of culture, identity, and communication residing in humans' relationship to the larger ecology. She regards Thomas Berry as one of the influential figures in her deepening "ecological turn" in her research and teaching. She teaches courses in intercultural communication, environmental communication, and human rights and the rights of nature. She lives in Colfax, NC with her husband, two girls, and two four-legged boys.

The Wayless Way, The Pathless Path, The Whyless Why

by

Sally Pamplin

*We are made to love without reason,
to breathe in the wide open plain of wonder,
to ponder without asking why,
because in God there is no why to be found,
no reason to be known
beyond the flame of ever whyless love.¹*

~ Meister Eckhart

The path we make can have no path before us or it is not the path we make. If we can see the footsteps ahead of us, it cannot be our path. As I experience the Journey set before me through The Inner Life of the Child in Nature program, my feeling is that there is no way but many ways, with footsteps of the many who came before us imprinting the heart of the earth and the hearts of us all. The only way to enter this wilderness of the heart is to take the first step wherever it may lead; and in silence and solitude, grounded in compassionate presence to the earth, in stillness, in naughting oneself (as Meister Eckhart directs us), so that in communion, we become every self.

Listen. See. In awe and wonder and gratitude:

*Thank you Earth for welcoming us,
and thank you touch of eyes and ears and skin,
touch of love for welcoming us.
May we wake up and remember who we truly are.²*

~ Jane Hooper

¹ Meister Eckhart, "The Whyless Why" in *Everything is Divine: The Wisdom of Meister Eckhart*, ed. Edmund College and Bernard McGinn (New York: Paulist Press, 1996).

² Jane Hooper, "Please Come Home" in Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Way of Knowing: Reclaiming an Ancient Tradition to Awaken the Heart* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2003), 38-40.

Children are “Thous” before they can build their egos. Egos are fed by praise, which is not authentic. Praise should be for sunsets, for streams, for meadows, for all creatures and plants on the earth. At Timberlake Earth Sanctuary, children are drawn into awe and wonder, into an I-Thou relationship. In sacred silence, they are nurtured by love of their experience with earth, and by their creative expression of their experiences. It is a reflection of the Whyless Why. No need for Why’s. Love is revealed in the connection to the earth. It is peacefulness in the beauty of a natural setting. It is the sacredness of life.

*If there is a product, it is this: the world needs peaceful souls.*³

~ John O’Donohue

*Only a sense of the sacred will save us.*⁴

~ Thomas Berry

Wisdom of the Fallen Log

I am walking through the woods at Timberlake. February, 2019. No path, just sauntering, making my way — nowhere. Practicing unhurrying, I see the fallen log. It is a deteriorating, less than whole, moss covered, wood fragment surrounded by fallen leaves. Stopping, in ear-silence with eye-listening, the serene feeling permeates me, blending with the rain that is pattering through the branches of the bare trees of winter. Oh, yes, it is raining, and not to divert attention to the skin sensation of dampness, I return to the sensation of communion with this log, this fallen compadre of the forest.

There is a genuine feeling of appreciation rising in me. I lean against a willing tree and feel an energetic source connecting me to this log, not exclusive of the forest floor, the trees, the bushes and briars. In setting my intention to visit with the log, I expect to mourn it’s passing, give it reassurance of its place in the forest. The log could have laughed at me condescendingly, but it reached into my heart with the reassurance of its place in life, and more — it reminded me of the wisdom of humility. It is more a feeling remembrance than a thought. I feel the humility of this fallen log, the complete surrender, the willingness to accept a new role, that of provider, a necessary, nourishing role. A role that is whole, not less than. I am feeling humble before this log. I thank the log for its wisdom.

³ Krista Tippett interviews John O’Donohue (*On Being*, August 31, 2017) podcast.

⁴ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999) 48.

Chop tree, remove log, saw into planks, and build! Fast moving. Our society.

“Trust in the slow work of God,” said Teilhard de Chardin,

Patient Trust

*Above all, trust in the slow work of God.
We are quite naturally impatient in everything
to reach the end without delay.
We should like to skip the intermediate stages.
We are impatient of being on the way to something
unknown, something new.
And yet it is the law of all progress
that it is made by passing through
some stages of instability—
and that it may take a very long time.
And so I think it is with you;
your ideas mature gradually—let them grow,
let them shape themselves, without undue haste.
Don't try to force them on,
as though you could be today what time
(that is to say, grace and circumstances
acting on your own good will)
will make of you tomorrow.
Only God could say what this new spirit
gradually forming within you will be.
Give Our Lord the benefit of believing
that his hand is leading you,
and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself
in suspense and incomplete.⁵*

~ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, SJ

⁵ Teilhard de Chardin excerpted from *Hearts on Fire*
(www.ignatianspirituality.com/8078/prayer-of-teilhard-de-chardin, Loyola Press. 2009) online.

Honoring the web of life, and following many Native American traditions, I don't disturb the community of the trees unless I ask; and I sense the log would instruct me to leave it in its humble but necessary role for the health of the forest. As Sophia, I would see all of creation as holy: the seed, the sapling, the tree, the log. As a scientist, I would understand the need of fungi, soil morphology, nutrient cycles and natural generation.

Returning to the Treehouse, and in reflection, I recall the mossy layer on the log, the evidence of insect occupation, the deterioration that will create rich compost for new generations. The log is not through living, only the life we imagine for it. I am aware of the connection to the Wisdom of Indigenous People, recognized by Berry as one of the 4 Wisdoms we must learn from to live harmoniously on this earth. I would not be surprised if Berry spoke to the fallen logs.

*If you would learn more, ask the cattle,
Seek information from the birds of the air.
The creeping things of earth will give you lessons,
And the fishes of the sea will tell you all.
There is not a single creature that does not know
That everything is of God's making.
God holds in power the soul of every living thing,
And the breath of every human body.⁶
—Book of Job 12:7-10*

In Wonder Comes Wisdom

In a log home, the first frost calls to the ladybugs like the sirens in Greek Mythology. Calls them into homes where they will be swept away by the currents of the vacuum cleaner. Pests. They are viewed as living clutter, disrupting our media-induced image of the perfect home.

Little beetles silently chugging around...and flying. They are carnivorous and can inflict a teensy little bite, so I brush them off for their own sake because it is instinctive to swat at insects when startled. I am reminded of (reflect on) my grandchildren being encouraged by friends to step on anything that crawls on the ground or flies in the air. They soon learn the joy of

⁶ "Book of Job", *The Holy Bible, NRSV* (Nashville, TN: Cokesbury, 2009) 463.

becoming friends or friends-at-a-distance with crawly and fluttering creatures. There is an intimacy in relating with life in all forms.

Thomas Berry reminds us that “our relationship with the earth involves something more than pragmatic use, academic understanding, or aesthetic appreciation. A truly human intimacy with the earth and with the entire natural world is needed. Our children should be properly introduced to the world in which they live.”⁷ Back in the 12th century, visionary Hildegard of Bingen recognized the spirit in all of life when she said, “no creature lacks an intimate life.”⁸

One evening, reading Thomas Berry’s essay, “The Wild and the Sacred,”⁹ I see the boundaries I have constructed. This is precious life. We didn’t hesitate to capture the wren who flew into our house up to the loft in order to release it back to its habitat. Holding the quivering ball of feathers so tenderly in anticipation of a release, I question the mentality that requires the squashing of flying or crawling pests. We learn it from our elders. And we pass it on.

We – the ladybugs and I – had initially established this relationship: You do whatever is natural to you, ladybug, and I, in turn, will tolerate you. Berry emphasizes a core of respect and suggests we stop many destructive habits — habits developed to maintain an artificial standard. We must learn this core of respect ourselves and teach our children, not from media but through the four wisdoms: indigenous cultural integrity, feminine wisdom, wisdom of religious traditions and science.

Ah! Science! Of course! Lady bugs are good in the garden. It is time-consuming to capture ladybugs, but not difficult. They gather on the lampshade, running up and down the ridges until scooped into a container to be released in the greenhouse for the winter.

With their new label of garden helper, my perception of ladybugs changes. How they move along like little dotted bumper cars, 6 skinny legs working synchronistically to propel them, wings tucked away! I can and do get lost in watching them and disappear into them as I would watching a beautiful sunset.

⁷ Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), 13.

⁸ Hildegard of Bingen in Matthew Fox and Sheer Joy, *Conversations with Thomas Aquinas on Creation Spirituality* (NY: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 2003), 97.

⁹ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 48.

*A human being is part of the whole world, called by us “Universe,” a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separate from the rest — a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. The striving to free oneself from this delusion is the one issue of true religion. Not to nourish the delusion but to try to overcome it is the way to reach the attainable measure of peace of mind.*¹⁰

~ Albert Einstein

Winter Mudslide

Mud is very nice to feel
All squishy squash between the toes
I'd rather wade in wiggly mud
Than smell a yellow rose.

Nobody else but the rosebush knows
How nice mud feels
Between the toes.

~Anonymous

It has been raining for many days. We have had 8 ½ inches of rain in 10 days. A consequence of this “abnormal” rainfall presents itself with a landslide at the edge of our garden. Did we think we could control the soil? Dump fill dirt onto the edge of a mountain that was cut away to build a cabin? We supplement with good organic soil and manure in order to compensate for the removal of the naturally formed landscape. How much manipulation can the earth take? As Robin Kimmerer described in *Braiding Sweetgrass*,¹¹ we must listen to the earth, work cooperatively with the earth. Her ancestors, the Indigenous people of the Potawatomi tribe, were gentle with the earth. They listened to the earth, and with awareness, planted their gardens with love and respect.

Not that we didn't think we did this. Yet we planted rows of corn, rows of tomatoes, rows of beans, rows of cucumbers, of cabbage, of squash, in isolated homogenous communities. The stink bugs invaded, the squash bugs invaded, the worms in the corn, more worms came for the tomatoes, the raccoons jumped the fence (which is now about to slide down the mountain) and occasionally a rabbit came in for its fill when the gate was left open. Growing organically is good. But it takes sensitivity to know the needs of the plants. The 3 Sisters, corn, beans, and squash live cooperatively as a family unit, diverse as a family itself. The beans climb the

¹⁰ Albert Einstein in *Spirit Journal* (West Milford, NJ: Contemplative Outreach, March 2019) online.

¹¹ Robin Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 2013) Kindle.

cornstalk, bush out and shade the squash, which covers the ground. There is no question of using pesticides, but the weeds grow, and the squash covers the ground squelching the weeds and retaining water in the soil for the family unit. Less weed pulling. Less watering.

I stand at the edge of the new ravine and stare, mesmerized, at the mudslide. It took trees that were rooted, roots along with trunk and bare branches, all down with the mud. The trees were brave to grow there. We were ignorant to plow and seed near there. Yet we are to care for the earth and that means we need the wisdom of science to know circumstances and to predict results. Needing elders, we find few. Our culture does not sustain the wisdom the indigenous people nurtured and protected. How are we to teach our children? The knowledge is there and that is one layer. Do they care? If the people in their family community do not care, or know better; if they have not experienced the awe in their natural surroundings or in that which sustains them, then they, too need the vision quest of Thomas Berry.

Hovering, pondering the mudslide every day this week, a strange feeling comes through me today, calls to me. After early dismay to disgust, then aggravation, emerged an overriding sensation of amazement. I stand in awe. The mudslide simply surrendered to the laws of nature. It lives with the elements as we all do. It very simply...slid.

Pondering plunges me into an imaginal world of being the mudslide and I feel the swelling inside where rivulets of rainwater eat their way through to nowhere, and I feel the little spaces being carved out in the vessels of earth. In the vessels of me. Bubbles making spaces, water filling bubbles, earth tissues absorbing. The tightness, the need to breathe, the big gasp for breath and the driven release. This in a micro instant.

The water, pushing through earth's containment, gave birth to its newest home 100 feet below, on whose precipice I now stand.

How admirable. How freeing. If I were the mud, I'd slide too.

*I smiled at my lack of trust and self-importance, and nature's capability for surprise.
Sometimes I teeter on the verge of overwhelm and forget I have wings too.¹²*

~Kerri Welch

¹² Kerri Welch in *Order of the Sacred Earth: An Intergenerational Vision of Love and Action*, ed. Matthew Fox, Skylar Wilson, Jennifer Listug (Rhinebeck, New York: Monkfish Publishing, 2018) 169.

Listen Childlike and Behold

The lamps are different,
but the Light is the same.¹³

Listening to the first birds of Spring. A new band has come to the hills. The notes are different but the song is the same. Life calling.

There is a feeling of awe listening to the new/familiar sounds and there is a visceral presence that accompanies the energy of the Spring. The chirping is loud, varied, and seemingly endless. An underlying baritone burps into the chorus, the low, repetitive Bruuck! Brruuk! of the frog. Welcome back!

Have you ever really gone, frog? Because I haven't heard you, I haven't kept you in my conscious awareness. "Help me stay fully present in the experience," I remind myself, and not rely on memory. This is a moment, as expressed by Berry, "in and out of time, which we usually glimpse only for an instant before the thoughts and the patterns of our consciousness cloud over our eyes."¹⁴

This early morning I sit on my deck, wrapped snugly in my shawl. I close my eyes, rocking rhythmically with an instinctive wave-like energy that is soothing and serene. I feel the energy of Spring, and without the visual, my senses intensify. My body sways, then squirms, and desires to sing like the bird, to croak like the frog, to sail like the breeze, to tumble like the first flowering petals of the trees. Thomas Merton invites us "to forget ourselves on purpose, cast our awful solemnity to the winds and join in the general dance".¹⁵ And so I dance!

Walking early the following morning, I am absorbing Spring with childlike wonder. The sun is filtering through the trees. My movement adds to the flickering of light so I pause in stillness as the earth does the moving, and the essence I feel is that of living, loving light. The tender touch of sunbeams illumines each individual leaf, ever so gently caressing and moving on, like a silent symphony.

Sunlight loving leaves loving me loving sunlight.

¹³ Jalal al-Din Rumi, *The Essential Rumi*, trans. by Coleman Barks (NY: HarperCollins) 32.

¹⁴ Thomas Berry interviewed by Rich Heffern in *Interview with Thomas Berry* (ncronline.org, June 1, 2009).

¹⁵ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (Shambhala: 2003), 302-303.

Awe and wonder are primary spiritual qualities that Berry advises we nurture in our children. And in ourselves, of course.

"If this fascination, this entrancement with life isn't evoked," Berry said, "then our children won't have the energies needed to sustain the sorrows inherent in our condition. They might never discover their true place in the vast world of time and space."¹⁶

Shocking thought in my peaceful yet arbitrated world this morning, yet a reminder of the sacredness of experiences and expressions of our natural world.

Be Patient, Caterpillar

*Traveling along a safe and level road, who needs wings to fly?*¹⁷

~ St. Teresa of Avila

Children, for the most part, in our society travel the roads their parents and teachers map out for them. But the roads are becoming bumpier and less reliable, and predictably more hazardous. If we notice.

Walking the woods contemplatively is more important than just walking the woods. Some children's feet never leave the artificial turf, concrete sidewalks, linoleum and carpeted floors to experience a true connection to the earth. There are metaphors in nature we can learn from. Children love metaphors, and they can develop their own by observing nature.

One spring morning walk led to this reflection as my granddaughter and I observed a representative of a significant cultural metaphor: the caterpillar.

I see the light of love in her eyes as she watches the furry crawly creature try to wiggle across the crushed rock mountain road. "Is gravel natural to the environment of the caterpillar?" I

¹⁶ Thomas Berry interviewed by Rich Heffern in *Interview with Thomas Berry* (ncronline.org, June 1, 2009).

¹⁷ Saint Teresa of Avila, "Fifth Dwelling," *The Interior Castle*, trans. by Mirabai Starr (New York: Berkeley Publishing Group, Riverhead Books, 2003) Kindle Edition.

asked. She shook her head, checked out the safety of this species and she gently picked it up, placing it among the leaves just inside the woods.

She is knowing herself in this unknowable cosmos, through her walks in the woods.

“Let’s make the best possible use of our feet first and learn to know ourselves,”¹⁸ says Teresa of Avila. “And yet it seems to me that we will never know ourselves unless we seek to know *the gifts of creation, know love.*”¹⁸

This is not a safe and level road, and it helps to have wings. “Be patient, caterpillar,” we say.

Sharing this tender point of encounter is sacred, understood as creator creating in our midst, listening, loving. Encounters with nature help us, help the children across the threshold into the oneness with the earth and all creation.

But first comes the chrysalis! The chrysalis or cocoon allows us the hidden place to develop our ability to fly, and to do this we must know ourselves. We must know ourselves in the context of our earth home. Because we are of the earth and on the earth and with the earth.

Who will help the children fly? Children entering the sacred space of Timberlake have a metamorphosis experience through silence, stillness and an authentic encounter with nature. This is a timeless place, a threshold of recognition of connection, or oneness, of being present to self and to the earth, and to infinite love.

Boundarylessness and the Bear

Spring is in full bloom. Life knows no boundaries, multiplying profusely, uncontainable in the circle of my mind. Conceptualizing Spring is like putting a tiger or other living creature in a zoo... it loses its natural flow, the light in its eyes are dimmed. It is sometimes the most of nature, unnatural nature that children will see.

The sounds of Spring know no boundaries, it seems. An unfamiliar splashing of water on a dry morning brought me to the deck in time to see a full-grown bear cavorting in our small pond. “Hey, this is my pond and my goldfish!” is my initial response. I am also in awe of this giant, who is a mostly gentle giant. The bear looks up at me and seems unconcerned, but heaves

¹⁸ Ibid.

himself out of the pond, shaking excess water and lumbers off. I imagined him Pooh-ishly saying, “Oh, Bother!”

My pond. My goldfish. Where do we get this ownership? Nature is boundaryless!

Our housebound, building-bound children miss this openness to the natural world. It is the opportunity the Inner Life of the Child in Nature provides. Children are alive and mystical, beliefs expressed by educator Maria Montessori and theologian Meister Eckhart as noted by Matthew Fox.¹⁹ Awe, wonder, gratitude, reverence and relationship with the universe are paramount. Their innate love of learning is often stunted in school regimen. Learning should be pleasing. Where has the joy of learning gone?

Do I know the bear encyclopedically? Yes. But I know the bear in a deeper way, in an intimate and integrated way. Was there joy in my encounter? Yes.

Peggy Whalen-Levitt describes the Inner Life of the Child in Nature program: “Every day in our work with the children, we bring this intimacy and compassionate quality of the universe to life through our eco-contemplative practices of being, beholding and belonging to the world around us.”²⁰

Which way will we educate? Why do we restrict the boundarylessness of the child’s mind? We have the opportunity to reimagine everything, to educate with the tools of imagination, creativity and nature. To be and to become.

Fallen Giant

“What if consciousness has no roots in the earth?”²¹

¹⁹ Matthew Fox, *Meister Eckhart: A Mystic-Warrior for Our Times* (Novato, CA: New World Library) 253.

²⁰ Peggy Whalen-Levitt, Opening Letter, *Chrysalis* (Vol 14, Spring 2017).

²¹ Carl Jung, *The Earth Has a Soul: The Nature Writings of C.G. Jung* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2002) 62.

There is a tree on my walking path. I often stop as it seems to be speaking to me. It has fallen and the roots which have ripped from the earth are reaching out toward the path like spindly arms. Reaching out to me. I go into receptive mode, audaciously determining this is a tragic event. The withering roots are pleading, I imagine as I put myself in the position of the tree assuming the desire of the tree would be to remain upright and healthy, as is my desire, its roots straining to reach and stretch themselves back into the earth. I listen. No groaning. No regrets. It was an imaginative, emotion-generated intimacy and as I looked down the length of the fallen tree, I realized it was resting serenely, nestled into the leaves and covered with a blanket of moss, providing a home for others. There was body language in this tree.

I walk on with a sense of appreciation, but still a sense of remorse for the fallen giant. I come back the next day and sit closer in stillness, in slow-time.

I used to think of time as a progression: coming out of the solidity of the past, being in the ungraspable present, and getting ready to enter the unknowable future. But I am reminded that there is only one time—this present moment, all that is.

I listen to the tree.

*This is my life. No regrets, no self-superiority, no anticipation.
My consciousness is not rooted in the earth, dependent upon the earth.*

In the present moment, I share a quiet joy with the tree. No roots.

*The divine communicates to us primarily through the language of the natural world.
Not to hear the natural world is not to hear the divine.²²*

~ Thomas Berry

²² Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe: Earth, Spirituality, and Religion in the Twenty-first Century*, ed. by Mary Evelyn Tucker (Columbia University Press; 1st edition, 2009) 145.

Soul Touching

hoping it isn't –
for the sake of your children –
too little, too late²³

~ Lyn Hopper

My walk today has taken on a sadness. A whale was found dead in Italy with 48 lbs of plastic in her stomach. Pregnant and aborted. There are 5 trillion pieces of plastic floating in our oceans. This awareness hurts me and makes me feel angry and inept. This awareness interrupts my communion with the trees, the birds, the lake. I felt myself apologizing to the trees, the bushes, the undergrowth just as I would to our children for the changes we as the guardian species created; the ominously irreversible changes.

Wendell Berry paraphrased from a common quote, “the world is not given by his fathers but borrowed from his children.”²⁴ I feel the personal and group irresponsibility, shame at being swept along in superfluous comfort and ease; so slow in recognizing, so reluctant to cease the behaviors that are creating the irreversible changes.

I have, as long as I can remember, been aware of the beauty of nature, of earth and cosmos. I am acutely aware of my surroundings, the beauty, the souls I have befriended in the flora and fauna. They are subjects of my awareness. Can I do this outside of nature, that is my question. Can I transform the tech-transferred object-images into the oneness I feel in the nature that I see, hear, feel, commune with daily?

Thomas Berry says we need a mystical communion with the earth, and today there is a crack in my awareness. Rather than appreciation flowing out from my heart, my heart feels open and I am transforming the awareness from object to subject, asking them in to an inner space of awareness that I can only describe as awareness of awareness. Like St. Teresa’s inner rooms in *The Interior Castle*, the inner room is infinitely larger than the room that contains it.

Awareness of awareness has this effect: I am not unwaveringly focused on a pre-determined goal; rather I am aware and open and receptive. I am surrendering the role of savior to protector of the environment. I am oneing with and vulnerable with my earth family. I hear within (me)

²³ Lyn Hopper, Daily Haiku, <http://eepurl.com/cvXSmX> April 2, 2019.

²⁴ Wendell Berry, *The One-Inch Journey* (New York: National Audubon Society) 9.

the sound of the earth crying, as Thich Nhat Hanh expresses sorrowfully, and like a mother, I respond to that cry.

Richard Rohr says that when you love something, you grant it soul,
you see its soul, and you let its soul touch yours.²⁵

A Yokuts Prayer²⁶

Sacred One,
Teach us love, compassion, and honor
That we may heal the earth
And heal each other.

My words are tied in one
With the great mountains,
With the great rocks,
With the great trees,

In one with my body
And my heart,
Do you all help me
With supernatural power,

With supernatural power,
And you, Night,
All of you see me
One with this world!

Sally Pamplin is a lover of nature and seeker in the wisdom traditions. Her doctorate is in Educational Leadership with degrees in M.S. Science Education, Early Childhood and Gifted Education. Her career focus was in curriculum development, helping teachers differentiate curriculum for *all* learners by implementing thematic instruction through environmental education, and evaluating the affective and academic impact taking place in this real life learning method. Sally was part of a team who developed the Advanced Training of Environmental Educators in Georgia Certification program (ATEEG), and was awarded the Outstanding Service Award by the Georgia Environmental Education Association in 2005.

²⁵ Richard Rohr, "Nature is Ensouled," *Daily Meditations* (Albuquerque, NM: CAC, 2018).

²⁶ Yokuts Prayer, <http://www.worldhealingprayers.com/2.html>

A Journey Towards Authenticity

by

Janet Perez

“Please come home. Please come home”¹



Longing for Authenticity

My longing for authenticity began when I was a child; yet I would not recognize this longing until well into the first year of my Inner Life of the Child in Nature (ILCN) program at the Center for Education, Imagination, and the Natural World (CEINW). Under the wise guidance of Peggy Whalen-Levitt, Sandy Bisdee and Andrew Levitt, I found the courage to embark on one of the most important journeys of my life.

I am a child of the 60's. My TV screen was filled with images that seemed to war against each other. The white idyllic world of “Father Knows Best”, “Leave it to Beaver”, and “The Andy Griffith Show” was in sharp contrast to the nightly news broadcasts of peaceful civil right marchers, vicious police dogs and firemen with hoses on full blast.

The first prayer that I recall praying as a child was: "God, do you like black people?"

Integration, that commendable effort that began after Brown vs the Board of Education-Topeka, resulted in my sudden removal from an integrated kindergarten class in my home school, the school I attended with my older sister who was a constant source of comfort and connection. When my mother took me to the new, predominately white school about twenty minutes away, I repeatedly screamed and hollered, "Momma, please don't leave me! Please don't leave me!" For days, maybe weeks, I cried constantly in class and refused to interact with the other children. Somehow I knew I did not belong. Where once I had a whole identity, my world quickly became filled with labels: walkers and bus riders; lunch boxes and free lunches; white kids and black kids. These kids and those kids.

¹ Jane Hooper, “Please Come Home,” in Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Way of Knowing* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2003), 38.

What does this have to do with education, imagination, and the natural world?

Looking back, I can see how the issue of race strips children of all colors of their authentic selves. White children are distorted by the illusion of superiority, while children of other colors are sucked into a cruel cycle of proving their innate worth, value, and belonging—something they already possess. (What a waste of energy, time and talent!) Nature automatically gifts each of us, all of us, with worth, value, and belonging. As Peggy wrote in an email, “We already belong... and have only to awaken to it.” Guiding students towards this awakening is a mission I am embarking on as a graduate of the ILCN program.

The ILCN program introduced me to the teaching of Thomas Berry. My understanding expanded when I read his dedication to *The Great Work*. For the first time, I saw all the children of the Earth, not just the human children, but also “the children who swim beneath the waves of the sea... and the winged ones who fly with the winds.”²

Yet, when introduced to Berry's teaching on “I-Thou”, my life experiences made me wonder if there was something lower than treating someone as an Object. Perhaps there were three types of relationships:

I (authentic self) - Thou,
I (masked self) - Object, and
I (masked self) - It.

(The latter relationship may actually occur when a person's self-identity becomes an object instead of a masked self, as in “I (object) - It”. How else could we strip another of the birthright of belonging, value and worth.)

I agreed that “I-Thou” is where authenticity occurs. Being in “I (authentic self)” is required to behold Thou. This is my longing, I - Thou. After much thought I speculated that “I (masked self) - Object” dwells in the land of superiority, pretense and labels, while “I (masked self) - It” is rooted in greed and oppression. While being treated as Object is not desirable, I concluded that an Object at least has purpose and value. However, being treated as "It" meant you have no value. You are invisible. Expendable. Worthless. Trash (which of course is a lie).

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

This insight was fueled as I listened to my mother recount her younger years, something she began doing nightly due to Alzheimer's attack on her brain. She told stories of Georgia sharecropping, where crops always came before school; of walking miles to a one-room school with seventy children from grades pre-primer to the culminating eighth grade, contrasted with the tales of white children riding buses to traditional school buildings and K-12 education. I saw the bitter pain in her eyes as she spoke of having to step off the sidewalk whenever a white person walked by, and of always being called "gal" instead of by her name, even though she was a grown woman. As I listened, I knew these stories were only the tip of the iceberg. Besides being demeaning and demoralizing, the Jim Crow South of her youth was also destructive and deadly. To survive, masks were required, as powerfully described in the poem "We Wear the Mask"³ by Paul Lawrence Dunbar.

We Wear the Mask

*We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.*

*Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
 We wear the mask.*

*We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
 We wear the mask!*

Although masks can serve as tools for survival, they also can become worn, heavy and confining. Perhaps this is why when asked to select a "Practice of Presence" based on my deepest

³ Paul Laurence Dunbar, "We Wear the Mask" in *The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar* (Adansonia Press, 2018, first published in 1922), 54.

joy and the earth's deepest need, I responded that the earth needs authentic, loving people, and my greatest joy occurs when I take off my many masks and share my authentic, loving self.

For the last twenty-five years I have worked as a teacher, teaching students from birth to 89 years in age. I have taught students who lived in privileged homes, challenging environments, and/or haunting nightmares. As an educator, Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs has been a foundational theory that has guided my understanding of student behavior and motivation. According to Maslow, our physiological and safety needs must be met before we are able to embrace love and belonging, self-esteem and self-actualization. Maslow is why we feed students breakfast at school and spend so much time creating safe learning spaces. Students will not learn until their primary needs are met. So we offer food, comfort, safety. Sadly, even when these basic needs are met, too often, belonging never materializes.

While working on this writing I received an email announcing an Amazon Kindle special sale. The first book offered was *Belonging: Find Your People, Create Community & Live a More Connected Life* by Ashad Agrawal. "Wow! What synchronicity!" I thought. Yes, just as the book summary stated, our lack of belonging has led to increased isolation, depression, and even suicides. According to the summary, this book would help me create my own communities and find where I belong. It sounded good. I was almost sold, but not quite.

For me the book seemed to miss the main point of belonging: I belong simply because I am part of the natural world. I am one of the children of the world. Belonging is not something I need to create, but a fact of life to awaken to and embrace. Creating "my community" can feed the human tendency to exclude others. Then, instead of welcoming "I-Thou" relationships, community becomes exclusive. Members are chosen, not beholden. If fear creeps in, this can lead to a descent into the dark terrain of turning other members of the natural world into Object or It.

**"Please come home to trusting yourself,
and your instincts and your ways and your knowings"⁴**

So how do I unmask my "I"? That became my most pressing question, The answer came during one of our ILCN gatherings which began with a reading of the poem "*Please Come Home*" by Jane Hooper. Like a caterpillar weaving a chrysalis, the poem wrapped itself around me and created a cocoon of belonging. There was no need to explain any of my experiences,

⁴ Jane Hooper, "Please Come Home", in Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Way of Knowing*, 39.

thoughts, ideas. Before relating authentically with other, I first had to reconnect with my truest self. I needed to awaken to the art of “Being, Beholding, Belonging”, three words found repeated in the heading on the CEINW webpages.

Late night walks with my dog invited me to look up and wonder about the vastness of this numinous creation and my place in it. Simply standing among my neighborhood trees brought solace and moments of deep beholding. I (unmasked) and Thou (oh beautiful, tall trees).

Until recently, I did not question Maslow's theory. In fact, I quoted it often. However, my two-year journey towards authenticity has led me to wonder if belonging is in fact our primary need. If I truly belong, then my physiological and safety needs will be met. That’s how the natural world works. Belonging is the root of all authentic relationships. I am, and I belong. You are, and you belong.

As a teacher I wish this truth was reinforced daily in every classroom. Just this week a gifted high school student shared a song he wrote. One line that kept repeating in the chorus was: “I was a mistake.” Sadly, he has been led to believe that belonging must be earned. “I” must do something, accomplish something, possess something, become more than I am; otherwise, I am simply a mistake, an Object, an It.

Trees understand that the only thing they must be is who they are.



Finding my authentic self required courage. I had to take off turtle shell and crawl out of my chameleon skin. Then there was the cocoon of silence, silence not as the absence of sound, but as the absence of angst. Silence became my guide and companion. Silence led me to a week-long retreat divided between St. Francis Springs Prayer Center (Stoneville, NC) and the Well of Mercy (Harmony, NC). As I wandered the trails, walked labyrinths, and whispered prayers in

the chapels, I began to understand that my journey towards authenticity would require much time alone in nature in order to reconnect with my birthright of being, beholding, belonging. Thankfully, as Hooper's poem compassionately affirmed, I did not have to rush. I did not have to come out until I was ready.

*And when you are ready, really ready...please come out*⁵



I have spent the last year thinking about belonging as the first step towards authenticity. At work, I have watched students work hard to fit in with one group or another and noted what occurs when they don't.

If I could go back to my beginning days of teaching, or even better, to my first days in that newly integrated kindergarten class, I would help children learn that belonging is a gift to nurture and cherish, in oneself and in all the Children of the Earth.

Without a true sense of belonging, it is hard to embrace what I believe are the other two cornerstones of authenticity: reciprocity and legacy. I credit Robin Wall Kimmerer with expanding my understanding of this sacred trio, Kimmerer's book, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*⁶ is a love song of belonging, reciprocity and legacy, each page sings: I-Thou, I-Thou, I-Thou.

⁵ Jane Hooper, "Please Come Home", in Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Way of Knowing*, 39.

⁶ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 2013).

Since I belong and you belong, we, all the members of the natural world, are in a reciprocal relationship that is intimate, amazing and fragile.

Kimmerer taught me that reciprocity means I never take more than I give, and what I do take I use wisely and share generously. I respect and honor the precious balance of life, diversity, and renewal. Reciprocity (not my grades, accomplishments, awards, possessions) is now the core of my life purpose, my guiding star, my connection to all the children of the Earth. Reciprocity begins with beholding. When I awaken to belonging, I will behold Thou.

Recently a friend gave me a children's book, *The Secret of Water: For the Children of the World* by Masaru Emoto.⁷ This beautiful book reminded me that water is not an Object. Water is a sacred Thou! Emoto reminded me that all the water on the Earth is all the water that has ever been on the Earth. Emoto then invited me to consider a deeper thought. Since our bodies are primarily composed of water, it is water (not blood) that unites us.

Living water!



What a concept to plant into the imagination of children! We belong, and we are connected.

This connection of beholding and reciprocity leads to an understanding of legacy. Legacy is a two-edged sword, a comfort and a dread. In the Christian bible, there are many references to sowing and reaping. The book of Revelation states, “their works do follow them.” (Revelations

⁷ Masaru Emoto, *The Secret of Water* (New York, NY: Atria Books, 2006).

14:13). Just as the legacy of the Jim Crow South of my mother's youth continues to affect lives today, many of the environmental challenges facing my generation are the effects of actions taken (or not taken) before we were born. Long-term consequences are rarely considered by my instant-gratification generation. This is also seen within my chosen profession. We are inundating students with technology. Virtual-reality is in. Also, practically every teacher workshop I attend these days includes the term WIIFM: what's in it for me. The latest educational buzzword is personalized learning (fueled by technology). The focus is on the individual. All me, no we (unless I invite you into my community. Definitely no authentic "I-Thou."

The United Nations recently issued a report stating that the extinction of many species will be the legacy of my generation. Plastic pollution, toxic coal-ash waste, contaminated water, the list of environmental crises grows daily, yet, in an "I (masked) - Object / It" state of mind it is easy to ignore these ominous warnings with no concern for the legacy we are leaving behind.

I keep wondering how much longer will the Earth put up with our foolishness. I was not alone in my musing. In the April Reflection (2019) from CEINW, Peggy sent out the following quote from Thomas Berry:

"If the earth does grow inhospitable toward human presence, it is primarily because we have lost our sense of courtesy toward the earth and its inhabitants, our sense of gratitude, our willingness to recognize the sacred character of habitat, our capacity for the awesome, for the numinous quality of every earthly reality. We have even forgotten our primordial capacity for language at the elementary level of song and dance, wherein we share our existence with the animals and with all natural phenomena."⁸



⁸ Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), 2.

While walking along North Carolina's Atlantic Beach during one of my silent retreats, I paused to consider the seashell along the beach. "These were remnants of a life once lived," I thought. For the first time, I realized that there was a story inside each shell. Often, I collected shells without considering their previous owners. The shells were simply objects. However, in that moment, I experienced the simple beauty of "I-Thou," being who I am and graciously beholding life in one of its many forms.

Nurturing a child's authentic self helps to create a world that is safe for all the children of the Earth. Thus, my current pressing question is how can we turn schools into places where students experience the power of belonging, reciprocity and legacy (instead of places where students create masks and collect objects). Fortunately, this April, my colleagues and I were able to bring ten middle school students from the Governor Morehead School for the Blind to CEINW's Empathetic Listening program. The students' reflections during the closing circle resonated with a cry for more, more time to slow down, more opportunities to behold nature, more guidance to develop the "capacity for the awesome." Upon returning to school, one student wrote:

"From deep within my mind,
New thoughts came to me like never before,
peaceful thoughts.
I am now one with myself."

"Please come home and please come forward"⁹

The last two years have graced me with many opportunities to grow. In addition to the daily encounters with Alzheimer's, I also supported my older sister as she cared for her daughter during my niece's battle with brain cancer, a battle that ended on the first day of Spring in 2018. As I contemplated the life of a child in the natural world, I also had to consider the role of death in the cycle of life. Death as loss; death as necessity, death as renewal. Death as the final step in the journey towards authenticity.

I am grateful for my mentors at the ILCN program (Peggy, Sandy, and Andrew) and for their invitation to begin a practice based on the world's greatest need and my greatest joy. The world needs authentic, loving people who understand and embrace belonging, reciprocity and legacy. Thanks to the ILCN program, I will continue my journey towards authenticity with a newfound freedom to be just who I am. Authentic. Loving. Unmasked.

⁹ Jane Hooper in Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Way of Knowing*, 39.

*Please come home. Please come home.
And when you feel yourself home, please welcome us too,
For we too forget that we belong and are welcome,
And that we are called to express fully who we are.*¹⁰

This gift of awakening and welcoming is what I long to share with my students each day. For me, the natural world is the foundation for educating children. It's where children belong.



Dogwood Petals

Dogwood petals gently land
On pine straws laced
with toasted leaves

Joined by wind,
Fall kisses Spring

—Janet Perez

¹⁰ Ibid.

Step into the Woods



Come step into the woods
Come, step deeper,
Deeper

Don't be afraid of the
Silence you hear

It's only your soul breathing
Deeper
Freer

Embrace the absence of
City noises, human voices
clattering inner doubts

Listen as trees speak
Beneath the carpet
Of mosses, soft needles
Fallen leaves

You are never alone.

The sounds of the forest
Will ease your mind
And melt away your
Gnawing stress
No need to worry

You belong here.

Come,
step closer
Breathe deeply

Rest

~ Janet Perez



End Notes:

Photos:

Page 1: Trail walk at Timberlake Earth Sanctuary (Whitsett, NC)

Pages 4-5: Trail walk at Well of Mercy (Harmony, NC)

Page 6: Beach Access at Atlantic Beach, NC

Page 7 (from left to right): a tree within a tree at Bond Park, Cary, NC; Seashells along Atlantic Beach, NC (Fort Macon access); newly hatched birds at Sylvan Bird Sanctuary (Scotland Neck, NC)

Page 8: Trail at Bond Park (Cary, NC)

Page 9: Meditation station at Well of Mercy (top), dogwood tree near my home (Cary, NC)

All photos were taken by Janet Perez using either an iPhone or an iPad.

Janet Duncan Perez grew up in Jamaica, NY where she fell in love with a majestic oak tree. "The Tree" served as the meeting place for the neighborhood children and offered shade, safety, and a sense of belonging during the turbulent 60s. Janet served three years in the U.S. Army. After the Army, Janet began pursuing a career in education. She earned a M.Ed. from UNC Charlotte and delivered the student commencement speech to her Class of 2001. Janet has taught students from birth to 89. For the last fifteen years she has worked with people (adults/teens/children) who are blind or visually impaired. She also earned a certificate in documentary studies from the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke. Excerpts from her final project, "Insight Beyond Eyesight," aired on BBC Radio 4. As a member of the 2017-2019 Inner Life of the Child in Nature cohort, Janet continues exploring nature's pathways to belonging, which she believes will help heal childhood trauma, especially those caused by racial strife. Lessons learned from her majestic oak tree still reside in her heart.

Befriending the World with Imagination: Presence as Practice

by

Thomas J. Roepke

“Above all, tell them to practice an intimate presence to the beauty and wonder of the natural world through their intuitive awareness that recognizes the oneness of all life; tell them to stop and enlarge moments throughout their days to become aware of the mysteries and miracles of creation all around them – the movement of a squirrel, the sound of a bird, the pattern of a leaf, changing patterns of light, the sun, the rain, the stars, dawn and sunset. Tell them we are not ourselves without everything and everyone else.”

~ Thomas Berry

In the fall of 2017, I started my thirty seventh year of teaching with the sense it would be my last. My enthusiasm at school had no direct connection to promoting the acquisition of academic skills or attainment of grade level benchmarks. Instead, joy flowed from sharing experiences of the world’s beauty and wonder. I enrolled in the Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Practice and Presence program thinking it would help me craft a way to highlight the importance of contemplative experiences for children and educators as well. In the end, this meant deepening an experience of their importance in my own life.

What qualities and capacities help broaden the horizon of our consciousness? How do we practice Berry’s advice to recognize the oneness of all life? The answer to these questions may have something to do with the use of imagination and intentional cultivation of small moments in daily life. The Inner Life program supported an exploration of the world revealed by my senses and an inner world of images unavailable to direct perception.

A descriptive framework of my experiences in nature gradually unfolded. With guidance from our cohort gatherings, I started to recognize a process of beholding, befriending and becoming one with my fellow beings. What follows is an attempt to understand the wonderful something that happened in my life as I explored my relationships with the natural world.

¹Thomas Berry quoted in Carolyn Toben, *Recovering A Sense of the Sacred: Conversations with Thomas Berry* (Whitsett, NC: Timberlake Earth Sanctuary Press, 2012), 136-137.

An overview of a process that emerged looks something like this:

Beholding...

stillness, silence, grounding	(preparation)	soil
availability, offering, receptivity	(invitation)	seed

Befriending...

Experiencing communion	(participation)	cultivation
wonder, beauty, reverence	(recognition)	flowering

Becoming...

truth, peace, love	(sharing presence)	fruit
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Beholding

The world is always available to behold. We don't need to wait for an invitation or just the right conditions. Seeing the Grand Canyon or a star filled desert sky easily evokes wonder and reverence, but the same experiences await one who truly sees a blade of grass or a cumulus cloud slowly changing its shape in the sky. Daily life offers subtle glories in abundance, yet these wonders often remain unrecognized if we don't practice the stillness needed to notice them. Stillness invites a space for beholding the world that surrounds us. Standing still, feeling my feet on the earth with an awareness of what I'm actually experiencing in a given moment is a practice I've come to value.

Silence also contributes to the formation of a space for beholding. The silence we experience simply by not speaking may be a prerequisite for fully experiencing both the outer world and our own inner life. Beyond this is the possibility of silencing our thoughts, desires and eventually the stories we carry around to define ourselves. One afternoon after a period of silence and stillness in the woods I wrote a short poem:

*Sitting with some tall pines,
Beams of January sunshine warm my face.
Watching my friends sway gently in the breeze,
Fills me with peace...
and wonder.*

Our Inner Life gatherings at Timberlake Earth Sanctuary provided opportunities to experience the beholding I'm trying to describe. During a solo walk in the rain, I found myself looking carefully at a blade of grass. A poem that I jotted in my notebook illustrates how imagination enriches our experience of the natural world. Without it, I probably would have missed the sound of the falling drop.

*Raindrops resting
On a blade of grass
Motionless...until at last
One drop slides down
And falls in a flash
Making such a tiny splash*

Now, as I read these short verses, I experience those moments of beholding the natural world again...and I smile. Listening now to birds chirping outside, as a gentle breeze blows through the window on a sunny Manhattan morning, I'm starting to think moments like these are not just breaks or a rest from life's tasks. It seems experiencing nowness is the main event! I guess that's what the teacher meant when he said the present is a present and encouraged us to open it with enjoyment. I still have plenty of crusty conditioning that blocks my access to the wonder of most moments, but as I age, some significant cracks in the prison walls are thankfully starting to appear, allowing me to peer into paradise.

Here is an unspeakable secret: Paradise is all around us and we do not understand. It is wide open... With my hair almost on end and the eyes of the soul wide open I am present, without knowing it at all, in this unspeakable Paradise, and I behold this secret which is there for everyone, free, and no one pays any attention. O Paradise of simplicity, self-awareness - and self-forgetfulness - liberty, peace.¹

~ Thomas Merton

Befriending

Friendships with fellow beings slowly formed as I beheld the natural world. These friendships had all the qualities of those I have with human beings. My nature friends provided solace, encouragement, companionship, inspiration and more. I wonder why I had for so many years limited my friendship to a small subset of humanity while the entire universe awaited my

¹ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 131-132.

loving attention. Befriending nature helped me realize an interesting connection between the words “alone” and “all one”. A sense of being alone in the world is slowly dissolving as awareness of the world’s underlying unity unfolds.

I felt a sense of communion while sitting in the woods and I began to cherish communion, a form of togetherness beyond thoughts and words. While the moments of genuine communion I experienced were brief, they produced a lingering residue of wonder and reverence. At times these feelings inspired a poem:

Requiem for a Forest Friend

*Little golden leaf friend
tumbling gently down
making such a subtle sound
landing softly on the ground.
Raising you up into the sky,
sunlight shines through you
into my eyes...
and my I cries,
“You are so beautiful,
even when you’re dead and dry
you fill me with wonder and love!
I whisper “rest in peace my friend”,
and place you on the earth again.*

Not Just a Slug

*You’re such a sweet little slug,
looking like glistening glass
polished in the rain;
Moving...so...slowly...
unseen by any other human being.
We visited earlier and now we meet again.
Were you resting while we ate lunch?
Traveling such a short distance,
moving less than a foot an hour,
are you sprinting with full power
toward that blooming yellow flower?*

More often, I simply enjoyed recalling the experiences. For example, during one of the solo walks we took, I met some tiny baby pinecones emerging from a low branch. After spending some precious time together I looked carefully to see if anyone else was nearby. When assured we were alone, I thanked one of the cones with a gentle kiss, knowing it was felt by the entire tree. Imagine that! Intimacy with a pine tree is available to us all. I believe this possibility can be shared with children when we befriend the world ourselves.

Becoming

Becoming fully human requires what Thomas Berry described as an “intuitive awareness that recognizes the oneness of all life.” An awareness of the oneness can be developed by actively engaging the imagination while in nature. Possibilities are endless for contemplating the interconnectedness of all we encounter.

Beyond this, our imagination can allow us to experience wonder and beauty that would remain hidden if we relied on sense perception alone. Below are a few more poems inspired by experiences in nature, sense experiences imbued with imagination.

Beholding, befriending and becoming one with the natural world sounds like an overwhelming task, but continuing to neglect our capacity to do so is not a wise alternative. As a world teacher once said, perception of oneness is wisdom and wisdom brings peace.

Thirsting

Spring breeze

Purple trees

Buds are bursting

Humanity is thirsting ...

For wisdom and love

Mother Nature is everywhere

Mother Nature is everywhere

She may be harder to recognize

When formed into the objects we create,

But she's there, in our buildings and boats,

In stores and clothes and castle moats

In all we make from her “resources”,

*In GMO foods and synthetic pharmaceuticals
Mother Nature also goes by the name Spirit
And matter simply can not exist without her.
So tread with reverence as you walk about
On grass, on asphalt, or sidewalk grout.
Look how we turned metal and rock
Into the bones of New York City,
Bones that support an abundance of plants and animals
Easily overlooked as part of the natural world
Just because they live with us in the city.
And let's not forget the light and air
Embracing us so lovingly with care.*

It's not too late for change

*Subway stations, like some classrooms,
Are often void of natural light, plants and fresh air!
Why are schools and prisons
places without plants?
Why do court rooms,
hospitals, military bases,
nursing homes and banks
Suffer the same fate?
It's not too late...
For change*

Tom Roepke recently retired after thirty-seven years of teaching. For the past twenty years he taught in New York City as a literacy specialist at a public school in East Harlem. His role included helping teachers, parents and children engage in contemplative practices and develop social and emotional learning competencies. Earlier in his career he became a certified Waldorf teacher and taught a class of children from first grade through seventh grade at the Rudolf Steiner School in NYC. Tom graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison with a BS in Education. He also has a Masters in Early Childhood Education from Antioch New England and a Masters in Special Education from Hunter College.

Web of the Natural World

by

Amanda Smith

Welcome to my enlightenment! Thich Nhat Hanh claims, “Enlightenment, joy and peace can never be given to you by another. The well is inside you”. I had no idea what I was getting myself into when I began the Inner Life Program. I began the program in fall of 2017, immediately following completion of my Montessori teacher training. I had hopes of learning new methods and modes of inspiring and connecting students with nature on a deeper level, but I had no idea that I myself would begin to discover the depths of the well of enlightenment, joy, and peace all around me and within myself.

One of the core principles of the Montessori philosophy is the cosmic curriculum. This is the idea that all beings are an integral part of our universe and we are all interdependent with each other. Montessori starts with the big picture in mind and works it way down to the individual. Simply put by Dr. Maria Montessori herself,

Since it has been seen to be necessary to give so much to the child, let us give him a vision of the whole universe. The universe is an imposing reality, and an answer to all questions. We shall walk together on this path of life, for all things are part of the universe, and are connected with each other to form one whole unity. This idea helps the mind of the child to become fixed, to stop wandering in an aimless quest for knowledge. He is satisfied, having found the universal centre of himself with all things.¹

This sentiment is echoed by Thomas Berry when he states, “For the universe story is our own story. We cannot know ourselves in any adequate manner except through an account of the transformations of the universe and of the planet Earth through which we came into being. This new story of the universe is our personal story as well as our community story.”² Telling stories about the creation of the universe and the coming of life on Earth fills students with a sense of wonder, awe, and reverence for the amazing universe, the planet we call home, and all the creatures living on it. Through this exploration, young children are able to seek to understand

¹ Maria Montessori, *To Educate the Human Potential* (Amsterdam: Montessori-Pierson Publishing Company, 2007), 5-6.

² Thomas Berry, *The Great Work* (New York: Harmony/Belltower, 1999), 83.

their place and greater purpose within this wonderful web of life, discovering their own cosmic task within the universe.

The Inner Life program itself is divided into three components: presence, contemplation, and practice. I will walk you through my journey during each of these processes. Keep in mind this work is ongoing and I truly feel that this is only the beginning of a lifelong communion with the natural world!

Presence

The first step of the process was developing a practice of presence with the natural world. I read carefully selected articles, stories, and poems in order to prepare my spirit for a deepening presence and communion with the natural world. Peggy, Sandy, and Andrew taught us how to read for reflection rather than content, inviting us to read for what touches our soul. I immediately knew that I wanted my practice of presence to incorporate mindfulness and mimic the natural rhythms of the day.

I chose to pursue a daily practice of a sun salutation (yoga flow) at sunrise followed by a short time for journaling with the goal of offering loving attention directly from my soul into the soul of the world. What I came to find, after developing and practicing a deep listening and expressing a deep reverence for the natural world, was that so often, it was the soul of the natural world offering itself to me.

Sometimes my sunrise practice would lead to an effortless flow and other times I felt annoyed and rushed, but I did it anyway! I learned to listen to and follow my body. After yoga, sometimes I would read from Andrew Levitt's book of poetry, *Heron Mornings*³ and journal about my reflections, while other times I could barely squeeze in a quick shower before rushing out the door. However, looking back on this practice at our retreat last June, I journaled that this daily mindfulness practice "brought me peace, presence, awareness, and gratitude that carried with me throughout each day." I enjoy being able to look back on this journal remembering the ups and downs of this journey.

³ Andrew Levitt, *Heron Mornings (Greensboro: The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World, 2017)*.

Through this practice, I began to recognize and understand the divine presence that exists within the natural world. “The adventure of the universe depends on our capacity to listen.”⁴ I learned to listen deeply and attentively to the universe putting my thoughts and knowings aside to truly listen. Let me tell you, this is much easier said than done, especially for a millennial, who is guilty of consumerism and getting lost in material objects and desires and expecting instant gratification, often forgetting about the blessings gifted and shared with humans for hundreds of thousands of years by our Mother, the Earth. I am continuously moving from an “I-It” relationship with the world to an “I-Thou” relationship and communion with the natural world.

Contemplation

The next phase of the program was contemplation, where we reflected on our practice of presence cultivated the previous year and listened for the will, not of ourselves but the universe, to guide our next steps. We were guided into this process using Frederick Buechner’s idea of vocation as “the place where your deep gladness meets the world’s deep needs”.⁵ We were warmly welcomed by the harmonious sounds of Sandy’s Native American flute surrounded by trees, amphibians, birds, mammals, and insects in a place where all beings are accepted and free - how different this is from the outside world in which we live.

The morning began with a guided solo walk through Timberlake Earth Sanctuary where all beings are free and recognized for everything they are. The walk included quotes which I meditated over along the mossy way and deep, thoughtful questions for pondering in the bamboo forest along the water’s edge. We were guided to think about our individual truth, life, and light and focus on coming-into-being with our higher selves and co-becoming with the universe rather than attaching ourselves to fragments of the outer world. This was difficult for me and I felt uneasy as I was guided to sit in silence and accept the unknowing and overflow of emotions as a sacred part of the process. The day ended with a lovely bridge ceremony in which I purposefully and intentionally let go of those materialistic wants and knowings and the constant immediacy and rushing that has impeded my connection with Mother Earth making way for creativity and spontaneous experiences with the natural world.

Overnight, we were instructed to ruminate over the “seeds for practice” developing in our minds, listening for which “seed” is calling to be watered and cultivated by asking ourselves, “what in the universe is calling to you? What is the world’s deep need?” I especially loved this

⁴ Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story* (San Francisco; Harper Collins, 1992), 44.

⁵ Frederick Buechner quoted in Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 16.

metaphor because it immediately brought me back to my Montessori roots as I recalled the numerous times Maria Montessori refers to “the child’s mind being like a fertile field, ready to receive what will germinate into culture”⁶ and encourages educators to plant as many seeds of interest as possible for later exploration and understanding. I feel that this quote can be applied to Montessori teaching as well as to the Inner Life teachings where the ultimate goal is intimate connection, reverence, co-becoming and deeper understanding of one’s higher self.

The following day, I engaged in an I-thou dialogue with my dear partner Hollis Gabriel, which was again, an enlightening experience. Sitting down by the pond on a damp June morning with our companions, the hornet and the frog singing and encouraging our communion and grandiose ideas. Hollis listened, supported, and echoed my ideas and sentiments as I developed this “plan” for my practice to take shape in the upcoming school year.

What I came up with was a very detailed (and looking back I might say it was a bit scheduled and rigid) plan for weekly nature classes. The “seed” that I felt the universe needed the most was cultivating daily awareness of the beauty, wonder and awe surrounding us daily in nature. I experienced this awakening daily during my sunrise practice and I hoped to bring this experience to the students in an organic way leaving them free to follow their own destiny or calling ultimately leading them to find their own cosmic task within the universe.

I planned to hold a weekly class outdoors in different natural environments around our campus each week focusing on a different aspect of the natural world. Each student would have their own nature journal, made from natural materials, to record. I planned to incorporate refining of the senses, enjoying Native American creation stories and myths, participating in song and dance from cultures around the world, guided meditations and solo walks in nature. I even planned for culminating end-of-year ceremonies including an overnight retreat where we would watch the sun rise and set together, as well as a Fire and Water ceremony of letting go and letting come.

Whew, that was a lot to plan and accomplish in just one year’s time. Looking back, I’m not sure how I thought that daily awareness and gratitude for nature could be cultivated with only a weekly class or focus but we’ll get to that.

⁶ Maria Montessori, *To Educate the Human Potential* (Amsterdam; Montessori-Pierson Publishing Company, 2007), 3.

Practice

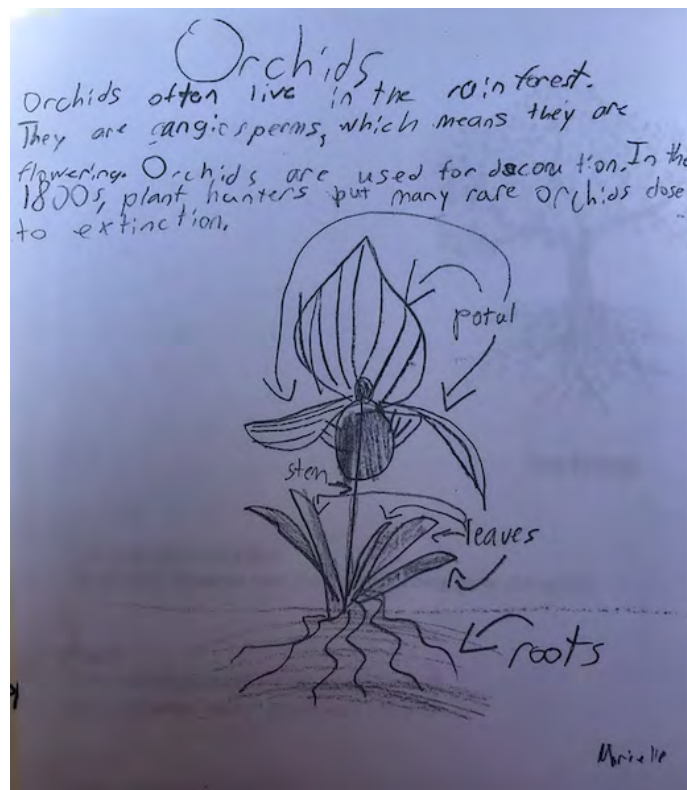
The final phase of the program is implementing your practice. I already briefly shared my plan for practice with weekly nature classes and now I'll fill you in on the actual implementation. When our group met in October of 2018 to check in with our practices, I was feeling discouraged with my work (or lack of work) accomplished. Due to time constraints, long weekends, and special presentations, I had only managed to hold three nature classes. We had focused on developing our sense of sight by beholding objects from nature and noticing the many different shades of one color, both close up to nature and from a distance. We also did a geometry in nature scavenger hunt where the students noticed and drew geometrical concepts and patterns in nature. Lastly, we gathered in the outdoor classroom to read and act out constellation stories from ancient Greeks and Romans as well as our Native American ancestors. It wasn't that I didn't enjoy or appreciate these first classes, but more a feeling of overwhelming ideas and no time for them. Even those classes were rushed and squeezed in at the end of the afternoon following our music class.

With constant positive affirmations and support from my classmates and instructors, I took a pause. This pause allowed me to reflect on my goals and intentions for myself and the children. I realized the idea of weekly nature classes was forced and was actually causing me stress. I was reminded that nature is woven into everything and is not something that can be observed or experienced in solidarity. This prompted me to take a more holistic approach and try to incorporate the natural world into all that we do. Instead of a weekly class dedicated to the natural world, why not dedicate all of our work to the natural world?

The practice took on a whole new life! We would stop mid-morning to observe the birds outside the window, students often took a break on the sitting stones under the feeder. The students enjoyed their companionship so much, they took on the responsibility of filling the bird feeders and hummingbird feeder when empty. The nature tray became a revolving door of precious objects from the natural world that the students would behold as they offered peace, love, and joy to each other each morning. I will always remember the day this spring when the students noticed the new leaf on the banana tree; they screamed with excitement and giddiness, all hustling outside, clapping and cheering for the new growth! I had been at school at least an hour before any children arrived, tidying and planning for the day ahead, not once stopping to notice the tremendous leaf waving like a flag outside of our east windows. It was in this moment I was reminded of my goal of cultivating awareness within myself and the students.

It is funny the way things organically fell into place when I stopped having expectations for our experiences with the natural world and instead allowed spontaneity in nature to occur. When we were studying reptiles, our office manager, Ms. Greene, happened to rescue a

Northern Brown snake from her backyard that we kept in our classroom for a few weeks for observation, care, and, learning. This spring, when we began our botany studies, we were inspired by the numerous flowers growing in the school garden including poppies, bachelor buttons, and mums. Students enjoyed dissecting flowers, replanting cacti to observe the roots, and dissecting a bean to notice the embryo or “baby plant” developing inside. The students appreciate the pitcher plant that I found for the classroom and placed it strategically on the snack table so it will eat the flies that try to graze on our snack. They have joyously discovered just a few of the ways in which we can aid nature as well as a few of the ways in which we can benefit from nature.



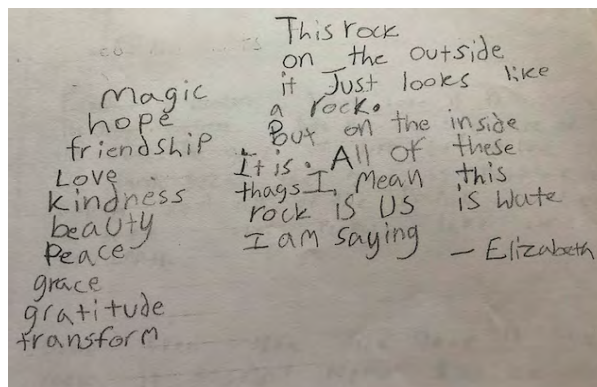
Marielle (age 9)

Along with making an effort to incorporate and refer to the natural world whenever possible, I also chose to expand upon the work of my colleagues before me. I am lucky enough to be the third of four elementary teachers at Greenville Montessori School to participate in the Inner Life Program. Andrea Reed and Heather Koch paved the way and re-imagined each of the five Great Lessons that serve as a framework for the Montessori elementary curriculum. They integrated a spiritual and natural component into these lessons including quotes from Thomas Berry and heart words that represent human capacities relating to the natural world. Some of these words include awe, compassion, humility, reverence, magic, wonder, and joy. Their complete work can be found in the Fall 2016 issue of *Chrysalis*. I chose to expand upon their

work by implementing a follow-up for each Great Lesson for both lower and upper elementary classes rooted in the sacred and natural world. We had already shown the first two great lessons, The Story of the Universe, and The Coming of Life on Earth, which leaves me with work for next school year, so I will share with you our follow-up activities for the last three lessons.

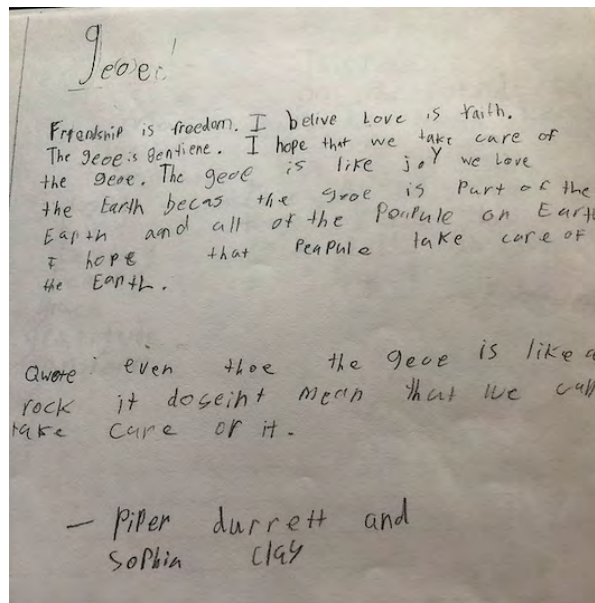
The third great lesson is The Coming of Humans. This lesson reminds us of how our ancestors were so deeply connected with the earth; they listened to the animals and rivers and expressed gratitude for the bounties from the Earth. It is also a reminder of all life that came before human life and our duty as humans to preserve this Earth. Humans have three very special gifts that no other living animal has: a mind to think with, hands to create tools, and a heart to love even those we have not met. Following the lesson, the students were invited to go out into nature to search for an example reminding them of these special gifts. Those who could collect their object without disturbance or destruction were invited to place them on a tray, while pictures were taken of those objects that could not safely be removed from nature. Using the objects from nature, selected nature writings from the students, and quotes from Maria Montessori about the hands, mind, and heart, the teachers composed a book to remember “Humans’ Special Gifts: Hands, Mind, Heart”.

The following week, a special assembly was held honoring each of these special gifts. To tap into the mind, we shared the book with the students. They were amazed to see their own pictures and writings published in a hardback book. There is a copy in the reading chair in each of our classrooms. To acknowledge the hand and use of tools, the students took turns cracking open a geode which later inspired some writing. Lastly, to honor the mind, the students chose one of the objects to return to nature. They joined in a guided small group meditation where they beheld their object, listened to where it was calling to be returned to in nature, and then said “A Prayer of Gratitude”⁷ acknowledging the mysteries of life. Once all objects were beheld, thanked, and returned to their place in nature, we called this lesson finished.



Elizabeth, Age 8

1. ⁷ “A Prayer of Gratitude” from *Only One Earth* (United Nations, 1990).

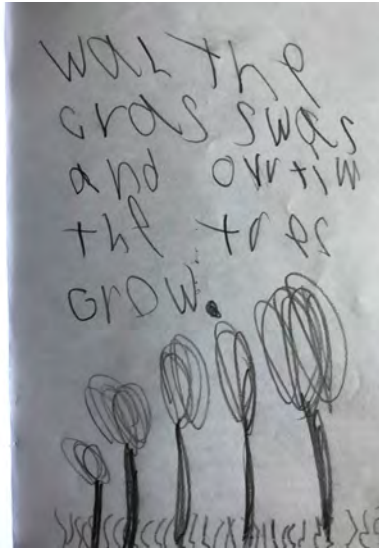
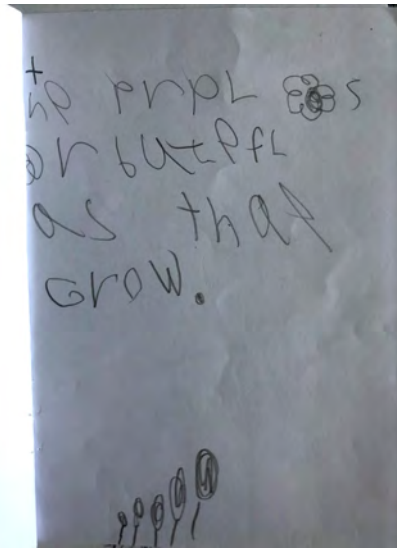


Sophia (age 8) and Piper (age 7)

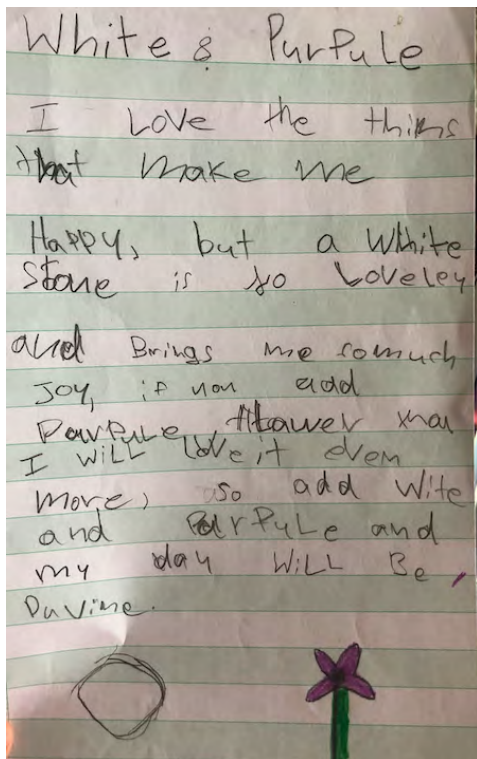
The next Great Lesson is the Cosmic Stream of Literature. This takes listeners on a journey through eighteen well-known genres of fiction literature following the course of a stream. Some of the genres included are epic, poetry, folk tale, realistic fiction, creation story, and myth. Heart words and quotes were chosen to represent each of the genres and a brief description, as well as examples, were provided for each. After journeying through these genres of literature we invited the students to go out into nature and either allow themselves to be called to a certain spot for intentional writing or to allow an object from nature to inspire their writing. Students were encouraged to try out any of the different genres explored.

The poems, stories, myths, tales, and legends they came up with were absolutely amazing and deeply inspiring! Kaci (age 9) wrote about "How the Carpenter Bee Got Its Stripes - a pourquoi tale". In this tale, Pax, the carpenter bee, defies Beauty, the strong and fierce bald eagle, who then claws Pax with her talons leaving a yellow stripe across the top of his body. Sophia (age 8) wrote, "The ditch might look dirty and green, but when light hits it, it glistens. The woods might look black and scary, but beautiful birds live in it. Bees and wasps, you might think that they have harm in them, but no, they are actually harmless. You might think that grass and mulch and everything you think is not alive is actually alive." Michael (age 9) wrote a creation story titled "How Did the Clouds Turn White". In this legend, the gods of thunder and lightning could not see because the clouds were becoming so dark due to the pollution on Earth by humans. The gods cause storms to rain down on Earth until the humans stopped polluting the air, returning the clouds to white. Ruby was inspired by two different colored objects from

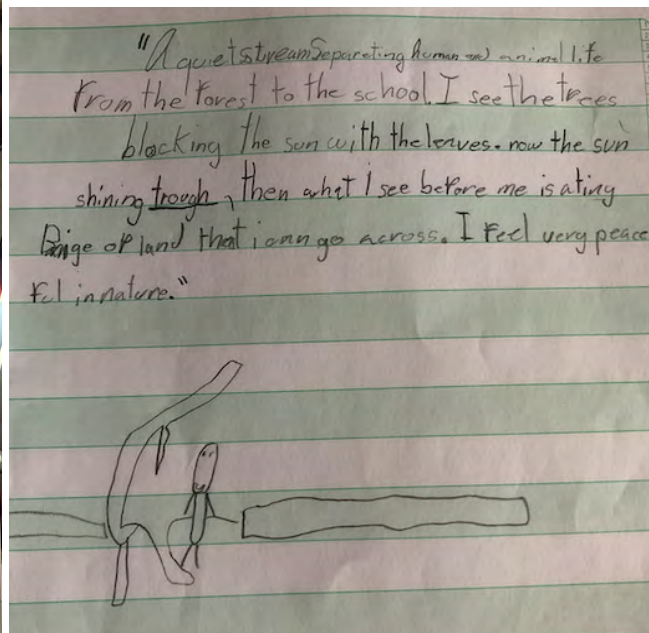
nature, while Nicholas was called to write on the edge of the stream. Emmy (age 6) wrote about the importance of taking care of the Earth, while Piper wrote and illustrated a booklet about her presence with living Earth in that exact moment. Audrey (age 8) connected with the natural rhythms of the sun rising and falling each day. See their work below. The lower and upper elementary students gathered together again around the painted stream as they shared their own examples or responses to reading as they each explored different genres.



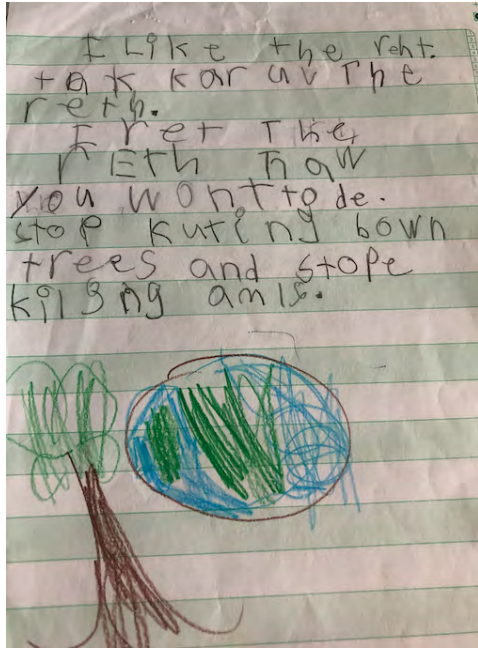
Piper (age 6)



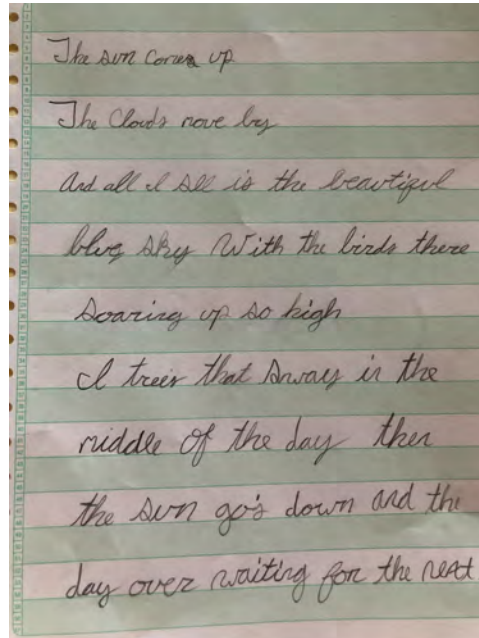
Ruby (age 8)



Nicholas (age 8)



Emmy (age 6)



Audrey (age 9)

The last of the five great lessons is A Cosmic Story of Math. Again, using heart words, quotes, and story-telling, the listener travels far back in time to learn about the development of numbers and mathematics throughout human history. Acknowledgment and gratitude is shown for those many civilizations that took part in the development of our numeral system over time helping it become what it is today. Many great mathematicians and theories were also introduced.

Following the lesson, we went outside and gathered around the special Willow Oak tree planted the previous year in honor of our school's 35th anniversary (another celebration of numbers!) We held a peace offering where we offered the "beauty of mathematics in nature" to our friends using an ammonite to represent the Fibonacci sequence, a mathematical pattern found within nature. The days following included peace offerings using acorns, pine cones, shells, flowers, and other objects representing naturally occurring mathematical and geometrical patterns.

The follow up activity was designed to incorporate geometry and art, as well as cooperation and leadership. The students randomly chose numbers assigning them into one of twelve groups, each focusing on a different development in our story of numbers. These included, but were not limited to, early counting using notches on bones or sticks, early numeral systems such as those used by the Egyptians, Sumerians and Babylonians, ancient forms and ways of writing such as cuneiform and papyrus paper, all the way up until more modern theories of mathematics and modern communication and time-keeping devices were developed. We provided the groups

with five triangles, part of a template to form a three-dimensional dodecahedron. Through independent and guided work times, the students worked together to research and draw about their contribution to the story of math. Once again, we all came together to celebrate the cosmic story of math by sharing and building our dodecahedron together!

The year culminated with a Letting Go and Letting Come - Decay and Growth ceremony on the last day of school. We thought of the tree that loses its leaves during the cold season in order to make room for new blossoms and growth in the spring. During this ceremony, each person was invited to think of a habit, way of thinking, or behavior that no longer serves them as they move forward. This was jotted down on a coffee filter and buried in a pot of dirt. We reminded students of the nutrient cycle and that as it decomposes into simpler matter, it will provide essential nutrients to the soil and life in the pot. Our oldest students planted some basil we had been growing from seed in the pot. We will water and take care of our plant and use it next school year to flavor water, snacks, and other tasty dishes. Next, we moved on to the letting come portion of the ceremony where students and teachers were invited to think thoughts of what qualities they would like to cultivate and carry forward as they grow into the next phase of life. We then chose a shell (reminding us of those beautiful mathematical patterns in nature) and dropped it into a bowl of water. The ripples spreading outward remind us of the positive effects of these small steps in the right direction by each of us.

Thanks for allowing me to share my personal journey and I look forward to the inspiration, growth, wonder, and awe that is to come. I would like to end with two quotes that continue to inspire both my personal journey with the natural world as well as my philosophy toward working with and educating children.

Our relationship with the earth involves something more than pragmatic use, academic understanding, or aesthetic appreciation. A truly human intimacy with the earth and with the entire natural world is needed. Our children should be properly introduced to the world in which they live.⁸

~ Thomas Berry

The child who has felt a strong love for his surroundings and for all living creatures, who has discovered joy and enthusiasm in work, gives us reason to hope that humanity can develop in a new direction.⁹

~ Maria Montessori

⁸ Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (Berkeley; Counterpoint Press, 2015), 13.

⁹ Maria Montessori, *Education and Peace*, (Chicago; Henry Regnery Company, 1972), 68-69.

Amanda Smith is a graduate of East Carolina University with a BA in Special Education, minoring in Psychology. In college, she was introduced to Montessori education and after spending a year in public education, she found her way back to Montessori. She recently completed her third year as the lower-elementary teacher at Greenville Montessori School, working and learning alongside six to nine year olds. Like Maria Montessori, Amanda believes that children are the key to a peaceful and more harmonious future and she is proud to be a part of that future! Amanda enjoys spending time in nature, working in the garden, and nurturing her many cacti and succulents. She believes “to plant a garden, is to believe in tomorrow” (Audrey Hepburn). She is continually searching for new ways to nurture plants and children and the Inner Life of the Child in Nature Program enlightened her to the ever growing and changing web of the natural world.