

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

2018-2020



Edited by  
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## Foreword

As the application process for our 10<sup>th</sup> class of the Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice program drew to a close, it looked like we would have ten people in the class that was to begin on November 17, 2018. Then, one by one, many of our applicants had last minute changes of circumstance that would prevent them from coming. Some would change jobs, some would move, some had new demands on their time.

When I got in touch with each of the remaining applicants to ask them if they would still like to continue with a small class, the answer was an affirming “Yes”. What unfolded over the course of two years for this group was an intimacy unknown in other classes of the program and a journey in the spirit of Rilke, of living the questions that were living in the hearts of each person over time.

Our work together was small and deep as we engaged in a practice of presence with Earth over the first year and an individual practice over the second year that was birthed in a two-day summer retreat, guided by these words from John O’Donahue’s “Blessing for a New Beginning”<sup>1</sup>:

In out-of-the-way places of the heart  
Where your thoughts never think to wander,  
This beginning has been quietly forming,  
Waiting until you were ready to emerge...

Though your destination is not yet clear  
You can trust the promise of this opening;  
Unfurl yourself into the grace of beginning  
That is at one with your life’s desire.

Awaken your spirit to adventure;  
Hold nothing back, learn to find ease in risk;  
Soon you will be home in a new rhythm,  
For your soul senses the world that awaits you.

In this spirit of midwifery, a sacred space for play and prayer was born, a song was born, and a newfound presence to Earth was born. And, even as a global pandemic kept us sheltered at home during the last months of the program, new awakenings deepened and shifted the practices this Spring. What you will read on these pages is testimony to what emerges from deep listening to what is calling to us from the future.

Peggy Whalen-Levitt, Editor  
June 1, 2020

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<sup>1</sup> John O’Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 14.

# A Sacred Space for Play and Prayer

by

Rene Gouverneur

Even before the pandemic I was thinking about connections, but the recent social isolation and distancing has made this seem even more important than before. During the past 18 months of my Inner Life of the Child experience I have noticed so many connections: between Thomas Berry and Richard Rohr and St. Francis of Assisi; between humans and the rest of the natural world; between our early experiences and how we relate to the world and our later passions.

When I retired, almost two years ago I had a vague idea that I wanted to do something to connect children with nature - especially children with limited resources and access. Through the practices of the program, I have refined that idea and begun to implement a multi-pronged approach to making this connection.

The practices of presence and silence have helped me to slow myself down and pay attention to what is needed. Instead of pushing ahead full-steam, I have been able to let things unfold and grow naturally. I have been able to connect a wide variety of experiences from my life to build a cohesive vision for children's interaction with nature.

My project for the ILCN is both a space for children to interact with nature and a series of programs. I am very fortunate to belong to a church that had a large piece of wooded land on its property. The church did not want to develop the land, but did want to put it to good use. I connected with another member who had begun to create a path for prayer and meditation. I shared with him my vision of a natural play space in the woods where children could connect with nature. As we talked, we both realized that our ideas for using this land were not only compatible, they were complimentary! We assembled a small committee to help with planning and implementation. And thus was born St. Francis Way at Holy Cross Church.

We began with developing the children's area which now includes a sand box, area for building with natural materials, log balance beam, ninja line, tree house and mud kitchen. We have now begun putting in benches for meditation and a lovely statue of St. Francis. We have plans for more benches, a gazebo for individual or small group prayer/meditation and a labyrinth.

Even though the space is not yet complete it is already being used. Adults from the church and neighborhood use the path as a place for quiet reflection and peace. We have had groups of children use it for vacation bible school and summer Sunday school. We hosted a playdate for children from our church and our neighboring mosque. Unfortunately, Covid 19 has brought all of that to a halt for the time being.

We continue to dream and plan for a time in the future when we can be together again. For children our plans include monthly playdates, outreach to a nearby elementary school, offering field trips and community events. For adults we are thinking about offering quiet days, having worship in the woods, and making available leaflets with prayers or ideas for meditation.

The most meaningful realization I have had through ILNC and creating St. Francis Way is a developing understanding of the spirituality of nature. I have always turned to nature for solace and peace, but never really thought of every bird, leaf and stone as containing a spark of the divine and being precious to God. Thomas Berry's idea of communion of all beings really resonates with my experience. St. Francis's calling the sun, moon, wind and water sisters and brothers is another expression of the same idea. The idea that we are all interdependent and will either thrive or fail together is a crucial one. One that I hope to pass on to the children and adults who visit St. Francis Way by giving them an opportunity to experience the healing peace of nature in a loving community.

**Rene Gouverneur** recently retired after teaching for 30 years, primarily in kindergarten and first grade. She received her undergraduate degree from UNCG and her masters from UNCW. She is National Board Certified in Early Childhood Education. She recently completed her Environmental Education Certification. She is one of the founders of The Cape Fear Center for Inquiry, a non-profit charter school in Wilmington, NC. She lives in Wilmington with her husband, Joe Gouverneur, a dog, a cat and four chickens. Since retiring, she is enjoying having more time to garden, read, paint and spend time enjoying nature.

# A Song on the Way Back to the Garden

by

Susan Lindsay

We are stardust  
Billion-year-old carbon  
We are golden  
Caught in the devil's bargain  
And we've got to get ourselves  
Back to the garden

Joni Mitchell<sup>2</sup>

## Fall 2018

All my life I have had songs that stick in my head. I've found them to be good guides to what I need to be reminded of on a regular basis. I began a practice in the Fall of 2018 noticing I had a personal feeling of disconnection with the universe. This practice has led me, in the round-about way that practices do, to a realization that I am not in an isolated struggle and that I cannot get out of this alone, but must move forward together.

When reading Thomas Berry's ideas for the first time, his idea of being part of a "communion of subjects"<sup>3</sup> resonated with me and I wanted to remind myself of this on a daily basis. I began to experiment with a practice. First thing when I woke up, I would go to my front porch barefoot and say good morning to the Universe. The song Woodstock by Joni Mitchell<sup>4</sup> would run through my head and I would think, "we are stardust, billion-year-old carbon' – me and everything in the universe – so saying good morning to the universe is like saying good morning to my right arm. Just another part of me and me a part of it." This was a good practice and it helped me to remember my connection and keep it in my mind throughout my day.

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<sup>2</sup> Joni Mitchell, "Woodstock" (*Ladies of the Canyon*, Reprise Records, 1970).

<sup>3</sup> Carolyn W Toben, *Recovering the Sense of the Sacred: Conversations with Thomas Berry* (Whitsett, NC: Timberlake Earth Sanctuary Press, 2012), 28.

<sup>4</sup> Joni Mitchell, "Woodstock" (*Ladies of the Canyon*, Reprise Records, 1970).

## Spring 2019

As the months wore on, however, I would get frustrated that I still did not FEEL connected. I had many moments over the spring (and during other times in my life) when I did feel connected and part of something as big as the universe and those were great moments! I kept hoping for more of them.

## Summer 2019

We met in June at the Center and spent some wonderous time on solos in the woods around the Center. In the morning I sat and fell asleep during my time – a sign of the utter exhaustion I was feeling. Later that day in my time in the woods a song popped into my head – complete with a tune and lyrics. It went:

We Are Connected  
Susan Lindsay      Susan Lindsay

I am you are we are con- nect- ed

It kept running through my head like a “mantra of connection.” It was a clear statement that it didn’t really matter whether I felt connected, I am, and you are, and we are – whether we pay attention to it, feel it, acknowledge it at all. Then I noticed that we could change the last line to include anything in the universe.

*I am, you are  
Trees are connected*

*I am, you are  
Water is connected*

I decided that my project would be to engage in the process of writing/composing and then getting that song stuck in my head. Understanding that the inner work I do will affect the way I am in the world, I started with a song for me, to ground me in the reality of my deep connection to everything. I used the song like a “mantra”, reminding me of the particular work I am doing. I said I would sing it as I greeted the universe each morning, as I entered into school and as I go about my day and then I would share it with others.

## Fall 2019

I did use my song. I shared it with the students and teachers at my school. I shared it with other schools. The children loved it, but all through the fall, I kept forgetting to use it to get me started, more connected, as I arrived at school. We met again at the Center in October and I remembered the piece of my project that was about using it to get me remembering my connection. After that I tried different things to remind myself. At one point, I put little signs all over the school and in my car that said, “SING.” I used them for a couple of days, but then that stopped reminding me and I would go back to being in “get going” mode as soon as I arrived in the building. I tried making a list each day of moments when I remembered my connection to other people and/or the natural world. That lasted about a day.

## Spring 2020

I was so discouraged that no matter how much I tried to focus my attention intentionally on connection in my life and in my work, I didn’t FEEL connected. I struggled with this over several months wondering what I was doing wrong and how to “make it better.”

At some point in the midst of my discouragement, I thought “what would I do if I were connected.” That shifted my thought process a lot and I gave up trying to FEEL connected. I understood at that point that FEELing connected, while it would be nice and easier in some ways, was not a requirement for BEING connected. My connection to the universe, all living things and even other people is not dependent on me being about to feel it. Wow! What a relief! I decided that acting on the knowledge that I am connected was more important than feeling connected.

So I’m going along through January and February doing things “as if I am connected,” and then March comes and the COVID-19 virus and suddenly I understand that the best thing for me to do to help myself, my family, my school families and the community in general is to “disconnect physically” from all the places I had been regularly going – my school, the gym, the stores, etc.

What a strangely ironic time to be exploring connection! And how surprising that I could suddenly feel the connections to beings all over the world. I could feel the Earth breathing in and out a warning to me that now is the time to pause “regular life” and focus on what matters. I could suddenly easily reach out to people. I spent more time outside and noticed more the early budding of spring. I led my staff to focus only on how to stay connected to our students and their families (not worrying about “teaching” anybody anything).

Now in late spring, it’s been two months since the shutdown began here. People are exploring the idea of “opening up” and what that means in different places. I’m involved in many discussions – in childcare, in my neighborhood, in my family of what we are hoping for in this next time period and what changes to the way we do things we can keep and what new ways of

living we need to develop. We are faced with real practical challenges. Once again, the song runs through my head “I am, you are, we are connected.” It is not wrong. This is an important guide. How would we set up the human part of the world if we always kept that in mind? How will we get to Joni Michell’s garden? It’s clear that lots of people are struggling with connection and belonging. This is not my isolated struggle. At the same time, we are noticing the ripple effects around the world of our actions and non-actions.

Since “we” are connected – the collective we, Thomas Berry’s “communion of subjects” – then all actions that I take affect all other beings and all that you take do, too. We affect each other, we need each other – we are each other. Our connections are not dependent on our actual feelings of connection and our feelings are not a guide to our actions. When asked about what he would tell children about the future, Thomas Berry said that we need to awaken “humanity to see all living forms as a single sacred community that lives or dies together”<sup>5</sup> and that “[we] are all part of the family of humankind walking toward the light.”<sup>6</sup>

**Susan Lindsay** has been an educator most of her working life. She has worked in childcare centers, public schools, science museums and zoos. Eight years ago, she helped start Greensboro New School, a preschool program, where she has been able to guide the vision of the school and support the staff to take on new ideas and methods. She has always loved rambling in the suburban woods near where she lives and the more exotic woods of far-flung places. She lives in Greensboro, NC with her husband, daughter and two dog friends – who also love the woods. She is hopeful about moving together with everyone and everything toward a universe seeped in connection.

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<sup>5</sup> Carolyn W Toben, *Recovering the Sense of the Sacred: Conversations with Thomas Berry* (Whitsett, NC: Timberlake Earth Sanctuary Press, 2012), 135.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 136.

# A Journey to Presence

by

Darcy Toler

*“The human venture depends absolutely on this quality of awe and reverence and joy in the Earth and all that lives and grows upon the Earth. As soon as we isolate ourselves from these currents of life and from the profound mood that these engender within us, then our basic life-satisfactions are diminished.”<sup>7</sup>*

## Year One

### Fall: An Introduction

My first introduction to the work of the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World was as an audience member. I watched as the Great Lessons were presented and noticed the integration of Thomas Berry’s teachings. I was intrigued and excited - this was the part of my journey that could cultivate my “spiritual preparedness,” a concept that I had been searching for since completing the training to become a Montessori guide. Having no orientation other than the basic notions of what spirituality was, I was relieved to see a program that would guide me on my path. Coming from a Montessori background, many of Thomas Berry’s teachings aligned with Dr. Montessori’s views on children, the earth and universe, our connectedness and their relationships with the natural world. Peace and understanding come through making and recognizing connections. I felt right at home.

### Spring: A Cultivation of Presence

During the first year of the Inner life program, we were exposed to a myriad of practices to plant the seeds for our own practices. These practices served to cultivate presence in the natural world that we commune with. Several writing pieces were also gifted to prompt our development of presence. One in particular, “In Grandmother’s presence – a not so solitary, solitary practice,” resonated with my own experiences of defining, classifying and commenting on the environment around me. I was given a sense of hope as Joanne was able to discuss the journey of her own practice and her appreciations of the many observations that led her to new discoveries.

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way Into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 166.

## Year Two

### Summer: The Development of a Practice

The development of a practice had seemed a great undertaking to me. My training cohort had external plans of implementation and practical usage, where my own intentions were more to work on my inner self. I wanted to cultivate and instill happiness and mindfulness in my being. I thought that asking myself about the reasoning behind my feelings of unhappiness, I could reveal a culprit and provide a plan to pursue. I was not successful in this endeavor. I found that asking myself why I was unhappy did not beget feelings of happiness, rather the opposite seemed to manifest itself.

### Fall: The Implementation

I chose to begin each day with the natural world – listening to my needs, physical or spiritual, and committing to honor and serve those needs. Part of my practice included daily journal writing of which I struggled with my satisfaction. I wanted beautiful entries that included drawings that replicated the world that I was surrounded by along with thoughtful prose. My expectations of what my practice should be had deterred my actual practice. Instead, I shied away from my practice as I became more aware, which served as a reminder of insecurities about why I had feelings of unhappiness. I became aware of the lack of detail my drawings would convey. As a result, I recognized I had to adapt my practice.

### Winter: An Acknowledgement

Daily, I would reflect on how I longed to be in the woods and with the commitment to my practice. As the excuses would roll in my mind on why today just wasn't the day, I would try to sort through the why. Is it being alone with all of my thoughts, instead of glancing at them as they whiz past? Mom being in chemo? Dad aging? My sister's cyclic journey? My niece is growing up without her parents present? Acknowledgment is the first stage of change. I wondered if acknowledging would help make way for my practice to develop.

Whose hear?

The crackle of the pines,  
as the wind makes them sway.

The sharp shrill cries,  
that pierce the day,  
a quick search  
its owners take flight.

I used to know these calls.  
Oh, how I miss my Mother.  
Who could name any Ave,  
based on its call.  
Such a good day.

-Darcy Toler (Journal Entry, 1/17/19)

### Spring: An Awakening

It is Springtime, daylight saving time has come and gone, bringing a renewed vigor towards life as the days grow longer and opportunities abound. The trees are budding and flowering, the young fruits are beginning to appear. Flowers and plants, too, are rising up to share their fragrances and hues as a welcome respite from the daily media's account of the world. As I look around I see that the Earth is repairing itself and am reminded of Thomas Berry's teachings:

"We need not a human answer to an earth problem, but an earth answer to an earth problem. The earth will solve its problems, and possibly our own, if we will let the earth function in its own ways. We need only listen to what the earth is telling us."<sup>8</sup>

I began to notice that I too had started to "repair" myself. Cooking fresh produce and gardening, purging and reorganizing until each thing had its own space and each space an intentional purpose. Projects, too long procrastinated, had been finished in record time as my thoughts and actions were entirely focused on the task at hand. Much of the early spring has been enjoyed from the comfort of covered porches, where for years, a rickety pallet and a plywood cutout served as a makeshift transition between the mud and our home. On the rare days that the weather would drive me inside, the newly hung screen doors allowed for a beautiful serenade, where I could listen for the different bird songs amongst the windchimes, or hear the

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988). 35.

sound of rain as it would bounce off the tin roof saturating the Earth, or the thunder which rattled our bones.

It was not until the world had been forced to shut down during the pandemic that I returned to my interest to want to draw the natural world and picked up another item of my procrastination, *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*, a suggestion from a family friend that happened to teach art. This thoughtful guide provided lessons that helped break down barriers to drawing and gave reasons as to why most adults still draw as if they are children - skills take development and the majority of society stops drawing around age 10. What a sad thought, I pondered its implications. As a society, we had deemed art an unworthy skill that required no further educational development. By extrapolating this thought it seems as though my own commune with the natural world was interrupted as a result. Often the first sketches a child creates are of the world that surrounds her, striving for realistic features as time marches on. In addition, it seemed that activities and interests had taken a back burner approach to responsibilities and duties which were viewed and engrained with greater priority.

### Now: A Presence

Ironically, during our isolation as a community, our connections and the quality of our interactions and relationships have, although distant, been more substantial. By choosing to look on the positive side of being quarantined along with the rest of the world, it has encouraged us to use time wisely and at the same time freely - with no guilt attached to the activity. No thoughts of "Oh, I should really be cleaning/planning/organizing/entertaining...", simply being present to the moment and activity at hand. This act of being present has provided a sense of calm and satisfaction that I had been missing in my practice thus far. It seemed a simple epiphany when cognition occurred: that being present was the key to happiness, the key that I had been searching for.

"We are talking only to ourselves. We are not talking to the rivers, we are not listening to the wind and stars. We have broken the great conversation. By breaking that conversation we have shattered the universe. All the disasters that are happening now are a consequence of that spiritual 'autism.' "<sup>9</sup>

Finally, I had found what I was missing: presence. Reflecting on my journey, I had not been valuing the time and benefit of my activities and interests or even my responsibilities and duties as my mind would wander often to the next task or a different task that I felt I should be completing. The joy and contentment I feel are overwhelming, as I watch the birds gather

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

around the feeders or the recently uncovered yard as the winter's activities are cleared from the undergrowth. The sounds outside of my kitchen window complement one another as I wash dishes for the first time in a long while unbegrudgingly, listening for the call and return of the local Aves and windchimes. While my findings may not just involve the natural world, I am reminded of the Thomas Berry quote, "We are a communion of subjects not a collection of objects"<sup>10</sup> as I observe the juxtaposition of the natural world and my interior world.

### The Dance of the Dragonflies

Around the pond,  
between the grasses and trees.  
Flying gracefully  
amongst the lily pads.

Here is where the Dragonflies meet.

Where the frogs splash  
and croak their song,  
like a band pulled back taut  
and then released.

If you are still  
and your heart is awake,  
you too will notice  
the patterns  
that the Dragonflies create.

"Will you come with me?"  
They seem to say.  
As they turn and fly  
along their way.

Darcy Toler (Journal Entry 6/25/2019)

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*, 82.

**Darcy Toler** is a graduate of East Carolina University where she received her BS in Public Health Studies and minored in Psychology. After graduating, she moved to the Pacific Northwest and fell in love with the natural world that surrounded her. The luscious rainforest, winding mountain trails, and spectacular views were breathtaking and reignited a yearning to be with nature. During her time in the PNW, Darcy was introduced to the Montessori method of education, after accepting a position as the physical education specialist for Childpeace Montessori School. Darcy fell in love with the appealing classrooms, the enticingly beautiful materials, and the students' excitement and engagement with their studies. It was not until she moved back to North Carolina that Darcy was able to truly comprehend the learning style that she had witnessed. Darcy was given the opportunity to complete her Montessori Elementary training at the Insititute of Advanced Montessori Studies in Silver Springs, Maryland, where she was introduced to Dr. Montessori's philosophy on education. She has recently completed her second year as a Lower Elementary Montessori teacher at Greenville Montessori School. Darcy and her husband Kris live outside of Greenville, NC. They were inspired by the tiny house movement and sustainability practices in the PNW and chose to implement these lifestyle changes by constructing their own tiny house of 480 sq. ft. During her free time, Darcy enjoys spending time outdoors with her husband Kris on their land; working in their garden, exploring the natural world with their niece, Sya, and playing with their dogs Tuco and Caya. She believes that children are our future and just like Dr. Montessori that "Education is the best weapon for peace". Darcy's time at the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World has helped to "marry" the teachings of Dr. Montessori with Thomas Berry's views of the natural world and spirituality, helping her to develop and walk on her own spiritual journey.