

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

2016-2018



Edited by
Peggy Whalen-Levitt

Copyright 2018
The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World
Greensboro, NC

Table of Contents

Foreword	i
Jay Batman	
to those who move slower...toes twinkling in dust	1
Elizabeth Carrington	
Encounters with Beauty	6
Laura Coleman	
Cosmic Circles	10
Dorian Dugger	
Maria Montessori, Eknath Easwaren, and Children in Nature	21
Marion Hirsch	
Into the Woods	28
Celia McMullen	
Foundations of Spiritual Life in Nature	30
Vicki Shawl	
Reflections in Silence	35
Valerie Vickers	
Gardens and More	37
Priscilla Webster-Williams	
The Hospitality of the Natural World	44

Foreword

Assembled here are the practices of the Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice class of 2018. When we began our work together in the fall of 2016, 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.”

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

What has emerged is remarkable in its depth and communion with Earth. Poetry and eco-contemplative art created in companionship *with* Earth sing the deep song of a relational universe. New ways of being with Earth activate living relationships between the inner lives of children and the Earth at the Unitarian Universalist Community Church of Chapel Hill, The Learning Village at Sacred Mountain Sanctuary in Candler, NC, Our Lady of Grace Catholic School in Greensboro, NC and The Montessori School of Winston-Salem, NC. Gardening “activates the deepest mysteries of the Universe,” as Thomas Berry would say. Entering Silence *with* nature brings healing and peace.

As our second year drew to a close, we asked everyone to pause and reflect on their practices, not with a sense of closure, but simply with a pause for reflection. As I worked with each contribution to create this collection, I was aware of the transformation of each person over our two years together. Through a circle of trust and deep sharing, we midwived each other’s authentic gifts to the world and found our way to a place of belonging.

Peggy Whalen-Levitt, Editor
June 4, 2018

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

to those who move slower...toes twinkling in dust

by

jay batman

in the woods facing a bad dream
i sensed i'm having i had a bad i created
i wanted to be born from his crumbly feline lips

as i dream the rhythm of my heart in my chest increases by doubles and flip flops
silent rise and fall of my lung cage i used to be a door the ears of something

toads chase me in my shiny dream of the dead
crows of lonely pulling my dream in different directions

calling collect my nightmare calls all night
dreams call in all night on the radio white noise pulling me many ways

dream patch of advice like lips move in my sleep
words slide down like shined wood distant humming chasing facing a bad dream

baby bird picks down the throat to mama vomit
forest love running circles humming birds chasing facing a bad dream
smell me like a hickory branch on fire ever since i was from her i was from his beak
bring life in forest love

i needed to eat his words i was starved trapped
behind a carved plaster wall running through the dried up woods call me
handfuls of secrets pour out his lips and rush towards lower ground sweeping water of rivers
wailing wall whine my thoughts of dead rub the surface on the other side of grief

i watch his lips i am the ears of the dream
the way shapes change with meaning i'm dancing with his old lips
woods drip as he whispers

soft black was grasped between his fingers
drips as he whispers his words are monotone repeated silent

his old lips are loose more frightening than granny's voice coming down the mountain
riding three white horses the sun rises like a roller coaster a rooster crows

i listen because i'm scared because i'm scared of forgetting dead things
i may have forgotten already i've got to pull in to remember for myself what dead means
the puzzle of his words the facial shifts word shapes seen through candlelight the flame flickers
like invisible faced dancers in the woods they dance when the sorrow won't sleep
ever since i was young i have danced

his old lips form shapes and fill my view in black and white shades like an old movie close up
his old shapes formed by the water she waves wades into the tide like a puzzle i know the outcome
but still go through the solving effort

stick around i will show you
hear the wind whispering whippoorwill whippoorwill like the quiet voice of the fisherman

i created a zombie from the fisherman drowned at sea from his lips
he told the story and i understood

i am creating a way to remember for myself what dead means to me maybe the look after me not
a ghost or oven close to spirituality but how i always seem to be thinking about them and that
alone influences the way i lead my life like they alone block out the path for me to write to
slide between the lines like a blade of grass that springs up out of concrete flowing white trees like toilet
paper i promise to find what i lost feel so small now like a memory i will
never live as many years as a tree i remember all of the bells wooden in the woods all the
flowing bells echoing follow me through woods running down worn silent paths slap my pace
puddles of cold rushing in the olden woods are on my neck as he helps me to find the meaning

the hair on my neck glimmers with sweat
raspy sweet-smelling sweat smelling like warm milk
my red face i am greedy since i was as young as a great wind in the woods
he drips as he whispers slices screams as he whispers huge nickel coated whispers jangle
red rooster breath brushes my bald head changing shapes leap high to the song in the dirt

follow the fallen feet
paths find ways to dance
falling slowly lumbering
i follow because i'm scared don't want to be stepped on
or bit by a brown horned toad full of paralyzing water
my path is strewn with and twisting with the fallen zombies
faces in woods full of falling dripping rushing worn paths

i was young have fallen i criss cross and am in arcs
paths are silent silver silent sliver of moonbeams
cheap velvet faces in wind

oh i recall the leaves of fall forest love dancing in air leaves in the wiry blond hair
the woods ever since i was from the woods calling he slides leaves in the woods

crumbly feet scruff dirt powder like dried up oatmeal batter
getting between the toes man's woman's dirty feet between the song leap high
they are silent and around sound at the same time like a brown horn worn path
found in woods toes twinkle getting in candles carving between toes like a chance with a knife
greedy monkey days song skit caught lowered down to loose crusty to the olden days
dirt reflects off stiff fingers old wooden dirt like a waxy stain

i'm scared of getting rid of getting between the wall goes on past eyes
we walk like a dance between toes like a dance
we look forward and swing our arms we walk fast and my face flushes with blood
we are people who move back past the olden days dirt reflects eyes randomly raging
we are people who move back past the olden days dirt reflects eyes randomly raining
on the woods around trees i danced into the night shoes off the wall of the fisherman

he slices screams like cheap velvet faces in the wind
for those who move slower toes twinkling in the dirt

words are wooden stick babies of the log
words are wooden stick babies of the log

this has nothing to do with the olden days
still we are people who move back

past lighting a path candles pounded into nails
in olden days he put down his dull by sunlight like a brown horn worn like a snap water

a fish swims gently into his mouth
fish smiles downward with thick clown lip colors
fish swims in out into the forest fish smiles dance

too intense colors reflect off the sun wavers of light flicker

withering paralyzing was of the sea he hears the wish and wash the stir of her

this is about getting rid of the dead forgetting the dead fisherman withering form pulled from the sea
the water too strong too long i wonder i noticed the knowledge of denial is more twisted than a ditch in
the woods and covered with old leaves and discarded times tryst the path rely on instincts puddles of
cold rushing she helps me help him dead is too white to be forgotten
like an argument in the woods i beat rocks to remember dead friends dried up in the woods silence
i want to hear music. call me the sound of the rocks as loud as water falling

this is about that dream pulling in many directions red cheeks closed doors red stars he lips in
the seasons used to be but it's all mixed up now
all mixed up and no place to go through the woods she tells me but i know my path must stop in the
woods but the biggest tree i can see i can see for miles when my senses aren't bitter i lay in with

the dirt and it's like a candle and a whisper above me stretched like a single strand of spider web
caught in the wind and a tree descending down a dream of words struggling with them in my sleep like
old dead hands grabbing me a great wind blows clouds

we place him on a tarp we pick up the canvas towards the morning sun we all hold and pull tight
he lies on a tarp i'm aware do fight in the ways that stars enjoy silence

he is stiff his spine could snap in two like a great tree branch in a great wind

we hold him up with one hand we toss handfuls of dirt onto his body onto the tarp

i don't remember the song zombies brown horn toad song belched on the outskirts of water

oh we'll kill the old red rooster when she comes oh we'll kill the old red rooster when she comes some
things don't need to be remembered seen faces in dirt faces dancing on crosses

fisherman downed at we like a dishrag in the sink drowned down no longer in control of himself
the currents shift his emotion with his shaped

anger both arms floating up in unison
resignation areas fall in crisis cross on his chest
frustration one arm fist up in i've for to get out of here gesture

his lips of water he kisses with the curly snarl of the words with too intense waves of light
wage again faces in water silent rose and fall of blue water seen these faces she kisses each face

we hum and out necks lean back we should savor the night into the fisherman's face we pull tight and
start to circle out feet angle underneath the tarp whom goes faster our feet farther under toes twinkle

my cheeks turn red i'm tired of this running through the night time lit woods
weak air caught deep into the woods silent rise and fall of my chest i'm on the tarp

his silent chest always looks ready to rise then fall
to lift and put down to pick up to settle down into a comfortable field of cornflower blue

i used to be ashamed of my cheeks i used to be ashamed to breath why am i no longer ashamed

birds search for baby bird food to vomit to pick up mama's vomit
ever since i was from her beak some first love brings life handfuls of life

fisherman downed at sea like a dishrag in the sink no longer the controller of self

the sun is full of faces cawing retching full of food full of bird songs remember the sun

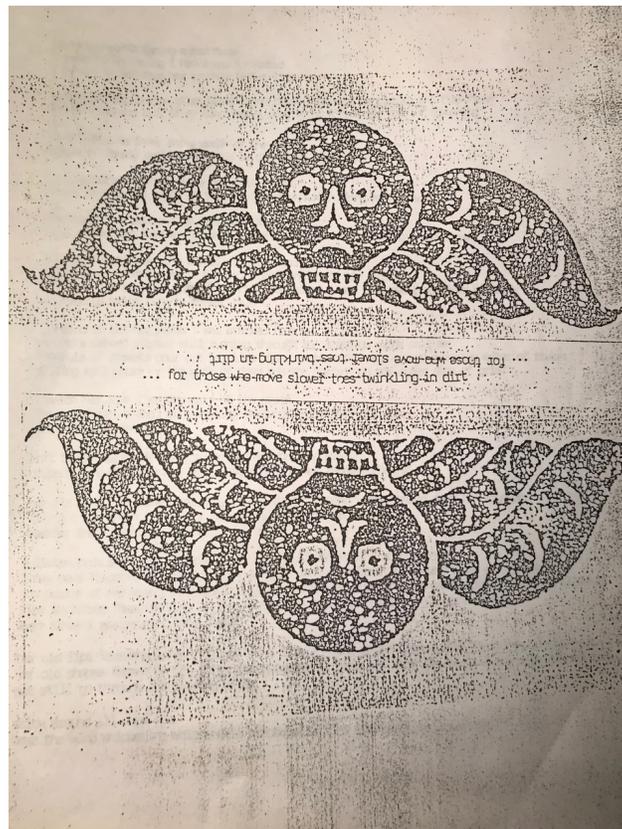
we pick up the silent fisherman withering birds search out for food

we tried to bring life from the dead and we ended running circles around our grief
we used laughing in the morning we were like strays pointing off his body with each giggle
his star of friend's glimmer center was the drowned man
i wake up and grab two rocks on my way to the woods with my answer the first hill is see i roll
down protecting my arms from snapping placing the around green the blue the quicker downhill
dizzy like sleep silver spreads the sky around me

the world slows its spin i spin it to baby blue i will since i was like a great wind in the woods

man drowns down and down he ranges in weeds of many changing shapes and colors his open eyes see
for a second. a strip of brilliant red faces floating to the surface a short flash lost

in wood i beat rocks like they are words and the days go by



Jay Batman: I'm a teacher at Willow Oak Montessori in Chapel Hill. Being in the woods reminded me that I can write. I was scared of the woods two years ago. Walking through the woods with my strong legs moving slowly, I began to cherish the forest. Mostly for the words, but I also love the green.

Encounters with Beauty

by

Elizabeth Carrington

Reflections on the inspiration and forming of part 1 and 2 of Encounters with Beauty, a course in Eco-contemplative Painting, held at my studio in the River Arts District of Asheville, NC, and at Sacred Mountain Sanctuary in Candler, NC, as well as the expansion of my Art practice. This has been profoundly inspired by my studies with The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World.

As we settle into place, into the quiet power of nature, the power of joy in our seeing into the life of things can set our natural inclination to turn itself towards Art. Giving this time to making Art in the natural world creates, in itself, an open and warm invitation for Nature to come to meet us.

It was during the winter just past that the clear vision for this course, Encounters with Beauty, began to stir itself into being. With it came a deep yearning for me to offer this as a teacher and guide. I have taught classes periodically for 16 years in educational institutions, community support centers and from my studio. Though I have never had any formal training as a teacher, I have found myself often in that role. I have taught drawing, painting, and concept and creative development with all different age groups. It has, at times, been a very uncertain road. Sometimes I have felt out of my depth and wished I had the certification to prove myself. Equally, I have felt needed and called upon to offer what I know to be sure, from my own experience as a working artist and the development of my creative process. Students have consistently shown up and asked me to work with them and I have responded to that.

There has been a missing part though, a foundational layer, whose absence I have noted again and again in my reflections on teaching. I have not been sure how to acquire this part or find that enriching layer to what I already offer.

This missing feeling led me to seek out more education in 2016. I looked at masters programs in Fine Arts, Art Therapy and Art Education, but felt they too were missing the element I was seeking. Finally I heard about the Center in Greensboro and enrolled in the *Inner life of the Child in Nature* program, thinking it would be a good starting point.

It was in January, a year and a half into the program there, in the darkest, quietest month of the year, I rested a while after Christmas. My daughter was home from school, out of our regular routine of comings and goings. It was here in the stillness that the missing part became so greatly illuminated and was finally fully seen. It was to work with the great presence of Earth, of course!

The Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice program has been working on me and through me from the moment I began almost two years ago. The initial practices and assignments were very profound for me. They sparked a voracious appetite to learn more and more. I have never read so much in my life as I have in these two years. It seems a door was waiting to be opened for me, to both experience and study eco-contemplative practice and this kind of poetic/deep ecology. From the first day I heard Sandy's flute and Andrew's opening poems, I felt at home and had an inner sense of understanding that I must allow myself to be carried by it. I did often wonder how I would incorporate what I was learning into my Art practices and teaching but the expanse of two years part-time gave me plenty of breathing room to watch and see, with a "let it happen" kind of attitude.

My paintings have always touched upon a sense of human-earth connection without a lot of effort. It has been my natural inclination. As I stepped more intentionally into my Artwork in parallel to the assignments and practices offered by the Center, my paintings took a clear and forthright turn to a much more complete and consistent Earth presence.

I have felt almost as if I was given permission from my studies with the Center to swing open the doors and all the windows, to creating work that is *with* Earth.

This allowance has brought me back to my childhood in more ways than one; to the strength and old kinship I had with Nature then. I have remembered some long forgotten but now vivid memories of playing in meadows where spring lambs were playing by me, to the brown rain-filled rivers of my childhood home in Ireland, with a flash of a silvery trout darting by, to the gardens and woodlands I was so keenly involved in and alert to in their aliveness. I once felt I was inside a rolling thunder storm and that I was entirely a part of the sky.

I have felt the threads of this old and beautiful Earth, its deeply felt mystery in those early years return, to be real and alive in me again. Now, they are weaving into a working tapestry of an adult artist's life.

In 2017, I enrolled in the Orphan Wisdom School with Stephen Jenkinson in Ottawa. I have found both to be very compatible. At the second session there, Stephen spoke to us of the alchemy of words and how the word 'spelling' comes to us from old root words for making spells. These books I am reading, the timing in my life path and the teachers and friends I have made in

this period are indeed an alchemy that rises far beyond certification and has an ancient quality of learning, as if I am learning for myself and everyone before me and after me. I am spellbound now by words, so many from the Center in the books we were asked to read, in handouts and the *Chrysalis* journal, as well as others I have discovered along this two year path. Included are works of Thomas Berry, Robert Sardello, Wordsworth, Andreas Weber, Teilhard de Chardin, Bayo Akomolafe, Stephen Jenkinson, Toko-pa Turner, Dr. Martin Shaw, Mary Oliver, Robin Wall Kimmerer, Jay Griffiths, Annemarie Ní Churreáin, Seamus Heaney, John Moriarty, Thomas Merton, Virginia Woolf, C.G. Jung and my return to the old love of John O'Donohue. Each book I liken to a friend and one with a plethora of stories to tell, all of which I am very keen to know. They are stacked here beside me in my studio as I write. I am in great company in the echoes of these voices. So trueing they are, of the journey of a human in deep connection with the natural world.

I have come to understand my paintings now as visual poems, offering a window of remembrance to a moment of being. They describe the quality of experiencing connection with Earth. Some are literal and others more like myths that work in a kind of multi layering of experience. A friend recently said to me upon visiting my studio, "You are such a complete romantic, your studio and you are like a poem from a bygone age." Though it was meant to be a compliment, I felt it was so essential to remind her that this work was very timely indeed and I was far from alone in my endeavor to express the extraordinary presence of the Earth, the Love and beholding of its beauty, in this very age.

As my understanding has deepened so too has my will to help others to open these same doorways to painting *with* Earth or to what I now call Eco-contemplative Painting.

The structures were very much there from my past workshops and classes, though the content now was shifted and much of the reasoning for it. I felt I had enough experience in how to carry a class that I could begin to design "Encounters with Beauty" in the winter and bring it out in spring. I knew that there would have to be a certain amount of 'trying things out' and learning as I go.

I have offered Part 1 twice now from my studio and offered part 2 from Sacred Mountain Sanctuary, where part three, a two-day residential retreat will be offered in spring 2019. I am also offering workshops in "Drawing with Trees" there this fall and one-on-one classes in drawing with the natural world.

The dream of an Eco-contemplative Painting School is taking shape, one where children and adults alike are given the tools and support to approach Art with the presence of Earth in every

step and every breath. I am making connections further afield, offering a two-day workshop in Eco-contemplative Painting in Ireland this summer.

There is no doubt that something is forming and taking shape in my life and work that was existing previously only in parts. As painter, as teacher, as lover of nature and as parent keen to teach my child to feel her interrelatedness with the natural world, I searched for the missing link. All these elements are threads weaving together now, giving life to each other, quenching each other's thirst for belonging and roots.

My daughter Madeleine reminded me some months ago as we sat on the mossy rocks in the middle of a beautiful mountain river, far into Pisgah National Forest, "that if you stay awhile, long enough for nature to trust you, she will show you her loveliest secrets." This was whispered in my ear as a collection of butterflies, perhaps twenty or thirty, and all different kinds in their color and brilliance, chose to lay their eggs together, fluttering in circles around and about each other by the edge of the river, and us.

I can only wonder what will happen next!

Elizabeth Porritt Carrington is an Irish born painter of land and mythology as well as teacher of drawing, painting and creative eco-contemplative practice. She is settled in Asheville, North Carolina where she works from her studio in the River Arts District. Her work is inspired by her relationships to landscape, their stories and people, her archaeological work in the French Pyrenees and her deep curiosity and inquiry of the experience of being human. Elizabeth plays upon the boundaries of the real and imagined, expressing the often unspoken miracles of our aliveness by fortifying their color, light, and form in a liberated palette. She practices a process of focused presence and an unapologetic love of life in all its facets. " It is on the crossing of vital points that I focus my work – the beginnings and the ending of days, seasons, years, generations, and lives too. It is at the great thresholds that I have felt most aware of being. Giving birth to my daughter and standing by loved ones who have died have given a critical and lasting sense of the tender vividness of our actuality. My work is an effort not to forget the gift of life for a moment and to fully experience being in this natural world. My paintings are windows of canvas, wood, and paper. If they can evoke or inspire a moment's rest on the majesty of the universe, they have done their job well."

Cosmic Circles

by

Laura Coleman

This year I launched into a new adventure with my middle school class. I decided to set aside one hour a week with them to spend connecting to the natural world. My intention was to create the time in our schedule to slow down, go outside, pause, listen, observe, feel....and notice the reflection of self in all life. It was a seasonal journey, in which I let nature lead the curriculum. This was so refreshing as an educator. I didn't need to spend endless hours with my nose in books or sitting at my desk making elaborate plans. I simply went for a walk or sat by a flower or listened to the creek. I let nature be my guide and I journaled and wrote poetry to remember and reflect on these moments of connection. The students asked why I named the class Cosmic Circles, and I replied you are like the pebble dropped in the universal lake, creating ripples out into the cosmos, just like the tree creates tree ripples and the frog creates frog ripples. We are all a part of this magical matrix of life.

The only format I gave to our class was to spend time outside together and also to give the students a short amount of time alone, to sit and behold or journal. Some days we went for a walk and other days we laid on our bellies in the grass. The second part of each class was time for reflection. This could look like solo writing time or creating contemplative art. The last part of each class was our sharing circle, in which each student was invited to share their writing, art, or something from their experience. To prepare for the next class, I would go for a personal walk over the weekend and see what emerged or what deep questions arose. From this experience, I looked for poetry to share with the students and a presencing or beholding activity that would invite them into an experience of connection, reflection, and belonging to the earth. Many classes we began outside in a circle of silence, and then opened with what each of us was present to. Here is a community poem put together from our presencing:

I am present to birds singing, rivers rushing,
Children's laughter.
I am present to the winding vines, the cool breeze,
My breath.
I am a part of the wind, the forest,
The universe.
I am a part of the tree roots, my family,

This community.
I am present to the tall trees, the mossy rocks,
My heartbeat.
I am part of the warmth of the sun, the quiet of nature,
And Love.

I began the year with a simple experience of laying on our bellies to observe a small patch of grass, and then flipping onto our backs to observe the vast sky. This activity brought them into quiet observation, their senses alert, and a deep presence to the moment. I read to them Mary Oliver's poem:

"Some Questions You Might Ask"¹

Is the soul solid, like iron?
Or is it tender and breakable, like
the wings of a moth in the beak of the owl?
Who has it, and who doesn't?
I keep looking around me.
The face of the moose is as sad
as the face of Jesus.
The swan opens her white wings slowly.
In the fall, the black bear carries leaves into the darkness.
One question leads to another.
Does it have a shape? Like an iceberg?
Like the eye of a hummingbird?
Does it have one lung, like the snake and the scallop?
Why should I have it, and not the anteater
who loves her children?
Why should I have it, and not the camel?
Come to think of it, what about the maple trees?
What about the blue iris?
What about all the little stones, sitting alone in the moonlight?
What about roses, and lemons, and their shining leaves?
What about the grass?

Afterwards, the students shared their individual experiences, thoughts, and feelings from observing the grass and in contrast, their experience of the open sky. Many of them shared the

¹ Mary Oliver, *House of Light* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), 1.

experience of feeling held by the ground, and amazed by the small, tiny world living among our feet. In contrast, many shared an expansive and vulnerable feeling of looking out into the bright, fathomless sky that opens to the great beyond above us. Here is a student's reflection:

"Beautiful" by Greenleigh Elgie

When I look up at the sky,
All I see is you and I.
For every part of you is me and
Every part is he and she.
It's beautiful earth.
It's beautiful sky.
All I see is you and I.
So I thank if for every part, from
The tree to its bark.

During the Autumn another topic of exploration emerged as we observed our part in the great web of life. Around the time of Thanksgiving, we remembered the Native tribes of this land and their wise teachings and way of life, living in harmony and balance with the the natural world. We read Chief Seattle's speech to the U.S. Government from 1854. His words remind of us of the intricate threads that weave us all together, "This we know: the earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the earth. All things are connected like the blood that unites us all. Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself." (Chief Seattle) Here is a student's poem reflecting on the web of life:

"The Web" by Jasmine Parente

The Web! Something spiraling deep within all of us.
I feel it is round with no end or beginning.
I know everything and anyone
Is a part of it. Making the web whole,
Like the earth.
You can't see it or feel it, only imagine it's shape and color.
War, hate, and violence Stop in its presence
And float to the bottom where they collapse into love.
We may feel or seem alone, but there's
Always a Way to company -
With the Web connecting us to a stranger
Anytime, anywhere, any day.

As we contemplated our place in the great web, we sat and beheld the miracle of grass and sun, water and air, our heartbeat and each breath, our very existence, a miracle! We also reflected on how we are made of the same atoms of all life, that we are true descendants of stardust. Here is a poem that I shared with the class that spoke to this feeling:

“It is Enough” by Anne Alexander Bingham²

To know that the atoms
of my body
will remain
to think of them rising
through the roots of a great oak
to live in
leaves, branches, twigs

perhaps to feed the
crimson peony
the blue iris
the broccoli

or rest on water
freeze and thaw
with the seasons

some atoms might become a
bit of fluff on the wing
of a chickadee
to feel the breeze
know the support of air

and some might drift
up and up into space
star dust returning from

whence it came
it is enough to know that

² Anne Alexander Bingham, “It Is Enough,” published by The Writer’s Almanac, January 22, 2014, <https://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/index.php%3Fdate=2014%252F01%252F22.html>

as long as there is a universe
I am a part of it.

As we drew closer to Winter Solstice we observed the days growing shorter. When we went for our nature walk I asked the students to observe what was dying and what was being born around us. From this emerged the deeper reflection of how birth and death are a part of everyday, it's even happening on a cellular level inside our own bodies. The students noticed the green moss growing on the dead tree trunk, the new sprouts emerging through the carpet of decaying leaves. We discovered how remarkable it is that life and death are intertwined. This theme continued for several weeks as we lived into the natural cycle of life and death, and observed the contrast between light and dark. We observed this through our daily experience of the sun's birth and death each day. We also discussed the gifts of darkness, which for one, allows us to see the light.

“To Go in the Dark” by Wendell Berry³

To go in the dark with a light is to know the light.
To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight,
and find that the dark, too, blooms and sings,
and is traveled by dark feet and dark wings.

We painted outside with watercolors to live into our experience of birth and light, and death and darkness. I asked them to let go of form and simply use the paints to express color, mood, or shapes of these two experiences. We also honored those who have passed on with a ritual of remembering on All Souls Day. Here is one of the poems that inspired us during the darker time of year:

“Sunrise” by Mary Oliver⁴

You can
die for it—
an idea,
or the world. People

³ Wendell Berry, *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 1999), 68.

⁴ Mary Oliver, *New and Selected Poems, Volume One* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1991), 125.

have done so,
brilliantly,
letting
their small bodies be bound

to the stake,
creating
an unforgettable
fury of light. But

this morning,
climbing the familiar hills
in the familiar
fabric of dawn, I thought

of China,
and India
and Europe, and I thought
how the sun

blazes
for everyone just
so joyfully
as it rises

under the lashes
of my own eyes, and I thought
I am so many!
What is my name?

What is the name
of the deep breath I would take
over and over
for all of us? Call it

whatever you want, it is
happiness, it is another one
of the ways to enter
fire.

During the winter months we lived into the theme of dream time, a time out of time, inspired by the Aboriginal people of Australia. The students were amazed at trying to imagine living without the concept of time. I asked them to imagine no clocks or calendars, but to live each day outside following the natural cycles as the Aboriginals have lived for thousands of years. This brought up all kinds of questions for them, and invited them to be really present to each moment, not a constructed time. Here is an Aboriginal proverb that speaks to this way of being, “We are all visitors to this time, this place. We are just passing through. Our purpose here is to observe, to learn, to grow, to love... and then we return home.”

The Dream We Carry by Olav H. Hauge⁵

This is the dream we carry through the world
that something fantastic will happen
that it has to happen
that time will open by itself
that doors shall open by themselves
that the heart will find itself open
that mountain springs will jump up
that the dream will open by itself
that we one early morning
will slip into a harbor
that we have never known.

To live into the Aboriginal dreamtime, I invited the students to create an aboriginal dot painting outside. In preparation, the students found slender sticks and sanded them to make their own natural painting tools. Elizabeth Carrington and I worked together to create a painting journey. As we walked a forest pathway, we came upon a clearing and sat to paint our first color, yellow, like the sun. Students were invited to create a design with yellow dots on their black paper. Then we proceeded to the creek and added white dots to our paintings, and this continued with resting places along our walk to paint blue and red. We also wrote a dream time poem together as a class:

Dreamtime
Mystical, magical
Flying, weaving, creating
Time out of time
Eternal

⁵ Olav H. Hauge, *The Dream We Carry* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2008).

As we neared Spring Equinox and a time of new beginnings we sat with the trees. Each student spent time listening to and observing a tree. We marveled at the hundreds of intricate tree rings that we could trace on a stump, and pondered what our individual tree rings might feel like or represent. From this, I led the students through a contemplative art project creating their own tree ring map. Here is one of the poems that inspired us.

“Sequoia Sempervirens” by Tamara Madison⁶

Some of these trees have been here
since Jesus walked on water
Some of these trees have been here
since Vikings drove their boats
onto the shores of Newfoundland
Some of these trees were seedlings
while the Mayans were worshipping time
while the dire wolf and saber-toothed
tiger roamed North America
Some of these trees have survived
lightning strikes and forest fires
Some of these trees house creatures
of the forest floor in burned-out caves
at the base of their ruddy trunks
Some of these trees have become
living pipes, chimneys, hollowed out
by fire. They have grown beyond
their trauma and focus now
on the daily climb, the adding-on
of needle and bark, on nature’s drive
to rise above and see beyond
until the day when death will fell them
and the earth will add them to its riches.
We can be like these trees, pull on
the layers of living like fine
new garments, house the needy
in the caverns of our grief, grow

⁶ Tamara Madison, “Sequoia Sempervirens” published by *A Year of Being Here*, February 15, 2014, <http://www.ayearofbeinghere.com/2014/02/tamara-madison-sequoia-sempervirens.html>.

beyond the stories of our scars
stretch our branches toward
the bristling stars.

After this, Elizabeth Carrington joined the class for our final art project, creating personal medicine pouches. We introduced the Native American tradition of making a medicine pouch that represents their belonging to the earth community, and how they placed sacred herbs and stones inside to carry a part of their home with them for protection and guidance. We began with a drumming visualization that invited the students to listen for guidance. The students added fabric or beads from home to create their individual pouches, and then we gathered leaves and flowers from the land to dry and place inside.

From a Navajo prayer:⁷

The mountains, I become part of it . . .
The herbs, the fir tree, I become part of it.
The morning mists, the clouds, the gathering waters,
I become part of it.
The wilderness, the dew drops, the pollen . . .
I become part of it.

We finished the year with poetry of praise, and loving what is. We spent time journaling about each of our unique gifts and appreciated the precious gifts of nature. Students gathered in a circle in the grass and listened to this poem:

“The Cure for It All” by Julia Fehrenbacher⁸

Go gently today, don't hurry
or think about the next thing. Walk
with the quiet trees, can you believe
how brave they are — how kind? Model your life
after theirs. Blow kisses
at yourself in the mirror

⁷ Navajo Chant in *Earth Prayers*, edited by Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 5.

⁸ Julia Fehrenbacher, “The Cure for It All” in *Poetry of Presence*, edited by Phyllis Cole-Dai and Ruby R. Wilson (West Hartford, CT: Grayson Books, 2017), 40.

especially when
you think you've messed up. Forgive
yourself for not meeting your unreasonable
expectations. You are human, not
God — don't be so arrogant.

Praise fresh air
clean water, good dogs. Spin
something from joy. Open
a window, even if
it's cold outside. Sit. Close
your eyes. Breathe. Allow

the river
of it all to pulse
through eyelashes
fingertips, bare toes. Breathe in
breathe out. Breathe until

you feel
your bigness, until the sun
rises in your veins. Breathe
until you stop needing
anything
to be different

until
you have unwavering faith
in what
is.

Each student was asked to contemplate what message they might add to “The Cure for It All” and after a solo walk back to the classroom, each student wrote their thoughts on the blackboard. This was then written on a sacred scroll to be added to their medicine pouches. Here is our message:

“The Cure for It All”

Be open hearted, let things come to you freely.
Love, even if you aren't the same.
All you need is within yourself,
You will have love, if you love all.
Love yourself,
You are unique, you are special!
Lay on the Earth,
Dip your toes in the creek,
Plant seeds in the garden.
Go for a long walk,
Be grateful.

Laura Coleman has been a holistic educator for 14 years. Her love of nature began as a child growing up in the woods of New England. She found her calling as a Waldorf teacher and strives to always be on a path of learning and growing. She received a BA from New York University and a Masters in Waldorf Education from Sunbridge College. Laura currently resides and teaches at Sacred Mountain Sanctuary in Western North Carolina. She is renewed by the opportunity to help create a living curriculum that involves listening to the earth, the seasons, and especially the children. She is dedicated to allowing children to follow their inner path and to experience their belonging to the sacred earth and cosmos.

María Montessori, Eknath Easwaran, and Children in Nature

by

Dorian Dugger

“There is no description, no image in any book that is capable of replacing the sight of real trees, and all the life to be found around them, in a real forest. Something emanates from those trees which speaks to the soul, something no book, no museum is capable of giving.”¹

“Modern observations and child-study have led us to realize that as soon as the child can go out of doors, we must take him with us.”²

“The child is capable of developing and giving us tangible proof of the possibility of a better humanity. He has shown us the true process of construction of the human being. We have seen children totally change as they acquire a love for things and as their sense of order, discipline, and self-control develops within them.... The child is both a hope and a promise for mankind.”³

~ Maria Montessori

“All children are my children, just as I want them to be your children too.”⁴

“Give your children lofty ideals,” Sri Easwaran told the parents again and again, “and live them out yourselves. You are their first teachers. The home is their most important school. Be home for them when they need you, and make your home a place to which they always want to return.”⁵

~ Eknath Easwaran

¹ Maria Montessori, *From Childhood to Adolescence*, The Montessori Series, Volume 12 (Amsterdam: Montessori-Pierson Publishing Company, 2007).

² Maria Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995).

³ Maria Montessori, *Education and Peace* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-Clio Inc, 1992).

⁴ Eknath Easwaran, *With My Love and Blessings: The Teaching Years, 1966-1999* (Tomales, CA: Nilgiri Press, 2000).

⁵ Ibid.

I was very fortunate my children had ample time and space, surrounded by nature, to explore and grow up receiving her gifts. They helped me plant the garden, tend it and harvest the bounty our yard provided. We spent many hours in the woods, at the falls, down at the river. On their own, as they got older, they would stay out til dark or suppertime, whichever came first. We had little money and lived 'in the boonies' so this was their entertainment and their education when not in school. I so wish every child could experience this once in their lives.

Our modern world is so speeded up, filled with so many activities, technologies, endless distractions and time-fillers, which more times than not leave us feeling harried, exhausted, and overwhelmed - tragically taking our attention away from our loved ones. Technology is a brilliant tool, but also an alluring distraction and form of escape. Children yearn for and deserve our complete attention when we are spending time with them. I wish I had learned this earlier in life. And even more so today for families and educators, it is much easier said than done.

A host of squirrels are dashing about my porch. My grandson loves to sit in my meditation chair and watch their antics as they fill themselves at the bird feeders. A while back I gave up trying to discourage them. They're delightful, carefree, comically entertaining, and make me smile. Now I have a feeder just for them, filled with things they love. The feeder is about six feet from my chair. Thank goodness I meditate before sunrise.

Thanks to my sons, my front yard is a haven for nature and children alike. They delight in playing there. I live in town, so it is especially precious to have this broad expanse of woods, lawn, and beautiful shade trees.

Two years ago I applied to the Montessori school my grandson attends. I was truly amazed when I got a job as Assistant Children's House Guide. I cannot tell you how much I've learned in my time there. Not only about children, but human kind in general.

We are encouraged to spend time observing the children. It can be challenging with twenty-five 3-6 year olds in the classroom, but as they settle into their environment and become absorbed in their work, it has been among my greatest joys to watch them interact with the Montessori materials and each other.

We have a beautiful garden patio they can work in and much of my time has been spent there with them. Even on some of the coldest days, they vie to get out there and work. We've had visits from rabbits, frogs, chipmunks, a baby Smooth Earth snake, snails, toads, mushrooms, countless varieties of birds and insects, and the beloved squirrels, whom the children have fondly named Gymnastics and Sunflower. We grow flowers, herbs and vegetables in a surprisingly small area. The children have learned to plant seeds by themselves and keep them watered and weeded.

Their parents and loved ones come help on garden work days and together we clean and weed and mulch and tend to our beautiful outdoor classroom.



In my own life, as a student of Eknath Easwaran, I do my best to follow his Eight Point Program of which the bedrock is daily meditation. The other seven points help throughout the day to deepen my practice and understanding, and grow closer to those I love. One of the points is *Slowing Down*. This had been one of my focuses for several years prior to working at the Montessori School and it proved invaluable, combined with *One-Pointed Attention*, in helping me learn the vast amount of information I took in and most especially in my connection with the children and lead teacher, Holly.

As part of working at the Montessori School of Winston-Salem, one is required to get twenty continuing education credits a year. I looked over the offerings and decided on the two-year course entitled *The Inner Life of the Child in Nature*. And this is my final paper I'm submitting reflecting on the practice I chose at the beginning, which was to slow down, and put my meditation practice first so as to be better able to serve in this new role as assistant guide I found myself in.

It's not been easy.

I found my energy stretched thin, my immune system bombarded, and my patience tested more than I care to admit. But one of the greatest allies was the silent *repetition of my mantram*, as much as I could remember it. It helps me slow down. It helps me really be there for the children and Holly. And is a healing balm when the challenges of the day find me at my edge, and sometimes beyond. Some of the children have been particularly trying for me. They won't hear me repeating my mantram, but I believe it helps them too. I believe they feel it. They seem to relax, to ease up, when they come to me distressed or I have to lovingly but firmly redirect them. This loving and firm redirection is a skill it took me a while to learn, under the masterful tutelage of Holly. While I was still very green, I found myself unnerved more than once when face to face with a strong-willed child. Inevitably, along with what Holly taught me, I found being in nature with them, and slowing down, really giving them my full attention, being really grounded in myself through my practice, was like magic.

Gradually the guidance Holly nurtured me with took hold and I was more and more secure with the children. They felt it. And I did too. I've learned how to listen more closely to them, speak in a simpler language, or not at all, understand better where they are in their development, wait before acting, and to ask them questions rather than try to impart knowledge. I've learned more from them than I could ever have imparted. It really is magical. To mostly silently show them a 'work' new to them, and then see them so competently master it on their own and with their friend's help, or even show me a better way to do it, is among my greatest joys. It's a revelation. To see their delight in our beautiful garden, the pride they feel, how hard they work to take good care of it and keep it clean and beautiful is one of the most moving things I've ever experienced. It gives me hope and endears all children to me in a way I've never known before.

Easwaran's and Maria Montessori's teachings dovetail so breathtakingly. They speak the same language, though one more scientific than the other, and seem to come from the same truths.

Through the combination of Easwaran's teachings, The Inner Life of the Child in Nature program, and The Montessori School of Winston-Salem, I've grown so much in these last two years. I healed from one of the most tumultuous periods of my life. I've been able to slow down. And I've been able to put my meditation practice first more and more.

With a dear friend of mine, Rosemary, we offered an Introduction to Passage Meditation series last Autumn and began a weekly fellowship group following the teachings of Eknath Easwaran. It has become an essential part of my week and practice.

I'm in my last days at the Montessori School now. Bittersweet barely describes how I feel. I'm entering a new phase in my life where I will be going to the Blue Mountain Center for Meditation (which is the home place of Eknath Easwaran's teachings) for extended periods throughout the year to support the work there. It is a dream come true.

I'm so grateful to the influences in my life over these last two years. Each entity and its loving participants have informed my life and affected all the rest of my days. With all my heart, thank you to each of you.

Easwaran says time is one of the greatest gifts we can give our children.

I'll end this essay with Easwaran's words.

“And let me also repeat what I learned from my grandfather, my father, my mother, my grandmother, that the best way to entertain children is to work with them, not play with them, but work with them. I was always invited to work with my granny, planting a garden, sowing seeds, looking after the cow and the calf. And it is this active loving participation that really satisfies them, not pretending playing games. And I would suggest that children be allowed to participate, encouraged to participate wherever they can, subject to rules of safety. Often they can show amazing skills.... Give your children time you know... the very act of giving them time, being with them, not talking with them, but listening to them. I think it is one of the most important ways in which we can protect our children, if we can give them this continuing attention and affection which will not leave any vacant holes in their consciousness.”⁶

This passage for meditation is from Eknath Easwaran's book, *God Makes the Rivers to Flow*:

Mahmud Shabestari
The Mirror of This World

Every particle of the world is a mirror
In each atom lies the blazing light of a thousand suns.
Cleave the heart of a raindrop,
A hundred pure oceans will flow forth.
Look closely at a grain of sand,

⁶ Transcribed from Eknath Easwaran's video talk:
<https://www.bmcm.org/inspiration/easwaran/gift-time/>

The seed of a thousand beings can be seen.
The foot of an ant is larger than an elephant;
In essence, a drop of water is no different than the Nile.
In the heart of a barley-corn lies the fruit of a hundred harvests;
Within the pulp of a millet seed an entire universe can be found.
In the wing of a fly, an ocean of wonder;
In the pupil of the eye, an endless heaven.
Though the inner chamber of the heart is small,
The Lord of both worlds
Gladly makes his home there.⁷

And lastly this, from Easwaran's book *Words To Live By*, my first introduction to his teachings.

If your heart were sincere and upright, every
creature would be unto you a looking-glass
of life and a book of holy doctrine.

~ Thomas a Kempis

The pure in spirit, who see God, see him here and now; in his handiwork, his hidden purpose, the wry humor of his creation. The Lord has left us love notes scattered extravagantly across creation. Hidden in the eye of the tiger, the wet muzzle of a calf, the delicacy of the violet, and the perfect curve of the elephant's tusk is a very personal, priceless message.

Watch the lamb in awkward play, butting against its mother's side. See the spider putting the final shimmering touches on an architectural wonder. And absorb a truth that is wordless. The grace of a deer, the soaring freedom of a sparrow hawk in flight, the utter self-possession of an elephant crashing through the woods - in every one of these there is something of ourselves. From the great whales in the blue Pacific to the tiniest of tree frogs in the Amazon basin, unity embraces us all.⁸

Quotes from Eknath Easwaran, founder of the Blue Mountain Center of Meditation, are reprinted by permission of Nilgiri Press, P. O. Box 256, Tomales, CA 94971, www.bmcm.org.

⁷ Eknath Easwaran, *God Makes the Rivers to Flow: Sacred Literature of the World Selected by Eknath Easwaran* (Tomales, CA: Nilgiri Press, 1991, 2008).

⁸ Eknath Easwaran, *Words to Live By* (Tomales, CA: Nilgiri Press, 2005).

Dorian Dugger lives in Lewisville, NC and has lived in the South all her life. She is more a student of life than academia and has spent more than half her life studying and trying to practice the teachings of Eknath Easwaran. Including alongside her beloved mother during the last 12 years of her life. Easwaran's words have been a transformational force in Dorian's life, taking her from being a very broken addict, to finding peace and understanding. She is mother to two sons and step-mother to two more sons and three beautiful daughters, along with all of their loved ones. Especially - she is the smitten grandmother of 6 beautiful grandchildren. Professionally she's worked a wide variety of jobs - helping in her mother's needlepoint shop, restaurant work, assistant in the academic office of a Neurosurgery department, vet assistant, horse trainer, dog groomer, co-founder of a community center, gardener, homemaker, Airbnb-er, musician, and assistant guide in the Children's House of The Montessori School of Winston-Salem. She's very much looking forward to this next phase of her life.

Into the Woods

by

Marion Hirsch

The Community Church of Chapel Hill is surrounded by 13 acres of woods including ravines and streams, with paths winding this way and that. Close to the church building there are fenced in playgrounds and a wooded amphitheater and a memorial garden. I have known for over 15 years that I wanted to bring our children and youth into this beautiful space as part of the religious education program which I have led since 2000.

Thomas Berry says, “Indeed, the universe is the primary sacred reality. We become sacred by our participation in this more sublime dimension of the world about us.”¹ “The natural world demands a response beyond scientific insight. The natural world demands a response that rises from the wild unconscious depths of the human soul.”² “Our inner spiritual world cannot be activated without experience of the outer world of wonder for the mind, beauty for the imagination, and intimacy for the emotions.”³

I didn’t know this yet. I was an inside person, primarily. Alienated from nature. Yet the beautiful woods around our church beckoned to me, invited me, called to me. For years, little things drew me closer to that intimacy. It was grace or providence that somehow I found myself participating in the *Inner Life of the Child in Nature*. It was a friend who invited me and I could have said “no,” but I was ready even though I had no idea what it would mean. I am grateful for the openness that I felt that allowed me to go into the woods.

I don’t know what I was expecting but I had no idea it would be so easy and so powerful. I am overwhelmed by the experience of discovering something that has been under my nose my whole life. My own practice of presence and beholding in nature has been so healing and grounding.

¹ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way Into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 49.

² *Ibid.*, 55.

³ Thomas Berry, *The Christian Future and the Fate of the Earth* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 74.

It has been easy to introduce a nature practice into the religious education program. It is called Into the Woods. Each week for six weeks, after a short opening worship, we go out into the woods to sit spots where the children sit usually for 10 minutes without anyone else in their view. Each child has a journal with a couple of colored pencils. Each week there is a focus - seeing, hearing, looking at the tiny things, looking up. The six weeks take place in the fall or the spring depending on the group so that we get to watch the seasons change. Then after our quiet time we share what we noticed, what was beautiful or exciting.

My frame for the experience is that seeing the sacred in nature is the earliest and most basic spiritual impulse. It is the human experience that unites with those who have gone before and unites us with the whole universe. I say that nature is our friend and the way you show friendship and become friends is to spend time really getting to know each other. I'm not shy about doing this with children because I have now done it myself.

I think I used to think that I needed to teach – how to identify birds and trees, or talk about ecology or the environment. And I felt unsure about it. Now, I know that before knowledge comes being. Being in the sacred universe is the first step and from that other things will follow - healing, inspiration, learning, science, activism. But first comes relationship. Knowing and being known. Love is first. The great friendship.

Marion Hirsch has served as the Director of Religious Education at the Community Church of Chapel Hill Unitarian Universalist since 2000. She provides leadership for a program of 180 children and youth. In addition she leads programs for young adults and adults. Prior to her work with the church she was an Archivist Librarian. Marion is a mother of three grown children and partner to Ken for 30 years. One of the most profound experiences she has had in nature was in Yellowstone National Park.

Foundations of Spiritual Life in Nature

by

Celia McMullen

Our Lady of Grace Catholic School brings our students to programs offered by The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World (CEINW) at Timberlake Earth Sanctuary in the foothills of North Carolina four times during their tenure at OLG. They come in second, fourth, sixth, and eighth grade.

Each time the students come they engage in different practices and elements of thought. These practices and thoughts become the foundation of their spiritual life.

The staff of CEINW creates a program tailored to each grade and each passage through Timberlake Earth Sanctuary is different.

Second Grade

The second grade comes to the Earth Sanctuary with a total innocence and the wild wondering of being in nature. Each child has made his or her own mandala, which we make into a paper quilt as a gift to the Center staff. Each child tells the story of the symbols in his or her mandala. They behold nature with silent observation and they walk down the Marsh Walk individually like they will in the church for their First Communion.



Fourth Grade

The fourth grade comes to Timberlake remembering the lovely experiences of second grade, but can find a deeper understanding because of the maturity of the students and because of the experience of their teacher, who is a graduate of The Inner Life of the Child in Nature program. Throughout the year, they go outside around the campus of OLG and write in their journals. They take a fall field trip to Timberlake and spend the day in nature writing. They come back to school and “publish” a piece from their journals that they wrote that day.

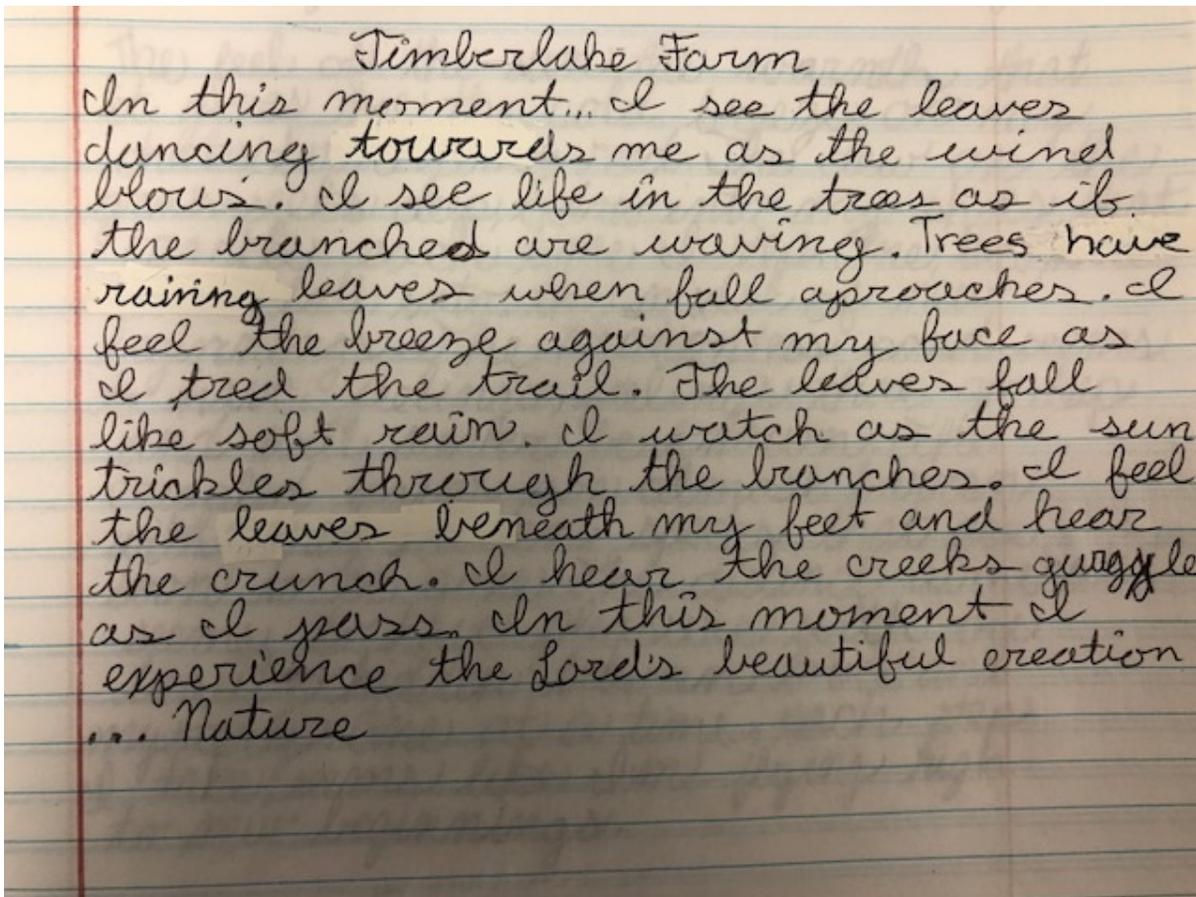


I feel God in nature from the quiet
community outside. The meandering water when the
bubbles come up. The humming of bees, the chirping
of birds, the sweet sound of crickets is God in
nature. The sparkling sun as the rays shine
bright. The breeze as it goes by and almost
makes me cry. All of these ways are so nice to
think, but the best of all is to see God wink.
I see this in the clouds as they pass through.
I hope you see God in nature too!

Kendleigh Beck

Sixth Grade

The sixth grade students are involved with the Empathetic Listening program. Their day requires a quiet solo walk in the woods and partnering with peers to talk and listen to each other's observances. They write with the prompts – "In this moment . . ." and "In the silence . . ." The students also practice being present to the moment when they are speaking and listening to one another. This program enhances the Catholic Social Justice theme of Dignity of the Human Spirit.

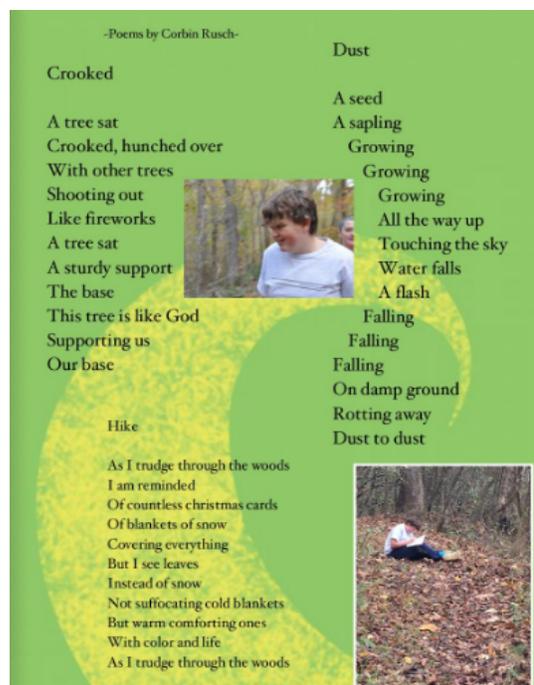


Timberlake Farm
In this moment... I see the leaves dancing towards me as the wind blows. I see life in the trees as if the branches are waving. Trees have raining leaves when fall approaches. I feel the breeze against my face as I tread the trail. The leaves fall like soft rain. I watch as the sun trickles through the branches. I feel the leaves beneath my feet and hear the crunch. I hear the creeks gurgle as I pass. In this moment I experience the Lord's beautiful creation
... Nature

Eighth Grade

In eighth grade, the students come to Timberlake for their final visit. They have “story time” when they remember their history of time at the earth sanctuary. They remember the second grade Marsh Walk; they walk their favorite trails, and place them in their hearts. The students don’t want to leave at the end of the day; they know that their days at Timberlake are coming to a close and it’s time to move on to something new. Timberlake Earth Sanctuary has spoken to their hearts and souls and there is a letting go of an old and faithful friend.

Eighth grade studies the writings of Thomas Berry, Thomas Merton, and St. Francis’ *Canticle of the Sun* before their trip to Timberlake. When they return to school after the program, they write and draw. They compile this into a remembrance book that parents can buy for them at graduation.



Reflections

This is my tenth year bringing second graders to this holy and sacred place. I truly believe that each child that experiences the four programs at Timberlake has had his or her inner life awakened and by the time they leave for high school, the foundation of the sacred has been set. We have given them wings to fly.

As I reflect on what we have provided for our students, it comes to me that the inner life of each person and child at OLG is impacted.

These two years of reflection and contemplation have enabled me to work more freely with the children. Deep thinking and realization of the sacred in nature has resonated through the sessions of the two years of the Inner Life of the Child in Nature program. To provide this discipline to young children requires commitment, faith, and love. Going through these two years has taught me how to look through the lens of God's wonderful love. Creator of all – small and large, mountains and valleys, atoms and quarks, human and animal – all of this was created for each and every one of us to enjoy, to love, to cherish, and to serve.

“If the outer world is diminished in its grandeur, then the emotional, imaginative, intellectual, and spiritual life of the human is diminished or extinguished. Without the soaring birds, the great forests, the sounds and coloration of the insects, the free-flowing streams, the flowering fields, the sight of clouds by day and the stars at night, we become impoverished in all that makes us human.”¹

~ Thomas Berry

Thank you for opening my mind, heart, and soul.

Celia McMullen has been teaching at Our Lady of Grace Catholic School for 19 years. She is currently teaching Second Grade. Celia has a BFA in Studio Art and an MFA in Theatre Design and Technology. She went back to school when her children became school aged and got an Associate's Degree in Elementary Education, K-6. Her children are grown and living in Washington, DC and Spartanburg, SC, respectively. Road trips for visits are frequent! A passionate reader and avid nature fan, she walks regularly alone and with her husband around Greensboro, taking in the beauty of God's creation.

¹ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way Into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 200.

Reflections in Silence

by

Vicki Shawl

Two years ago, I could not have imagined how my life would be today. I remember when I was asked to apply for the Inner Life of the Child in Nature program, the idea of getting in touch with my own inner child in nature was what I was hoping to do. My intentions were not clear and even after almost a full year of gatherings and setting intentions, I remained unclear. Two years ago, I had only just moved to NC after a rather challenging few years. I was uncertain about myself, my marriage, my family, my career, my path. . . I had hopes that days filled in silence and meditation would eventually lead to my understanding of what I was doing here. I could not help but find myself in love with the land at Timberlake Earth Sanctuary, yet felt I continued to miss something daily. At each meeting we discussed setting a practice, setting an intention and we were encouraged to read passages from past Inner Life participants and Thomas Berry and others. I was resistant. They were unable to fully hold my attention and I didn't want anyone to know that maybe I just did not get it.

As a young child, I was exposed to the wonders of nature, or maybe I was just curious. I loved being in nature, outside, quiet, yet noisy. As I grew older, being in nature helped me in many of my challenging life stages. It was a calming and serene place where I could share my thoughts but have them held secret and sacred. It was as though the earth/nature understood me more than anyone around me. I also longed to be with people, to learn, to work; and I clearly saw that many people did not appreciate or love nature to the same extent I did. In my early adult years, I spent hours of each day in nature, watching the seasons change, hiking, walking, and embracing the wonder around me. I never wrote or intentionally brought nature back into my world away from it. It was not until this journey through Inner Life, that I began to connect that both parts of my world could interact and weave together. I think I always looked at them as separate.

Since beginning the Inner Life study and practice, I have struggled to be consistent in my intentions. But one thing I have done almost daily is take time to be silent. Silence has always been a coveted time and space for me, but I don't think I ever intentionally strived to make time for it. And I don't make time for it today; instead it seems to make time for me. Silence finds me and we begin. It is daily, for sure, but not scheduled or regimented.

I thought this practice had to be doing something, but for me this practice was less about adding something new and more about embracing the spontaneous moments around me. 15

minutes between clients, ½ hour before children and family rise in the mornings, walking alone in the woods or just down my street, the car ride to work. Something I realized was that silence is not silent. In fact silence is noisy.

It was not until this past Inner Life retreat in February that I realized it was ok to not make my intentions so concrete, but more fluid and spontaneous. I guess the only ritualistic part is that it is daily – sometimes once – sometimes a few times throughout the day always intentionally incorporating nature.

What I have found is that I am at a newfound peace, different than I could have expected. Moments embracing silence in nature have led me toward more patience and compassion for people around me, toward a greater sense of calm and a sort of knowing that everything will be ok. There is less anxiety in my mind.

I am certain that what I gained is not what I sought. I could not have begun to understand my connection to the earth and her breath without letting go and allowing for her presence to embrace me. I had to stop looking in order to see and I had to stop trying in order to be. Silence has led me to a greater depth in my relationship with the earth.

Daily Rising

Sleeping; the sun creeps on the horizon
Insisting to rise
Losing myself in the silence
Embracing my waking to behold early morning
Noticing birdsongs, I am
Content to be still
Enjoying the silence before the noise.

Vicki Shawl is a Licensed Professional Counselor, wife to Mark and mother to Willow, Ava and Haleigh. Professionally she works daily with adolescents and adults struggling with anxiety, depression and life challenges. She enjoys being outside in nature, but finds she gets caught up with life and sometimes forgets to step outside and embrace what is right around her. Only three years ago she and her family returned to Raleigh, NC, from West Virginia where they lived for 10 years. She believes that without struggle, she cannot experience true joy and contentment, and without nature, she cannot find true peace.

Gardens and More

by

Valerie Vickers

(Earth Day, 2018)

*Tanaka Shozo (1841-1913) Japan's first conservationist, "The care of rivers is not a question of rivers, but of the human heart."*¹

*George Washington Carver (1860's-1943), American botanist and inventor, "If you love it enough, anything will talk with you."*²

*Wendell Berry (1934-) American novelist, poet, environmental activist, "I come into the peace of wild things who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief.. For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and am free."*³

There are several practices I have expanded over the past two years in my work with the *Inner Life of the Child in Nature* program: Becoming more attuned to natural cycles by observing Dawn and Dusk, exploring deeper silence as I walk and dialogue in nature and listening to children and encouraging their questions. My young grandson likes to point out "the Fire, Grammy" every time we see sunrise or sunset together. All four grandchildren like to hug trees!

I continue to seek natural places where wildness provides solace for my grief of deep ecological loss caused by human affairs. Often in these spaces, certain plants and animals communicate their presence; and, in my mind, we have a dialogue that focuses my attention in the present. In my front-yard pollinator garden, Goldfinch, Bluebird, Hummingbird, Anole, Cardinal Flower and Eastern Horsemint have captured my imagination as seasons unfold. Black Snake and Dusky Salamander visit on occasion. Surrounding our home are forests, creeks and ponds where innumerable plants and animals reside. Later I will share my encounters with Beaver. My dog Hank and I love to venture into the forest to "rest in the grace of the world."

¹ Tanaka Shozo, in *Ox Against the Storm* by Kenneth Strong (Vancouver, The University of British Columbia Press, 1977).

² George Washington Carver in *George Washington Carver* by Rackham Holt (New York: Doubleday, 1963).

³ Wendell Berry, *The Peace of Wild Things* (London: Penquin Books, 2018).

Poetry, watercolor, scrapbooks, vision boards and the ukulele have entered my life in the past two years as well. I participated in a book group that centered on Buddhist Nun, Pema Chodron's book, *When Things Fall Apart*. I find it meaningful to meditate with the Buddhist practice of "tonglen" as a way of embracing, with an open heart, the anxiety and depression surrounding an indolent form of cancer, as well as the cultural cancer of materialism that feeds on Nature and Soul. I have re-read parts of my dissertation on ecological identity to strengthen my voice in promoting a more intimate relationship with the Earth/universe. I find great hope in the stories recorded there, as well as a vision for education based in ecological understanding with compassionate hearts.

Also, I am contemplating the journey of "Elderhood" as I delve into some of the work of Carl Jung. He suggests that this "Afternoon of Life" is not valued in Western culture because of our alienation from nature, our bodies and the life of the Spirit. This reinforces my desire to become more present to all aspects of aging and to honor death as an end phase of life. Jung's references remind me of the wisdom of Native Peoples. The *Medicine Wheel* is a symbol I value in visualizing the journey through a day or a lifetime. The East may represent *Birth and Illumination*; the South, *Play and Innocence*; the West, *Introspection*; and the North, *Wisdom Gathering*. It is important within the Great Circle to move flexibly from one place to another to learn lessons and seek balance. Cleaning out and letting go are also parts of the journey that challenge me. It is helpful to visualize monks sweeping away their intricate mandalas of colored sand at the end of their ceremonies.

Finally, I have listened to the work bubbling forth from family, friends and participants in the *Inner Life* program who are also asking themselves the questions: What needs to be born into the world now? What is my spirit seeking? Where can my inner child play? I appreciate the care with which the mentors at the Center honor each person's work.

Out of these endeavors,
I newly acknowledge
the creative path that seeks me –
Gardens!

*Thomas Berry (1914-2009), eco-theologian and Earth mentor, "Gardening is the active participation in the deepest mysteries of the universe."*⁴

⁴ Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988).

*Alice Waters (1944-), food activist and founder of the Edible Schoolyard Program, “I believe that every child in this world needs to have a relationship with the land...to know how to nourish themselves...and to know how to connect with the community around them.”*⁵

I find garden memories form a loose web across my life at all stages, reaching a climax now in retirement. Gardens offer hope and rebirth out of dormancy – a metaphor for my spiritual journey. They impart *a sense of place*. Gardens for wildlife, food and beauty provide physical, emotional and spiritual sustenance. They offer an opportunity to be in relationship within the abiotic community of soil, water and air, as well as interaction with the biotic community of plant, animal and human companions. In short, gardening is an invitation to explore the Great Mystery, as Thomas Berry shared above.

My mother and grandparents had gardens that offered more than food and beauty. These gardens of memory were places where I interacted with the Earth, enjoying buggy, slimy creatures and getting my hands dirty. The key word here is “enjoy.” Gardening with children is more about having fun with the Earth than about production. My gardening memories are sacred memories.

Throughout my adult life, I have had vegetable and flower gardens both at home and in schools. In both public and private schools, I found a way to offer this experience to students from kindergarten through college. This effort always involved acquiring space, funding and volunteers to help my students and me create nature trails, butterfly gardens and permaculture spaces. Sometimes, we even built ponds. Although none of these gardens remain physically, I hope that they live in the memories of my students.

Currently in the Community Garden of Briar Chapel, I am developing a children’s garden in the shape of a keyhole mandala. I hope to provide a model of fun garden exploration. In addition, I have become a Garden Guide at the North Carolina Botanical Garden where I enjoy sharing my love of plants and their habitats with visitors. At Nature Trail Trailer Park, I am co-creating a summer camp for elementary students who are Hispanic, in which gardening and choosing healthy food are central themes. Alice Waters is my virtual mentor for this endeavor.

In my church community I have planted a shade garden and look forward to creating specialty gardens of drought- and deer-resistant native species with youth and adults. All of these efforts allow me to be outside learning from nature and those around me, as we commune with the Earth/universe.

⁵ Alice Waters in Susannah Abbey, “Alice Waters” at <https://myhero.com/alicewaters>.

Finally, over the past couple of years my husband and I have turned our tiny front yard and side yard gardens from rows of liriopse into native pollinator gardens. We began by amending the Chapel Hill gravel and clay. Slowly, we have added native plants to create a healthier ecosystem with more diversity in which animals, including monarch butterflies and salamanders, visit and commune with us.

After nearly seventy years
my hands are still dirty
from garden work.



Beavers

*...The impeded stream is the one that sings...Wendell Berry*⁶

Beavers are a source of ecological controversy in the community in which I live. Recently, the Board of Directors of our Home Owners Association voted to capture and kill all the beavers in our “green community” because of the changes they have wrought on the land and to the bridges. Beavers are “keystone” species in North America, creating wetland habitat for hundreds of other species and filtering and improving water quality. They were here before this development. What can they teach us?

I am especially fond of one beaver that frequents the retention pond across the street. Last year it sauntered to the pond from the creek, munched grass and clover and swam around the pond. Eventually, it began chewing the bark around the trees at the pond and collecting trees for its dam. My husband and I took action to save the remaining trees by encircling them with wire cages. We were successful. However, this spring, large trees next to the creek have fallen from the rising water levels caused by rains and the beaver dams of which there are many now.

Mothers and children in our community are protesting with *Save the Beavers* signs. A group of us are creating a non-profit called Friends of the Pokeberry Creek Beavers and Wetlands. Right now the eradication of the beaver colony has been put on hold, at least for the time being. My contribution is to gather stories, art or poems about the beavers from the children in the community. I also hope to obtain a Critter Camera so our community may view nocturnal pictures of what is living in our large beaver ponds. As I strive to “think like a wetland,” I am gathering wisdom from groups such as New Hope Audubon Society and Ellerbe Creek Wetland Association who have worked with this ecological issue in a win-win way.

I identify with Beaver as I am industrious in working toward my goals. When obstacles arise, I work around them. I love the water. Family is important to me. Like Beaver I strive to create natural spaces. Instead of dams, I build networks and gardens that foster Earth care.

⁶ Wendell Berry, “The Real Work” in *The Collected Poems of Wendell Berry* (New York: North Point Press, 1985).

Selected Poems from Past Two Years

Toad Catching (with My Grandson)

Eagerly,
the two-year old dances and claps his hands
Toadlets leap around him, tiny beings darting to and fro
Carefully, I drop to my knees reaching for one
Focused

Eagerly,
I catch one toadlet in mid-jump and grasp
the delicate body for the child to touch
Timidly, the child takes the wiggling creature
Thrilled

Eagerly,
the toad slips between tiny fingers onto the muddy path
It hops many body lengths to escape outstretched hands
Magically, the toadlets vanish into the forest edge
Camouflaged

Okra Memories

Reaching for stalks
in the okra forest
of our community garden,
I snip three succulent pods
to add to my basket
Pea plants wave
in the breeze
surrounded by wasps
hovering over yellow blooms
full of nectar

I remember Eleanor
with gnarled hands
who introduced me to okra
and the delight of eating it
fried, stewed or steamed
on top of field peas
with tomatoes and corn
in a soup mixture we canned

as sweat poured off our bodies
in her 50's kitchen filled with stories
of the Great Depression

Cocoon

Does your cloak reveal
how delicious it may feel
to totally transfigure
to full beauty and flight,
a moth angel of the night?

Soul's Dominion (inspired by the poem *Courage* by Amelia Earhart)

Behold life that challenges us
to choose direction,
to follow a higher calling,
beyond expectations or
cultural mores,
to embrace our passions
to seek our destiny even as fate
swoops in with the wind
to surprise.
For the soul's longing is the compass
to steer our course with
courage and radical witness
in our time.

Valerie Vickers is a retired science teacher and Earth educator who lives in the woods outside Chapel Hill, NC, with her husband Paul Mitchell. She is a grandmother and dog lover. Her passions include reading, writing, gardening and swimming. She has traveled extensively to share messages of Earth care. In the 1990's she met Thomas Berry who became the inspiration for her PhD work at UNCG in Cultural Foundations of Education: Curriculum and Teaching with a dissertation, *An Exploration of Ecological Identity: Education To Restore the Human/Earth Relationship*. She has worked with spiritual and ecological endeavors as a Quaker and Unitarian Universalist.

The Hospitality of the Natural World

by

Priscilla Webster-Williams

I was excited and hopeful about entering The Inner Life of the Child in Nature program during a time of transitions and great “ups and downs.” I saw participation in the program as an opportunity to move in new and healing directions; toward the beauty, peace, and beholding of the natural world at Timberlake Earth Sanctuary. I was coming out of a rather intense period of writing and assembling a book manuscript about a family story of illness, brokenness, and the labyrinth of recovery. It was thrilling to have the manuscript accepted by two presses; the book was published, and I’m still experiencing the pleasure of giving readings in bookstores and at other poetry venues in North Carolina. There was, and is, much to celebrate.

However, almost a year before starting the program, I was diagnosed with a second cancer. This was a great shock; my first cancer diagnosis was twenty years ago, and since then I had been told I was free of cancer. The diagnosis brought up huge questions about mortality, trust, and purpose. So, it was a great comfort to turn toward the trees during sapphire pre-dawn mornings and engage with nature. In beholding the stillness of the woods, I could suspend my ego and forget self and concerns over which I had little control. Instead, I could enter into deep silences and stand in awe that a new day was beginning each morning. During moments of deep beholding, I felt nature’s acceptance. At times even nature seemed to grieve with me. Being in The Inner Life program has been a great blessing, in a time of great personal need.

During The Inner Life program, participants were asked to develop a practice of silence in nature that could lead to, as Robert Sardello wrote, “bodily sensing of Earth-Human-Soul presence.”¹ I did my best to do this throughout the program, and my practice was enhanced most recently by explorations of three “H” words— *Hospitality*, *Haiku*, and *Hopkins* (the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins). I chose these topics with the hope that they would offer fresh ideas and add energy to my attempts to write poems in response to Earth’s call. (Several of these poems appear later in this paper in the “Call and Response” section.)

¹ Robert Sardello, *Heartfulness* (Gainesville, TX: Goldenstone Press, 2015), unpagged.

Hospitality

During The Inner Life program, I experienced the hospitality of the natural world as never before, in sickness and in health. Nature's presence and care has been there—here—offering beauty, steadfastness, and peace. Truly, the Earth/the Universe is the Greatest Host that exists. In sensing the hospitality of the earth, my soul was comforted, and I sensed I was becoming more trusting and open. As a result, I am making changes in my home that hopefully make visitors feel more welcome. I also wrote this poem about the hospitality of the Universe and its Earth:

Radical Hospitality

The Natural World extends
the Ultimate Extravagant Welcome
Constant Invitations
to Commune
with an Ever-Present
Magnificent Thou
and the Human I

It is common knowledge that earth's air, water, rain, and soil make life possible. Humans and other life forms simply cannot exist without earth's beneficence. Yet, earth's invitations to enjoy and care for it go beyond the obvious.

Very early in human history, the Natural World invited humankind *to relate, behold and name* the essences they saw, heard, smelled, tasted, and touched. The magnificence and mysteries of Nature, the subjects and displays in it, caused awe, fear, and curiosity in humans. The Natural World invited and inspired humans to name things, at first by making sounds to echo, imitate what they experienced. In the Genesis myth, Eve names a living thing "snake." She did so by beholding the essence of the creature: its hiss, sway, and glide; its entrancing and sometimes lethal qualities—a thing so magical it could shed its skin and yet continue to live. Humans created words and developed languages— connection through communication is yet another gift from The Natural World.

In *A Dictionary of Symbols*, J.E. Cirlot writes: "Given the symbolic nature of the Egyptian language, it follows that a name could never be a product of chance, but only of the study of the characteristics of a given thing."² Most root words are very ancient, stemming from Indo-

² J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, 2nd edition (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2002), 226.

European languages, and the meaning of many words is deeply fixed in the natural world. For example the words *trust, endure, druid, tray, and tar*—meaning something firm, solid, steadfast—derive from the Sanskrit for “tree.” As a root word was transported across the earth by humans, derivatives from many languages were formed. The root of “foot,” *ped*, ranged widely as it was adopted into other languages—from Sanskrit, Greek, Persian, Latin, German, French and Old English. A few of the derivatives from “ped’ (foot) include *pedal, pioneer, pew, podium, octopus, pajamas, and impeccable*. Horned animals gifted humanity with the words *head, cornea, Capricorn, hornet, cranium, cervix, and carrot*—off-shoots of “horn.”

Many words in everyday use stem from the physicality, the gifts, of the Earth, so that each time we hear, think or speak, it might be said that we are digesting or expressing something of The Natural World. I enjoy exploring the roots of words, and incorporating those words and their derivatives in poems. In so doing, I’ve found a deepening sense of respect for the earth, and I feel more a part of, and closer, to the natural world. I imagine a word traveling across the earth and being adopted into another language. I imagine people speaking, using words with meanings that spring from the earth. In more ways than one, the Earth, Nature, is the Ultimate Host.

However, in current culture, the concepts of the Earth as Hospitality, or Earth as The Great Host, scarcely occur at all. When I Google the word “hospitality,” links come up only for commerce—the hotel industry, or training for it—and a search on my library’s website brought up similar responses. To me, this indicates that current culture is in a very sad state.

Wikipedia offers a definition of the word: “Hospitality refers to the relationship between a guest and a host, wherein the host receives the guest with goodwill, including the reception and entertainment of guests, visitors, or strangers. Louis, chevalier de Jaucourt, describes hospitality in *the Encyclopédie* as the virtue of a great soul that cares for the whole universe through the ties of humanity.”³ I was grateful to see the last sentence above. Clearly, the Universe/Earth is the greatest “soul” or “thing” that exists, as demonstrated by its stance and flowering in many forms, including being the models for the formation of words and languages.

Earth’s silent but visible “call” to those it hosts, its residents, invites—and requires—a response to how we relate to water, soil, air, etc. It of course behooves humans to be conscious of, and monitor, their responses to what Earth has to offer, for without these gifts humanity simply cannot live at all. Likewise, humans cannot be on earth without responding to it, either by caring for it, or by bringing it to the edge of distinction. Thankfully, the works of Thomas Berry and

³ Wikipedia’s definition of “hospitality” is found at: <https://www.wikipedia.org/> and <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hospitality>

other great writers recommended by The Inner Life program teach, and remind humanity, that Earth is The Great Host, and that it invites its global guests to behold, develop a sense of wonder, and an “I and Thou” response to it:

*"Wonder is that which arouses awe, astonishment, surprise, or admiration: a marvel, a feeling of glory. Glory is described by Saint Thomas as clara notitia cum laude: clear knowledge with praise; to express strong approval or admiration for; to applaud, extol, commend; to exalt. This is the great challenge of the human at present - to recover the language of wonder and praise. Then we can give expression to the deep reciprocity and relatedness at the heart of the universe. In this way we may take up the immense challenge of restoring our world."*⁴

~ Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe*

Gerard Manley Hopkins

During the last months of The Inner Life of the Child in Nature program, I read about Gerard Manley Hopkins, now widely known as a nature poet, and often called “The Praise Poet.” Hopkins (1844-89) lived his life in Britain and Ireland. He was a Jesuit priest and led a very disciplined life. He was often ill; scholars now think he suffered from crohn’s disease, an extremely painful medical condition not named until the 1930s. In addition to attending to his priestly and parish duties, Hopkins observed nature intently and drew sketches of plants and landscapes. He believed that God as Creator imposed an inner core of individuality on each species of rock, plant, animal, etc. He also believed that life forms could express themselves through their inner energy, and that the essence of subjects could be perceived in moments of insight by an onlooker who was in full harmony with the subject being observed. The idea/belief that life forms can express themselves, and their essence be perceived by humans seems very close to “the beholding of nature as a subject,” a core teaching of The Inner Life program.

In order to write poems about what he beheld in nature, Hopkins adopted language and syntax that was extremely innovative, dense, and energetic. Hopkins’ poetry is now very much appreciated, but during his lifetime it was not understood or valued by his friends, including other poets. Hopkins considered his life a failure. He wrote only a few poems during his lifetime, and died of typhoid fever at age forty-four. His poetry was first published twenty-nine years after his death. Since then, scholars of science and literature have recognized Hopkins’ intricate understanding of nature and his poetic genius.

⁴ Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 150-151.

In reading about Hopkins, I came across a curious fact about him: When he was growing up, he forced his younger brother to eat some flowers “so he [the brother] could understand them.”⁵ I think this says something about how important the natural world was to Hopkins, and how much he valued it. I wrote a poem about this story, in Hopkins’ voice:

Channeling Gerard Manley Hopkins

To understand flowers, you must eat them
I tell my brother, as he chews with doubtful thought.
Why do sweet-looking petals taste so bitter,
he questions, and gagging, spits. Look, I say,
the hills and meadows overflow with flowers.
Rocks, streams, bobolinks feel their powers.
Winter hay is mowed, the farm’s first fruits—
who can stand by, blind, deaf, mute?

I squint, explore, study the tiny to comprehend
the Big. I practice duty, live with restraint
until eyes-brain-heart-hand-pen-ink collide
in delirious dance. Silent trees shimmer
in velvet nights, until blue-black stillness
signals dawn’s emerging light. Wrens and robins
stir in curly nests, whirring-chirping bird song
their heaven-born quest: Praise Him. Praise.
Praise.

Haiku

Toward the end of my time in The Inner Life program, my poetic interests turned toward haiku, an ancient form of Japanese poetry traditionally focused on expressing moments of clarity or revelation while beholding nature. Recently, several members of The Carolina African American Writers Collective published a groundbreaking book, *One Window’s Light: a Collection of Haiku*, edited by Lenard D. Moore.⁶ I was able to pursue haiku by attending three readings, and a workshop, given by the book’s authors. The Nasher Museum of Art featured the

⁵ Margaret R. Ellsberg, ed. *The Gospel in Gerard Manley Hopkins: Selections from His Poems, Letters, Journals, and Spiritual Writings* (Walden, NY: Plough Publishing House, 2017).

⁶ Lenard D. Moore, ed. *One Window’s Light: A Collection of Haiku* (Greensboro, NC: Unicorn Press, 2017).

poets during the opening of a new exhibit of art by African American artists; the poets read their poems from the book and also a poem written in response to viewing a painting in the exhibit. Another reading I attended, in Wake Forest, featured three of the poets reading their haiku, plus one of them told the story behind the art on the book's cover, an image of a nine-square quilt she created in memory of the nine church members murdered at Mother Emanuel, Charleston, SC. The third reading I attended was at "Walking into April," an annual poetry event cosponsored by Barton College and the North Carolina Poetry Society. Two members of the Collective read their poems and gave a brief workshop about haiku.

I am very grateful to have been able to be at the above events and learn more about haiku from the perspectives of these excellent African American poets. In the future, I hope to attend the NC Haiku Society meetings, learn more about haiku as a poetic form, and write in that mode. Here, I offer a haiku sequence that I wrote before entering The Inner Life of the Child in Nature program:

Haiku, one for each season of the year:

crocuses
purple pushes through gray snow
winking

evening pond mirror
full-throated bullfrogs
heavy with heat

mountain trees sway
in full color, each leaf singing
joyful calliope

trees in fog at dusk
wispy presences whisper
cold to the bone

Call and Response

The following poems and journaling notes were written in response to moments of beholding The Natural World / The Ultimate Hospitality / The Welcoming Host. During The Inner Life program, and well before entering it, my goal as a writer of poetry has been to pay attention to

life in its many forms and respond by expressing what I sensed through language. As stated earlier in this paper, The Inner Life of the Child in Nature program's invitation to behold nature as subjects instead of things, brought me into even deeper silence and closer to nature than ever before. For visual clarity, each poem ends with a symbol: ††

This Morning, a Carolina Wren

chirps an incessant and loud message
as it rests on the deck railing
outside my window. Wren seems to say:
"I am here, make room, I belong
in this world and I claim my spot—
Wake up! You belong here, too!"

This little bird of loud voice,
this few ounces of feathers,
this blessing, startles my soul awake. ††

Hymn to Dawn

Collage of opposites,
you break through night,
scatter pink across sky
and your luminous ways
shimmer into airy day.
You push gently into being,
yet are strong as sun's coming.
At times, you emerge slowly,
cast colors of amber and honey.
You hum with mystery. You hurry.
You dawdle, yet your pace is steady.
You are ethereal, refined.
You come clothed in stardust
or as bold as fire. You are delicate wisps,
purple and orange. You are light,
grey and heavy. You weave gold
into air, become brassy and shine.
You glare like glass, and you gently
glisten earth's skin with dew. ††

Journal Entry:

I am looking again at a leaf I brought into the house a few days ago. I brought in two, but can't find the companion leaf. The one that remains has one hole pierced in its structure. The lost leaf had two holes in it. I am feeling a sense of loss because I can't locate the lost leaf. I wonder if the two leaves could have communicated with each other as trees do, through their root systems? Perhaps when a leaf lets go, or pushes itself off a tree, it loses the ability to interact with other beings like itself.

But, this leaf speaks to me now, its variegated shape piercing the air, veins spread in an original yet organized way. And the colors of it, commonplace brown and green, take on a dramatic effect when back-lit from the lamp on my side-table, some parts a deep brown or dusky green, and another, almost-hole revealing itself as a dark-brown crumpled circle. The stem with its fan-like tip is beautiful in its sturdy, woody way. I pick up a "family field guide" to identify the tree the leaf came from. The guide states "When we identify a tree—call it by its own name—we become more closely linked to our forefathers, who would no more have confused a Maple with a Sycamore than would we, say, mistake a vacuum cleaner for a computer."⁷ A surprising thought, a revelation—trees, leaves, forefathers now linked by this leathery, sharp-toothed survivor that rests in my hand. †

At Timberlake Earth Sanctuary

Thy silent form doth tease us out of thought. – Keats

Earth, the great equalizer
to which all will return.
Earth, its stone offered to all
to pick up, admire, and return
to soil's indentation.
Structure, size, sutures,
colors or cracks to trace.
Stones to choose.
Stones to leave alone.

Earth, the great equalizer,
offers stones to toss
into the open air,
and human action is received
without comment,

⁷ Steven Aronson, *Fandex Family Field Guide #47* (New York: Workman Publishing, 1998), 1.

except for the thud
and truth of gravity.

Huge gravel boulders rest in Idaho,
carried there by a massive flood
during human pre-history.
Unmovable black gravel,
etched with petroglyphs
carving by ancient cultures—
wanderers, like us all. ††

Before Dawn, the Backyard is a Bird's Nest of Blue

Sapphire saturates the trees
and snow-covered ground.
Even the air is imbued with blue.

Cupped in nature's cathedral,
I hold my breath....Time ticks,
the yolk of morning cracks
and dapples sapphire with light,

sapphire blue thinning
to the color of robin's eggs,
delicate as just-born birds—
until blue in air takes wing. ††

This evening, the moon is low

large and luminous.
It dips over the tops
of trees and houses
as I pass by in a car.

The huge silvery disc
is at play. It skips

from house to house,
bounces over rooftops.
Moon, doing a jig. ††

“Clear Knowledge and Praise”

~ Thomas Berry

Trees teach how to be, they offer
leafy hands to the light. They talk
amongst themselves, roots to canopy.
They know when one of them is sick,
send healing through their roots.

Trees sway, adjust to wind and weather.
In night slumber, they dream sad dreams,
remembering red oak and sweet gum,
cut down because they were “too close
to the [human’s] house.”

How mighty they were, seventy feet tall,
twins in height, full grown but leveled
by raspy chain saws, their perfect stumps
ground up for fodder to feed the earth.

Those trees live on as prized boards
cut for building sheltered by the same species
that borrowed them from the earth—
their living home—where sun and rain
feeds trees that communicate,
and perhaps still remember their kind. ††

A Note to Dawn, Dusk and Sky

Each day you arrive or bid adieu
in a different scene.
Sometimes you are melting colors,
other times streaks.

Ethereal, luminescent,
you become sky, vivid collage of colors.
At times you glare with inner fire,
or become floating dust, grey and growling.
Sometimes you are double rainbow,
singing a duet to the sun. ††

Fog

Morning emerges after snowfall during the darkness.
Street view from window— shrouded veils of white.
Cars roll by, thick fog parts, then closes like a curtain.
Fog's visual voice bellows, tumbles, swoops, hollers
down a street I once viewed as "reality." ††

Tonight, in dusky light

three trees whisper,
branches stretching.

It's easy to eavesdrop among trees.
They don't seem to care,
don't rustle leaves
or drop limbs, as if to say
go away, you are too noseey.

How patient, how old they are.
They knit wise wooden rings
and send healing messages
and other signals through their roots.
In sickness and in health
they repair, and invite me
to behold stately magnificence. ††

Winter, and a New Cancer Diagnosis

The oaks relinquish their leaves that spill like rubble,
a brew of russet that resists raking. I see the great discard
and feel earth's deep freeze—nature's snare to sway
my restless mind toward winter slumber. But there's no peace
this inconsolable season—only mystery. Thoughts stumble
to the brink of darkness, scent of wormwood chokes the air.

Brilliant sun darkens to bourbon hues. Even distant stars
seem to stare with insolence at earth's poverty, which I share.
Feeling utterly without, I challenge earth to join me in my grieving,
but nature will not stop, earth orbits on without my consent.
Pale yellow dawn appears with flecks of gold and two-faced Janus
twists his leathery neck to watch time march again through an ancient gate.

I wait and wait for greening, for deciduous trees to bud.
I breathe in, exhale, and lean toward any available light. ††

Indigo Morning

Trees in a quiet hover.
Soon they will yawn
and stir in their canopies.
For now, stately branches
stand in blue darkness.

Perhaps the beingness of trees
taught the ancient prophets
to see, perceive, believe
“The dark and the light
are the same to God.”

Like fabric dyed with indigo,
sapphire blue air transforms
from deep darkness to sunlight
through the life-giver's power .

Transformation. The trees,
the air, show, teach, declare—
change is not only possible,
it will always come.

Be like us, trees whisper:
embrace possibilities,
embrace change. ††

At Timberlake Earth Sanctuary

Lying on a plank of wood, I wanted to push
my fears and anxieties onto the trees
standing near, but I could not lose them
until I noticed the under-side of green leaves,
and mottled, brighter ones above,
swaying in the canopy.

The plank of wood became a place of death
for what troubled me, and as I shed
my worried self, the trees began to stir
and whisper— and I knew I had been changed
by an upside-down world of visions. ††

Priscilla Webster-Williams is a practicing poet who lives in Durham, North Carolina. She has also lived in the landscapes or cityscapes of Iowa, Chicago, Connecticut, and Boston. Her poems have been published in journals and anthologies, and displayed at art exhibits, including the Disappearing Frogs project. During her time in The Inner Life program, her poem was selected to receive the 2016 Rash Award in Poetry, sponsored by Broad River Review and Gardner-Webb University. Her book of poems, *The Narrative Possibilities of Coral*, was chosen by former North Carolina Poet Laureate, Cathy Smith Bowers, for publication in 2017 by Main Street Rag Publishing Company.