

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

2019-2022



Edited by  
Peggy Whalen-Levitt

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

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## Foreword

On November 23, 2019, fourteen educators gathered in the round room of the Treehouse at Timberlake Earth Sanctuary for the first retreat of the eleventh class of our Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice program. They came from California, Arizona, Colorado, New York, New Jersey and North Carolina. They came as seekers of a depth missing in the culture; seekers knowing that a deep sense of belonging to Earth as sacred community was somehow the key to the future.

That afternoon, as we were about to go on solo walks on Timberlake trails, the skies opened to a downpour that stayed with us as long as we were outside. Perhaps this was a sign of the circumstances that would alter the dimension of intimacy with Earth that has always been an integral part of the program. Rain was with us also on our second retreat on February 8, 2020 and our plans to gather in March came to a halt when we learned of a pandemic that would keep us separated in time and space for more than two years.

Still, we stayed together with a tenacity that was almost mysterious as we all navigated extreme circumstances of remoteness, separation and confinement in our lives and in our work. Earth as sacred community was the lifeline that held us together. Over time, we all went deeper and deeper into its possibilities for healing.

In the midst of this upheaval, we worked from a distance for the second year with weekly meditations on Presence With Living Earth. Wherever we found ourselves, we stayed present with Earth.

And then, we added a third remote year to the program, the year in which we invite participants to birth a practice of their own that flows from a place of alignment with Earth as sacred community. The practices that have taken form, as you will see, are unique to each participant and come from a place of deep authenticity and belonging.

Soon, we will reunite on June 28-29, 2022 at Timberlake Earth Sanctuary for a final two-day retreat – a reunion like no other experienced by an Inner Life class in which we will finally be together after such a long separation to share these practices in a circle of warmth and receptivity. Through the travail of a pandemic, our bond of intimacy is particularly deep.

*Peggy Whalen-Levitt, Editor*  
*June 6, 2022*

# Deeper Knowings

by

Ieva Alverson



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

~ Thomas Berry

Dear Thomas Berry,

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

---

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Berry, “Contemplation and the World Order,” 11 (a paper available on the Thomas Berry Foundation website at [http://thomasberry.org/wp-content/uploads/Berry\\_Contemplation\\_and\\_world\\_order.pdf](http://thomasberry.org/wp-content/uploads/Berry_Contemplation_and_world_order.pdf))

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

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



The Octagon Weekly Assembly, 2022

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

I'd like to share with you a little of my daily practice and how it trickles into the daily life of the children I spend time with. I am discovering my inner movements. Part of my practice is

shifting language from industrious to harmonious. I discern the intent behind my actions. For example, what do I mean when I ..... “take” a walk or “explore” a habitat, or “show” children types of leaves. These are things “to do”. Within these activities, deeper knowings and experiences are accessible.

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

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

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

*Ask permission of the ones whose lives you seek.*

*Abide by the answer.*

*Never take the first. Never take the last.*

*Harvest in a way that minimizes harm.*

*Take only what you need and leave some for others.*

*Use everything that you take.*

*Take only that which is given to you.*

*Share it, as the Earth has shared with you.*

*Be grateful.*

*Reciprocate the gift.*

*Sustain the ones who sustain you, and the Earth will last forever.”<sup>2</sup>*

Upon the first chickweed and purple dead nettle growths in spring, we ventured to notice where they live on the land. Once identified, we paused, circled around and greeted the annual arrival - Welcome Chickweed! After we greet Chickweed, we take another pause to notice.

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

Notice where it's growing, what the air and soil temperature feels like, who is growing or moving around Chickweed? Next, we help lead the children into the questions they can't see the answers to. How did Chickweed know when to grow? Where's the seed? Between the questions, there is silence. Within the silence I listen, and am still learning to listen to Chickweed's answers. This is the work, the Great Work your life's writing offers to the next generation. Honorable Harvest shifts perspective.

This is also the shift in teaching. Within the process of creating and developing relationships with Earth's living beings, children's awareness changes towards what they spend time learning about. Also how they approach and interact with Chickweed or an Autumn Olive Tree. Using new language has been an adjustment, a new mindset to really think about what the feeling is behind the words I am choosing. When we relate, we care, and our hearts open.

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

Honoring all harvests,

Ieva



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



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

# Life Streaming

by

Nikki Bateman

Since becoming a mother I have been focused on taking care of my daughter, family, and a classroom of students. There was no room left to focus on myself. I was empty. So, over the last year my practice had been focusing on myself and my spiritual preparation. I focused a lot on stillness and experiencing the natural world revealing itself to me. I wanted to find the connection to the natural world I once had and missed very much.

I started practicing yoga again on a regular basis. I also have been training for my second Montessori credential this year, moving from an early childhood classroom to the lower elementary level. This training and being a lead teacher at a new level took up most of my time and attention.

Most of my practice was done enjoying some time outside in my backyard. The small amount of time I would spend with my daughter was on weeknights or afternoons on the weekends. We live on a small homestead in Eastern North Carolina where we have a large garden, fruit trees, and chickens. There is always work to be done so finding stillness can be challenging.

I took a last minute trip during spring break in April. I flew to meet my best friend from childhood, Cassie, in Las Vegas, Nevada. It had been almost three years since we had seen each other. She had been living in Arizona for the last five years. Cassie picked me up from the airport and we drove to spend a week in southwest Utah. We spent time in Dixie National Forest, Bryce Canyon National Park, the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, Capitol Reef National Park, and Zion National Park.

The scenery was breathtaking and just what my spirit needed. It was nice to be out of cell phone service for days. I felt I could really disconnect from the constant speed and responsibilities of my daily life and slow down. I journaled throughout the trip. I took the time to sit and connect in every park and place we stayed. I have included writings from my journal of one of my favorite days of the trip.

Journal entry: Wednesday, April 20, 2022

I opened my eyes to the dim interior of the tent. The tightly woven cocoon of fabrics and mesh discouraged gratuitous movement, so I lay there contemplating the day. The warmth was good, too. I watched my surroundings become less dim. The day was starting and the nature that I could sense but not see was changing shifts. Owls bid farewell to the night as ravens chortled distantly at the promise of a new day. Rabbits hopped back into the brush as falcons ascended to lofty lookouts above their roost.

Finally, my curiosity of the morning overcame the comfort of a cozy sleeping bag and I arose. The sun had risen, but barely, and the world remained quiet save for the whisper of synthetic fabrics gliding against each other as I negotiated sleeping bag and tent. The muted buzz of the zippered door on the tent fly made a familiar but highly unnatural sound in contrast to the surroundings. I stepped forward into the morning air, cold and lazy, but trying. It was still, with a gentle brightness that promised warmth and clarity.

The colors of the cliffs and canyons were also dancing to life. The blues, reds, and tans of geologic time warmed slowly in the west, while the slopes to the east clung to the shadows. The colors warmed with the day and changed by the minute. Like many days in the desert, this one promised to be windy, but it wasn't yet. The occasional cool pressure of moving air pressed against my neck every few minutes, but beyond that there was no movement.

After emerging from the tent, the first few minutes were spent in an overwhelmed state of calm. There was nothing overtly exciting, yet the sheer enormity of the landscape left you struggling to absorb it all. It stretched so far towards each horizon that it became hard to fathom how anything else could possibly be beyond it. It was like the last expanse of earth, beyond which there lay nothing but space and uncertainty. Knowing that, instead of space and uncertainty, there actually lies a country beyond that horizon made it a bit surreal. It all felt natural, like a place I was both supposed to be and lucky to reach at the same time.

I found a comfortable seat and a nearby rock. There was a fire to start and tea to make. There were bags to pack and a car to load. There was, still, a tent to take down and force back into its constricted receptacle. But there would only be one this time of day on any given day. It was the time of day that made you feel better about what the next 24 hours would bring. The rock and the morning with me in between were all there was for a few minutes. Eventually I could hear Cassie begin to stir in the tent. Shortly thereafter she emerged as well to see the morning for herself.

As the sun rose a bit further we broke the trance just enough to get some water going for tea and oatmeal. Over the hiss of the jet-boil I could still hear the sound of birds. Out of the corner

of my eye I saw one of the gray/brown lizards dart from rock to rock. The white flicker of a rabbit's tail wove through the thorny brush just down the hill.

Morning tea is a ritual that I find both calming and focusing under normal circumstances, and the sprawling landscape and blatant solitude only served to amplify the effects of a hot mug. The sweetness of the honey melded perfectly with the smooth warmth of my favorite tea. I enjoyed it, savored it, as long as I could but eventually the cup ran cold and the car needed packing.

It was mid-morning when we got back on the road and continued our travels. The sun was well into the sky by that point and the colors were on fire. Everything, everywhere, from washes to canyons and benches to peaks was on full display. The palette ranged from striking pinks, to subdued blues. Reds and tans, with plenty of gray and brown to fill in the margins. Each color represents its own unique mix of minerals, elements, and time that in turn contribute texture, color, and waving timelines.

It was nice not to drive as there was just too much to see and try to take in along the way. The motor of the truck purred along in a way that actually supported the natural sounds around us. It was quiet along the flats and minor inclines. When the little truck approached an uphill climb the gear would drop, the tach would spike upwards, and the engine would audibly struggle with the task at hand. The back would squat a bit going up the hill and at the completion of every ascent the motor would drop into a more relaxed mode as it shuffled its passengers through the Grand Staircase National Monument and beyond.

The trip along the Bill Burr Trail was generally downhill and we had to use the brakes decisively on multiple occasions. Eventually the road went into a series of fairly intense switchbacks that encouraged a little slower pace, particularly at the curves. Switchbacks function by implementing a series of relatively flat straightaways punctuated by sharp curves to traverse steep areas without burning up various automotive components during breakneck descents or groaning ascents. In this case they were almost rhythmic, straightaway straightaway – lean left, straightaway, straightaway – lean right... There was also no shortage of pull offs along the roadway where we stopped frequently. Some stops were good for pictures or a particular view. Almost all of them had enough wow factor to warrant a brief stop.

It didn't seem to matter how long we drove or where we went, the colors on display never seemed to end and it was mesmerizing. Cassie and I went back and forth between laughing and talking raucously to silently absorbing the views and the overall feeling of being in such a vast and beautiful, but undeniably harsh landscape. Each curve revealed new scenery to take in and familiar but ever varying color combinations.

While the landscape seemed infinite, it was understood that our time there was not. One of the great struggles was knowing this but not thinking about it. That would have made it too easy for the outside world to invade. To steal the moment at hand. With any luck there would be other trips, maybe “better” trips, certainly other destinations. But we were there then, and none of the rest of it mattered. The wind, the sun, the music, and the views all combined to make it what it was. And what it was, in the moment, at least, was perfection.

The only outside thoughts I allowed in freely during that ride were of my 3-year-old daughter. As enthralled as I was by the beauty surrounding me, it was far from my first adventure into scenic lands. Seeing things, knowing things, and the realities of life in general have no doubt done their part to dull the sharp edge of youthful enthusiasm. I had great hope and optimism that one day she and I could make this journey and that I could see the awe and wonder of these enchanting vistas through her young eyes. It was this vision of her future and my own that inspired me throughout this trip, just as it had inspired me virtually every day since she'd been born.

For the next little while the day blended with millions of acres of open space and miles of two-lane highway. It all became a blur. Just as I was having my first “are we there yet” thoughts we saw the Fremont River. I was just starting to get fidgety and, as enjoyable as the ride was, I was looking forward to not being in the car for a bit. So much of the trip was spent moving and a certain element was lacking, an element that made the connection between myself and the natural world I was immersed in. It was time to be still.

Having set up and broken down our camp once already, we'd devised a bit of a system. Even though most of the gear did not belong to me, I at least knew where it was and in what order it would come from the car. We made a little small talk setting up camp and getting a fire ready to light, but we both wanted some quiet and we'd found a great place for it. In short order our camp was made and we were largely free of responsibility for the balance of the evening.

It was hot, so I donned shorts and sandals and grabbed a red folding chair that had been propped against a convenient rock while unloading the car. I approached the river and surveyed the area for the ideal location to observe and relax. The river itself looked pretty inviting. As rivers go, the Fremont River was rather discreet. It was not wide, nor was it deep. It had few rocks protruding above the surface, and no rapids in sight. Instead, the steel colored water flowed freely with a persistent murmur that fostered tranquility and peace. It was so inviting that I waded forth, chair in hand, to the middle of the river and proclaimed my spot.

The loose cobble that covered the river floor posed a minor challenge to walking and setting up a folding chair, but it was a surmountable challenge and well worth the effort. The water itself was quite cold and offered a pleasant contrast to the hot dry air. It certainly did wonders to drive away any travel fatigue that might have been settling in.

And there I was, hot and cold, invigorated but relaxed. Balanced in every meaningful way and happy to just be. The longer I sat still, the more I was able to observe and to sense. The first thing that became apparent was just how vital this little ribbon of water was and how much influence it had over the plants and animals in that area. Here, in this delicate little riparian zone were willows and cottonwoods, a drastic change from the endless miles of sage and dry grass we'd driven through earlier in the day. Wildlife did not necessarily abound, but it was no great chore to spot tracks and droppings of all manner of creatures in the sandy soils along the stream banks.

When my presence was no longer new, the sounds of birds began to flow forth from the thick brush, the grass, and the taller trees, as well. There were the complex songs of elegant little birds vying for attention. There were shorter, more purposeful chirps and chatters to communicate the locations of food, nest sites or other points of interest. There was the occasional piercing shriek of a raptor that was heard but never seen.

The few clouds overhead were white and wispy. There were none of the big fat top-heavy thunderheads that would start to show up back at home soon on a near daily basis. But the shapes were no less captivating, and the speed at which they moved across the sky was especially impressive. It occurred to me as I watched the clouds scurry from horizon to horizon that there are some places that inspire me to observe the sky, while others, particularly urban environs, are more discouraging to the sky gazer. It struck me as odd that this was true but it's no less a reality for me. In this setting I was constantly looking skyward but in the city I could go days without really looking at the sky.

Here, looking at the sky was more like looking up at a mirror. Not every part matched perfectly but the irregularities of both land and sky met with and blurred the lines enough in each direction to make it believable to both the mind and the eye. That effect intensified throughout the afternoon as a pinkish tinge crept into the fringes of the horizon. The air was the land of the time and they all passed in concert through the afternoon. All the elements were in sync and it was nice. It was easy. It was easy to let the time go by with no desire whatsoever to fidget or check my phone. No desire to move. It was easy to think. My thoughts wandered and mingled, diverged and came back together. My mind unraveled in every direction, reaching for each horizon and the pent-up energy of constrained brain waves ran free.

The day had been a hot one, but as the sun got lower in the western sky the evening chill descended upon the river bottom. The cold water that had been so pleasant for hours was now just a bit too chilly. Ideas of dinner started to permeate my mind. My world advanced to the next frame. Slowly I stood and stretched. I plucked the chair, now anchored by a layer of small shifting rocks, from the river and walked ashore. The still warm sand coated my feet instantly. The gritty sand coated my feet and thickened with every step. It felt like cookie dough stuck to the soles of my feet. A slight short step over a worn stone scraped the bottom of my heel and peeled off a section of the wet pasty granules. The skin underneath was pale at first, and then red, but no blood arose to the surface.

Cassie had been nearby the entire afternoon, but in some aspects was miles away. Indeed, she'd had her mind to unravel. She registered again when I saw her going quietly about the business of laying out our dinner and starting to cook. I walked slowly beside her and began wordlessly to help with the preparations. We wanted to talk but knew it would break the spell. Even as we progressed we held onto a little bit of the day that had been.

After dinner there was a small fire that we were able to feed until almost bedtime. It gave just enough light to see each other and the tent, but not so much as to diminish the stars. And magnificent stars they were. Even in the relatively low country along the river, there were few obstacles and the sky was bigger than the land. It stretched as far as one could see in any direction with no light pollution to water down the celestial show. The occasional shooting star was relished, and perhaps wished upon.

Eventually I crawled into the tent and dove into the sleeping bag I'd emerged from some 16 hours prior. I'd seen the sunrise, kind of, and taken in all the glory of an arid country sunset. I'd move fast at times, and not at all during others. I was beyond satisfied and ready for sleep. Tomorrow we would move again and repeat today's pattern in a new place and I wanted to be ready.

**Nikki Bateman** currently works as a Montessori teacher in Greenville, NC. She is married with a 3-year-old daughter. Nikki was born and raised in Massachusetts and had a deep love for animals as a child. She wanted to work with animals and pursued a B.S. in Biology from the University of Massachusetts, Boston. She worked in zoos and rescues with all sorts of animals including big cats, reptiles, and birds. After graduating in 2012, Nikki relocated to eastern North Carolina and began working at Greenville Montessori School. Nikki completed her early childhood credential in and led a primary classroom for six years before training for a second credential in lower elementary this year.

# A Journey For the Sacred: Destination Unknown

by

Kasey Errico

“I only went out for walk, and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in.” ~ John Muir

At the start of the Inner Life of the Child in Nature program, I did not know what to expect. What I thought I knew was that I would be able to further inspire my work with the students at Ridge and Valley Charter School (RVCS), as well as infuse that work more deeply beyond my class and throughout the school. Not long after the start of the program, however, the COVID-19 pandemic reverberated across the world, essentially shutting down the global human way of life/living. It was a cataclysmic event in so many innumerable and complex ways that are still and yet to be making themselves known.

In my own little corner of the world, within my family, the pandemic led to many changes; for my children, it disrupted college, social and work experiences. An underlying fear existed in the day to day, as news of human loss and devastating illness chipped away at our foundation. My work with students, who were now unmoored and out of reach to hold the space of circle as a powerful tonic of security, safety, and comfort, was turned upside down and yet more important than ever to serve as a safety net and reminder of the intense need for connection and relationship.

Yet spring and summer still emerged with all of their beauty and thriving hum of life unthwarted. All summer, I and my fellow guides at the school wrestled with how to reimagine the work with this strange new blanket of unknown covering everything, making it difficult to move and think freely.

During this time, I received a call, a calling, that took me down an unexpected path and away from the direct work with young people at RVCS to one of larger human centered systems, grappling with issues related to access to shelter, food, and mental health supports, to name a few.

Although I was no longer at RVCS and immersed in exploring a human earth relationship with the students, I continued with the Inner Life of the Child in Nature program and hoped to bring its relevance into my new role. Letting go, letting come. This is where my journey kept hitting obstacles. Previously, I found it easier to make connections between the RVCS mission and the Inner Life of the Child in Nature program. There was a natural commonality of purpose, an autopoietic interplay between the two, one bringing forth energy into and from the



other. My flow-through of energy in establishing connection and purpose to my new role was more diffuse, more hidden from view.

This quote from evolutionary cosmologist, Brian Swimme and cultural historian, Thomas Berry captured my state of mind:

“And besides the very inborn nature of the future, we must also deal with the inadequacies of our present forms of consciousness. For even if the future were determined, its complexity would be beyond our capacity to articulate it. We will find our way only with a deep and prolonged process of groping - considering with care a great variety of interpretations, weighing evidence from a spectrum of perspectives, attending with great patience to the inchoate, barely discernible glimmers that visit us in our more contemplative moments. Out of this welter will slowly emerge our way to the star.”<sup>1</sup>

As fall transitioned into winter, I was on a quest to make connections and decided to use my walks with my beloved dog, Cosmo, as a venue for contemplation. I started capturing a snapshot of our approach to Horseshoe Lake, as it struck me as a welcome call to entering a different space. There was not quiet isolation, but rather evidence of life. The sign at the start of this part of the path says “Be Alert.” While I knew that the sign was there due to the terrain and exposed roots, I saw a more personal message to stay in the moment, be present to the unknown, be witness to the wonder ahead.



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<sup>1</sup> Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era: A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1992), 58.

Over the many weeks of walks, from the fall to the deep sleep of winter, to the awakening of spring, I wrestled with myself. I looked over and reflected on the photos I had taken; moments of the unexpected, such as suddenly stumbling upon a heron, and moments of amazement at the beauty of life engaged with the frozen shoreline of the lake. I groped. There were glimmers.





Then it was there... a bald eagle flying low over the lake. Massive and fierce. More beautiful than possible. A portal to the sacred.

As Berry states, “Exactly here the presence of the sacred reveals itself. Here is the exuberance that could fling the stars across the heavens with such abandon and yet with such exquisite poise, each in relation to the untold billions of other shining fragments of primordial existence.”<sup>2</sup>

This great being came out of nowhere amidst a great deal of human activity all through the park - picnics, lacrosse tournaments, playing children, people walking, some with dogs, some with babies. And amongst the more than human activity of budding of flowers, unfurling leaves, bird song, moving water, was a bald eagle, who I was told in my early years was on the brink of extinction. Something only to be seen in photos and honored as a symbol of our country and a symbol of the damaging impacts of humans. Something static and historic, was now dynamic and very present, nested within the very system I too nested within. I was in the presence of the sacred.

Author Tina Welling notes, “An alignment occurs with a system of intelligence greater than our own. We engage in life as a participant, rather than as a spectator. We realize that we are part of the unfolding of life, that our listening to birdsong is the other half of the bird’s singing it, that witnessing the unfurling of a wave or of a leaf is partnering with the water or the tree.”<sup>3</sup>

At this moment, I had my first realization, I am not just in the presence of the sacred, but I am also a participant. That this work is about MY sacred relationship with the natural world, that I need to first do this for me and that is not selfish or self-indulgent, but a part of honoring my sacred place in this interconnected web. I need to find MY path.

Educator, Daniel Wahl writes, “Becoming conscious of our *interbeing* with the world reminds us of our communion with life as a reflection of our larger being.”<sup>4</sup>

This “consciousness of interbeing” reflects beyond myself as Wahl states. Later that evening, I had a second realization. The eagle’s presence was known to all who were present and aware. No one needed binoculars or special equipment, no one had a paid guide along with them, this might be the splendor and glory of equal access to the sacred for all.

Ecologist and philosopher, David Abram states, “The singular magic of a place is evident from what happens there, from what befalls oneself or others when in its vicinity. To tell of such

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way Into the Future*, first paperback edition 2000 (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 53.

<sup>3</sup> Tina Welling, *Writing Wild: Forming a Creative Partnership with Nature* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2014), 36-37.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Wahl, “Wake Up To Find Out That You Are the Eyes of the World!” (2017), 3. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/@designforsustainability/wak-up-to-find-out-that-you-are-the-eyes-of-the-world-54a2d46e3e83>.

events is implicitly to tell of the particular power of that site, and indeed to participate in its expressive potency.”<sup>5</sup>

How might I help bring forth a more dignified and human experience for all?

How might I help bring forth humanity and compassion, and an opportunity for all beings to live as intended, to participate in the “expressive potency” of the sacred?

And it was more than that. Those most in need, most vulnerable hold their own beauty; they too are worthy of rapt attention, to be listened to deeply, to be seen, to be recognized as an essential part of the sacred. For communities not to look away at our sculpted landscapes and high fashion, but to see one another in our humanness, no matter how difficult that may be at times.

Biologist and author David Haskell captures the importance of relationship in recognizing the beauty that exists in the unheralded and often overlooked:

“The microbial community under our feet may be more richly beautiful than the obvious grandeur of a mountain sunset. In rot and scum we might find the slimy sublime. This is ecological aesthetics: the ability to perceive beauty through sustained, embodied relationship with a particular part of the community of life.”<sup>6</sup>

As I sit and take a break, have a snack and drink from my water bottle, I contemplate the path ahead. What I see in front of me will likely continue to change as I continue down the path. The story is still emerging, unfolding, and the path I am on currently may diverge in ways yet to be seen, in ways not yet revealed to me. The map of who I am and who I am to be within this world is being drawn as it is experienced. My journey to understand my role in larger community of life continues and my destination is unknown. I will hold onto and keep present the questions I have asked myself as I continue ahead.

Philosopher Henryk Skolimowski’s words ring true to me in this moment: “Each articulation changes us in the process. By articulating ourselves we, like flowers, come to fruition. We realize our potential by articulating ourselves; on the biological plane, on the cosmic or spiritual plane.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*, 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary edition (New York, NY: Vintage Book Editions, 1996, 2017), 182.

<sup>6</sup> David G. Haskell, *The Songs of Trees: Stories from Nature’s Great Connectors* (New York, NY: Penquin Books, 2017), 148-149.

<sup>7</sup> Henryk Skolimowski, *The Theatre of the Mind*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Wheaton, IL: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1984), 162.

I am grateful for the sacred space created for me through the Inner Life of the Child in Nature to allow me to keep articulating myself, to realize my potential and to begin to recognize myself and those most vulnerable in the sacred.

**Kasey Errico** lives in northern NJ, where she was born and raised. She holds a Bachelor's of Science degree in Psychology from Denison University and a Master's of Education degree in Integrated Learning from Endicott College - TIES Partnership. Much of her life has been involved in working with youth in some form or another, most recently at the Ridge and Valley Charter School in Blirstown, NJ for 14 years. She especially enjoys hiking the Appalachian Trail with a group of noisy teenagers and being witness to the unique learning that happens on the trail. Presently, she is engaged in a newer endeavor working in human services. She is forever on a quest to learn more about herself and the world around her, and over the years has realized that much of what is important to learn in the world can be found right outside her own front door. She lives with her husband, children and dog, Cosmo, who is an enthusiastic partner in connecting and immersing in the natural world.

# The Grounding Nature of Sit Spots

by

Alyssa Garner

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

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

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

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

reflecting on this year of uncertainty, I realize how much I grew and was able to develop and even deepen my practices with the children.

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

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

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



of uncertainty and the challenges of teaching during a pandemic seemed insurmountable at times, but we had finally made it to the end and it felt like a sigh of relief for summer to arrive.

Looking forward to a summer reprieve, I struggled to think of my “practice” for the Inner Life course. What do I need? What can I offer? How can I get the most out of this course? I racked my brain for things to do. What can I fit in my schedule? As I spent time reflecting on what would be the right practice for me, I kept thinking about our first couple of gatherings together at Timberlake. Everyone was so eager to hear about the work that we already do at our school. How do we teach the children to be present with the Earth? How do we incorporate Earth Literacy into a public school setting? What seemed ordinary practice to me seemed fascinating to others. When I was at Timberlake, I felt proud of my work with the children and was able to realize how special it is. I soon realized that refining my practice, reflecting upon my work, and sharing it with others may be the right practice for me. Instead of coming up with something completely new, why not work on documenting the great work that we already do? With that in mind, I wanted to focus on something concrete within our whole curriculum framework. I could have chosen from numerous school activities that would all fit within the scope of the Inner Life course, but Sit Spots was calling to me.

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

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

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

What message do you hear from the Earth?" Some children share what they notice with their senses while others listen deeply to the messages that the Earth is sharing and have profound experiences.

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

- We begin by standing in a circle and singing an adaptation of the song "Place of Power."<sup>2</sup>
- After the song, we lower a veil of silence. We reach up to the sky and pretend to pull down a curtain all the way to the ground.
- After the curtain touches the ground, we quietly walk to our spots, fox-walking to try to make as little noise as possible.
- At our sit spots, we encourage the children to make sure they are faced away from the group, sit or lay down, and try to stay quiet. When we first do sit spots, we set a timer for around seven minutes. As the year progresses, we slowly increase the time until it reaches ten minutes or longer.
- At the end of the sit spot, I ring the chimes two times and then begin to bang a drum slowly to indicate that everyone should return to the center in a circle.
- Once in a circle, we lift up the veil of silence by reaching down to the ground and raising the imaginary curtain back up. At this point, the children move into a circle and begin to share their experiences.
- Each child takes a turn sharing what they noticed, felt, or any messages from the Earth. Afterward, they each draw a picture of their experience in their special sit spot journal, and I record what they say to go with their drawings.

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

Throughout the past three years there have been many inconsistencies in the lives of everyone, including these young children. To be able to provide them with the consistency of a Sit Spot routine, while also connecting them to nature has brought me joy and satisfaction. The children feel confident and comfortable when entering into silence. They notice beings in the natural world that they may otherwise overlook. They are able to embody the Earth and hear the

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<sup>2</sup> Anne Hill, "Place of Power" in *Circle Round and Sing* (Serpentine Music, 2006).

messages that the Earth is sharing with them. And now, with their solid foundation of a Sit Spot routine, I am looking forward to guiding these children again next year to deepen their connections.

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

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

# A Mother's Journal

by

Jamie Hammond

For my practice, I chose to observe and journal about my three children's experiences in nature throughout the four seasons of the year from the Summer of 2021 to the Spring of 2022. I felt that journaling about my children, who are experiencing the same situations in nature, but absorbing and connecting differently since they are all in different development planes, would be revealing.

## Summer

It is a nice pleasant day on the beach. We decided to take a day trip to Emerald Isle, North Carolina. It is early morning, the sun not yet high in the sky. My eldest children, a daughter who is soon to be eight and a son who is 3, are bursting at the seams to go out and explore this wild environment. It's not the first time they have been to the beach, but it is the first time we've visited since 'beach season' began. The kids have not forgotten the fun and excitement the ocean and sand bring. As we unpack our things my 7-year-old lets out a wild Tarzan call into the wind, then runs without hesitation to the water. There, she is on the hunt for silver fish. She spends hours watching them, trying to figure out their habits. She is in awe of their fast movements, entranced by their sparkling scales in the sun. She catches one, and places it in a bucket of water for further observations. I ask her what she has learned by watching her new friend. She responds with "I learned that a bucket isn't a good place to live. This fish needs more space, like in the ocean with its friends." She takes the bucket with her new friend down to the ocean and releases it. From a distance I hear her yell to the fish, "Bye, I'll come see you tomorrow, don't forget."

My son on the other hand is not concerned with the ocean one bit. His sense of wonder lies in the sand. What a wonderful creation nature has shared with us. I sit back and watch him as he sits in the sand rubbing his feet into the rough mixture of sand and shells. This keeps him busy all day. He is completely mesmerized by the sensorial input the sand is sending him. He buries his whole body (not his head) into the sand, and just lies in it for a long time. I can tell he is just soaking it all in at this point. He decides to unbury himself and begins hunting for shells. This becomes what he does for the remainder of the afternoon. He collects them and dumps them out to feel them, sort them, and match some. These shells become his special treasure.

As my older children continue to play, the baby, who is five months old at this time, is lying on a towel in the shade. It isn't a very windy day, but there is a nice beach breeze with the occasional gust. I watch her eyes and facial expressions as the wind whooshes across her face. I can tell by her squeals of joy that the wind is a welcome experience. With every gust of wind she will kick her legs and wiggle her arms with pure joy.

## Autumn

The most beautiful time of the year. It's a cool autumn day, just a little breeze flows through the air. We are in our yard playing with the leaves that have been blown off of the trees from a storm the night before. My eldest child prompts a leaf pile and her younger brother joins in as the baby and I watch from our mossy seat on the ground. After my daughter and son build piles of leaves, they begin jumping in them and throwing the leaves in the air. They laugh and giggle with delight. They do this until my son decides to throw the leaves up and lie still at the bottom to watch and wait as they flutter down onto him. My daughter joins in just in time for a gust of wind to carry their leaves all over the yard. They both jump up and hysterically laugh as they chase these leaves all over the yard. The baby is entranced with the moss beneath her. She is enjoying rubbing her legs and feet into the soft green moss. A leaf falls down onto her. She picks it up and twirls it in her hands, waves it around in the air with an expression of pure joy. The other two are now making leaf collections. They are choosing their favorite leaves to bring inside. My oldest child encourages her brother to help decorate the dining room. "Perfect for Thanksgiving," she says. "Because we are thankful for trees and nature."

## Winter

Snow! The most magical weather event that can happen to a child. The weather woman has been forecasting snow in Greenville's future, and all of the kids have been buzzing, knowing that the snow should arrive while we all sleep cozy and warm in our beds. My older children wake earlier than usual at 5:00 in the morning. They are awestruck when they open the curtains and see the wonderland that has become their yard. We finally make it out around 9, and begin the exploration of our transformed landscape. It's so amazing how snow can turn a busy city street into a silent sanctuary. No sounds of cars, only birds chirping and snow falling from branches. We decide to venture out of our yard and go for a snowy nature walk. We all walk quietly, with only the sounds of our footsteps crunching in the fresh snow. My oldest, being the collector that she is, is on the search for nature that has been frozen into "art". Her greatest find is a chunk of

ice that has frozen grass and pine straw inside of it. This inspires her to make her own frozen art and she is on a mission to find pieces of nature to freeze in the snow. The things that have inspired her are a holly leaf with a few holly berries, a pansy, and some acorns. My son and his Dad are building a snowman. My son chooses acorns for the eyes and a pinecone for the nose. He is so pleased with his masterpiece that he hugs his snowman and begins a little conversation with it in his own 3-year-old language. He decides to build many snowmen, and soon he has a whole snow family, choosing all different natural items for their pieces. The baby is not too excited about the snow. She cannot walk yet, so sitting in her snow suit in the snow is about all that she can do. She touches it and shakes it off with a confused look. She is not sure about the cold stuff that turns to water in her hand. I'm sure next year will be her time to enjoy all the wonderful and exciting qualities of winter and snow.

## Spring

It is a cool spring day. The air still has a crispness to it. It's gloomy and grey out, but we have planned a family hiking day. We are in western North Carolina in an area we haven't quite explored before. We decide to try a "family friendly" hike and set off on our adventure on the trail. My oldest begins the hike with binoculars and a backpack for her findings. My son hits the trail with just himself and his energy, ready to explore. The baby is in a hiking backpack. She has no idea what's in store, but she is along for the ride. My oldest sets off ahead as the leader/navigator of the hike. On the way up, she is very into reading the signs and getting the family from point A to point B. She is into her collections, and finding rocks and plants she is not used to seeing on our Greenville nature walks is exciting to her. She has a pamphlet with a list of local animals to be on the lookout for in the area along the hike. She is on the lookout for snakes, turtles, and frogs. My son is living it up! He is in his element by touching everything, climbing every rock, jumping in every puddle, trying to catch anything that is falling from the trees. The baby is mesmerized by the sky. She looks to the sky most of the way up. The trees are swaying in the breeze, which I am sure is catching her attention. She can reach the rhododendron leaves, and is trying to touch each leaf she passes. I can hear her in her quiet little voice saying "ohhhh, wow" and "hey" as her hands glide by the leaves. We hike up to a waterfall and sit to rest and admire this sight. All three of my children watched this waterfall silently. They were as still as I have ever seen them, calmed by the crashing sounds of the water hitting the rocks below. We begin to walk down the trail again as it takes us next to a stream. The kids are a little tired, so we rest near the stream on a tiny beach. There is a pathway bridge crossing the stream. My son and oldest daughter are racing leaf boats under the bridge and down the stream to the little beach where we are resting. The baby is taken by all this excitement and is cheering them on. They do this countless times, and then venture off to do their own exploring.

The oldest, true to herself, is exploring an abandoned insect dwelling, while my son is digging in the sand next to the stream, making a sand house of sorts. The little one is with her dad sitting next to a moss-covered rock feeling the softness of the moss while taking in her surroundings. It is time for us to make our way back. All of the energy from our walk up has changed. The baby is still quietly admiring her surroundings as she is now walking back the rest of the trail, but the older two have joined in on the baby's silent intake of beauty around.

## My Childhood Experience

As a child I was able to spend a lot of unstructured time in nature. I grew up in Georgia on a large farm. Between our farm and our house were many acres of wooded area that had a flowing branch of Mossy Creek running through it. I was a child that was always happiest when I was out in the woods. I loved the sounds of nature over the sounds of people and the city. My parents trusted me to go out alone as long as I was back for meals. I had free rein to go and do whatever I pleased on the farm. A memory that I cherish, and that I feel has shaped my love for the natural world, is of a huge magnolia tree that sat on top of a hill that overlooked all of the row crop land. This tree was the biggest magnolia tree I had ever seen. The branches were so thick and old that they went all the way to the ground and rested in the earth. The leaves were so lush that you couldn't see into the tree. The branches made "L" shaped folds perfect for climbing or for lying back for a rest. This tree was my secret place. My dad put a rope swing and an old iron glider under the tree, and this quickly became my second home. In my mind I was a native who lived in this tree, away from all civilization. I had to live off of the land and in harmony with nature. I was the protector of trees.

If I wasn't in my magnolia tree house, I was in the woods between my house and our farm. Again, in my child-mind, I was a native person to the area and had to live off of the land and be one with the wilderness. I would build lean-tos by placing sticks against a tree and would swing from vines that were hanging from huge oaks. We had a creek that ran through the woods and right next to my house. I would spend a lot of time next to that creek. As a child, and still to this day, the sound of trickling water is the most calming sound to me. It brings me right back to the creek and the memories of my child-self painting creek silt on my face and performing my own ceremony to give thanks to the land. I would wade in the creek and let little fish swim around me. I would make toad houses in the mud for the tadpoles when they grew up. I have countless experiences and memories of my time in nature. My children do not have the same opportunity to explore nature the way that I did. I have such a strong love and appreciation for the natural world and I know it is because of the experiences I had as a child. The greatest gift I could give

my children is to have experiences that can lead them to a sense of self and a shared bond with nature and its presence.

*“We could never have loved the earth so well, if we had had no childhood in it, if it were not the earth where the same flowers come up again every spring that we used to gather with our tiny fingers as we sat lispng ourselves in the grass.”<sup>1</sup>*

**Jamie Hammond** is a wife and mother of three children ages 8, 4 and 15 months. She lives with her family in Greenville, North Carolina, where she is a primary Montessori teacher working with children 2 ½ to 6 years old.

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<sup>1</sup> Eliot, George. *The Mill On The Floss: Book First, Boy and Girl* (Pennsylvania: The Franklin Library, 1982), 38.



# And the Days Pass...

by

Chiara Klein

I sit in front of the bedroom window I have looked out of every day for the past three years. The sky darkens and an early summer thunderstorm breaks open. I watch as the leaves quiver under each pelting droplet and the boughs in the distance flip to their pale undersides with each gale. I am so deeply comforted and held by the darkness and the stirring. It feels elemental, wide, nourishing. In and of itself, it is a catharsis - for the world outside the window and for the world inside of me. It is the perfect backdrop for the second half of a virtual life coaching session I am in - I have been working with my coach Brooke for about a year now and it has been transformative. Equally fitting is the sudden tranquility as the storm passes synchronized with the closing of our session. I have been cleansed.

These are the deep moments of presence that I now intentionally seek out and cultivate. Like the strands of a magnificent symphony, these moments organize together to form the majesty and mystery of a life of communion with all that is.

The trajectory of this program over the past three years has felt simultaneously disjointed and synchronous. There have been so many moments of grace and serendipity, strands coming together unexpectedly, moments of being reminded to pick up the practice when it has dropped. There have also been fits and starts; times when life has, like a distressed child, demanded my attention fully, leaving precious little time for reflection. And yet..

I found, along the way, moments even (and especially) within monotony, stress, discomfort, and grief. I learned to abandon the worship of perfection in favor of imperfect presence. I absorbed the wisdom of "good enough." Two minutes of meditation are better than none; a walk around the block instead of a hike is sufficient; a kind thought to myself during a difficult day is far better than throwing away the whole day. Slowly, with time, there has been a wisening but more importantly, a softening. I have taken so many cues from the natural world around me: the lack of judgment, the ease, the lack of emphasis on performance or business. I think often about how I would like to foster these ideas in children, despite not currently working with them (nor having any of my own yet: my greatest dream). An entire generation shifted by the emphasis on presence and communion with the natural world - the vision of this Center and this Program come to fruition.

I have, of course, had many many allies in this practice along the way: individuals, communities, art, literature that support the slow and steady growth, and the connection to the tender, vibrant cycles of nature.

*Wintering: The Power of Rest and Retreat in Difficult Times* by Katherine May took a heavy weight off my shoulder. May describes wintering as “a season in the cold. It is a fallow period in life when you’re cut off from the world, feeling rejected, sidelined, blocked from progress, or cast into the role of an outsider.”<sup>1</sup> Whether brought on by some external experience, series of occurrences, or simply by the tides of time, wintering, she says, happens for all of us. But we are made to feel shame; or we are pressured into immediately alchemizing difficult times into something meaningful or purposeful. Instead, May contends, we should all get comfortable with wintering from time to time. Reading this book, ironically as spring first began to peek through, helped me to breathe into my winters, even retroactively, recognizing them as necessary and passively generative times. Maybe our phenology is not quite the same as plants and pollinators, but we certainly have seasons, and they are all to be appreciated and learned from.

Throughout these past years, I grew in relationships with friends who share my strong need and longing for connection. In particular, a close friend Elizabeth and I began to deeply vision lives which would bring us into closer relationship with the essential essence of all that is. We began to think intentionally and with joy about what a life with less labor, more community, more freedom, and more connection would look like. We have been steadily dreaming and brainstorming and consistently find sources of inspiration and momentum.

Acknowledging a little tug of a dream and taking inspired action, I recently developed and facilitated my own nature writing workshop at the Durham Public Library. I brought writings from the Center (Thomas Berry, Andrew Levitt, etc.) to share, as well as some of my own writing, and the works of beloved nature writers, and led several writing exercises. The participants were interested in the workshop convening semi-regularly and so we set up a next session, to take place late-May.

As well, I have been deepening and strengthening my meditation practice. No longer simply a means to an end, my journey through meditation has involved savoring each and every moment of the practice, even/especially the wanderings, the diversions, the discomfort, and the tedium. Simply the act of sitting still and silent affords me more space in my heart, in my mind, in my life. This space is not simply a void; it is full and rich. It brings inspiration, peace, true knowing,

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<sup>1</sup> May, Katherine. *Wintering: The Power of Rest and Retreat in Difficult Times*. Thorndike Press, 2021.

and boundless connection. When I make that space in formal meditation practice, it ripples through my entire life, day to day, minute to minute. Being present and mindful has enabled me to create a wellspring of peace - a refuge - within me that I didn't think was possible. What I have found the most beautiful, perhaps, about regularly meditating is the fact that the journey is never completed. Each time sitting is different; each breath brings about a new insight, a different sensation, a connection made. Meditating has fostered curiosity: an essential element to presence. When we can get curious as opposed to rigid, judgemental, fearful, or even overly buoyant, we create innumerable opportunities for perspective, insight, and connection. We are willing to engage with what is as opposed to what our minds create. Leading with curiosity has transformed the way I engage with the world and with myself.

I titled this essay the way I did because my relationship with time has always been difficult. I feel it passing acutely, like many of us do, and it engenders persistent and uncomfortable feelings of never doing enough. With presence, I am always doing enough. In each moment, particularly in each moment I am able to be mindful and connected, I am doing and being enough. This gradual but powerful shift is allowing me to access higher levels of consciousness, and deeper levels of peace. I feel more aware of the abundance of each moment. In this way, time both slows down and simultaneously feels less important. This is the magic of presence.

**Chiara Klein** currently serves as Program Coordinator for the Community Engagement Core of the Duke University Superfund Research Center. She graduated from Duke's Masters of Environmental Management Program in May of 2021. A New York native, Chiara has been living in Durham, NC for the past four years where she worked at the Museum of Life and Science for several years before starting her masters program. Prior to her time in Durham, she taught ESL in Medellin, Colombia, worked for the Franciscan Action Network as an Environmental Policy Fellow in Washington, D.C., and was an environmental educator with the Sound to Sea program in Pine Knoll Shores, NC. Chiara is a poet and an adoring cat mom to her little Eno. She will take any opportunity to travel, especially if it affords her ample amounts of time for leisure reading.

# The Healing Gifts of the Inner Child

by

Eden Koljord

Raised in a conservative, Norwegian culture and family in rural America, I began my religious education as a preschool student in the Lutheran faith singing songs that Jesus loves me and all the children of the world. However, by the time I was confirmed, insular personalities within my middle-class family, culture and religious community had intersected to reinforce powerful messages of judgment about individuals representing diverse backgrounds in culture, education, lifestyle choices, politics, religion and socioeconomic status. The lack of pluralism sculpted an adolescence of painful self-rejection, exposure to bigotry, homophobia, misogyny and racism; and total loss of faith. As far as I was concerned, a Higher Power that I knew from my religious education as God had abandoned me.

Growing up in the northern hardwood forest, the maple trees exploded with color every autumn – crimson red, vibrant orange and exuberant yellow. Polliwogs swam in ponds, a rare lady’s slipper orchid or tasty morel mushroom was found and sparkling snow blanketed the winter landscape. From an early age, my love and passion for nature was born! Connection to the natural world brought forth feelings of comfort, hope, inspiration and peace. Nature aligned me with the Universe without my conscious participation. “Make me an instrument of your peace” from the Prayer of St. Francis became my mantra, and St. Francis’ passion for nature influenced my career as an environmental education specialist, which evolved me into a skilled connector, educator and collaborator. I enjoyed a rich work history serving multicultural communities with a variety of projects, which included the development of award-winning environmental education programs. While these projects unfolded, I experienced pluralism for the first time and embraced the indigenous wisdom of the Anishinaabe, Hawaiian, Hopi, Menominee, Navajo (Diné) and Oneida nations located in these diverse communities. These Native American and Native Hawaiian teachings moved me beyond the boundaries of my upbringing on all levels – physically, emotionally and spiritually. As a result, their teachings resonated with me at the soul level and were the formative influences that changed my perspective about ecology and religion. These teachings highlighted that service often comes in the way of prayer and tending to humanity *and* the Earth.

After recovering from a medical issue, I was introduced to Mile Hi Church Center for Spiritual Living in Lakewood, Colorado. Ernest Holmes (1887 – 1960) was a New Thought

teacher and writer who founded the spiritual movement known as Religious Science and developed the spiritual philosophy, The Science of Mind, that is taught at Mile Hi Church. Through his research, Holmes created a structure of concepts based on the philosophies and religions of human history. He illuminated a core concept – a golden thread of truth (i.e. Oneness) – interwoven through all of the world’s religions, philosophies and science. Although Holmes taught New Thought in a Christian context, he articulated the similarities between the religions where the truth of Oneness shines through rather than highlighting the differences. “Spiritual wisdom says that God manifests through everything and is incarnated in all men; that all is Divinity and that Nature herself is the body of God.”<sup>1</sup> For the first time in approximately 35 years, I consciously began to feel, see and sense the presence of a Higher Power (i.e. God). More importantly, my consciousness had begun to expand to understand God as unconditional love and pure potentiality.

The Science of Mind has enabled me to deepen, expand, evolve and grow in regards to pluralism, re-sculpting my entire life in the process. By opening my heart and healing old wounds, I realized my medical issues were the catalyst for me to reclaim the health of my body, mind and spirit. In addition, I re-connected with God’s unconditional love expressing within, through and as me, and I felt it pushing and pulling me to realize my full potential. I am grateful for the clarity of this potential expressed as my soul’s desire to teach others to connect to the Creator through relational knowing in nature.

Once this clarity revealed itself, I had no clue how to proceed forward until an online document magically revealed the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World (CEINW). After reading the article and talking with Peggy Whalen-Levitt, I am grateful for her introducing me to another theologian of significance on my journey, Thomas Berry (1914 – 2009), who began his ministry in service to others as a priest of the Passionate Order. Thomas became well known as a cultural historian who created a comprehensive History of Religions program at Fordham University and directed the Riverdale Center for Religious Research. Rather than utilizing the term theologian, he described himself as a “geologist.” He viewed himself as a human being, shaped by Earth’s significant biological and geological evolution, embodying an expanded consciousness and perspective to reflect on the world and its inhabitants. This reflection resulted in Thomas coining the term “Earth Community” – in which “every organism [is] by definition an ensouled being.”<sup>2</sup> A true wisdom teacher rather than a teacher of knowledge, he exemplified the shamanic personality that he felt was emerging once

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<sup>1</sup> Ernest Holmes, *The Science of Mind: A Philosophy, A Faith, A Way of Life*, (New York: Penguin Group, 1938), 42.

<sup>2</sup> Ervin Laszlo and Allan Combs, eds., *Thomas Berry Dreamer of the Earth: The Spiritual Ecology of the Father of Environmentalism*, (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2011), 47.

again in society to bring about a deeper sense of the sacred. For me, Thomas has felt integrated with the Native American and Native Hawaiian teachings that have enthralled and inspired me.

Rather than continue to teach K-12 students to extract information about the natural world with a clipboard and worksheet in hand, my soul's desire to teach humanity to experience the Creator through relational knowing in nature expanded once I joined the Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Practice and Presence program facilitated by the CEINW. Licensed as a Professional Interfaith Practitioner with the Centers for Spiritual Living, I completed one term of their ministerial training focused on the New Thought/Ancient Wisdom tradition of spirituality. However, daily spiritual practice (e.g., meditation, prayer, etc.) further clarified that my path was to become an Interfaith Dialogue Specialist engaged in spiritual advocacy with inter-religious leaders about the importance of nature. Specifically, I want to inspire inter-religious leaders and teach that nature reflects spiritual principles and opens the heart of humanity to connect to the Creator.

One of today's most critical issues relates to the health of the earth, which affects the health of its inhabitants – both human and nonhuman beings. From a cultural perspective, I am grateful for my family's practice of sustainable agriculture through organic certification of crops and beef and dairy cattle as well as sustainable management of the northern hardwood forest. Deeply rooted in the farming practices of our Norwegian culture, my family abided by the teachings of our Viking ancestors to live in rhythm with the natural world. Taught to care for and respect the Earth to provide the bounty to sustain the family and community, these early experiences, along with my love for St. Francis, influenced my work as an environmental education specialist.

When inter-religious leaders facilitate experiences for their faith path members to connect to a Higher Power (i.e. God) through nature, they increase their members' self-awareness about their identity as part of the whole and advance their understanding of critical concerns for the Earth related to our contemporary communities. When faith path members (i.e. all of humanity) feel their Oneness with everything in the universe, we collectively strengthen the desire for the survival and thriving of Earth and its inhabitants – including both human and nonhuman residents.

From a religious perspective, I am grateful for the introduction to Holmes' teachings that "nature herself is the body of God," which has assisted me in my soul's call to connect humanity to the Creator through relational knowing in nature. Thomas's teachings validated my soul's desire and its implications for the human-earth relationship. He believed that humanity's conscious participation within a single, sacred community (i.e. the Earth Community) would result in the importance of the natural world being reawakened. Each of these theologians has strengthened my desire to bring the health of the planet to the forefront by ensuring humanity experiences nature (i.e. God) in a personal way. Serving as an Interfaith Dialogue Specialist helps

me create a collaborative atmosphere, a kinship, to raise the consciousness and vibration of humanity for the greater good of Mother Earth and Father Sky.

While attending the International Center for Spiritual Living Conference at Geneva, Switzerland in 2017, the seed was planted within me to live my full potential on a global scale. I networked with a diverse group of people, many of whom were employed by the United Nations Office at Geneva and other international organizations. Inspired by their global service projects, I engaged in meaningful conversations and learned about the Yale Forum on Ecology and Religion – a clearinghouse for this academic field. In 2017 as well, the Forum announced a new partnership with the United Nations Environment Programme's (UNEP) Faith for Earth Initiative, which highlights the moral and spiritual contributions of the world's religions to our growing environmental challenges. Faithful to my calling and vocation, the UNEP Initiative illuminates a larger vision for my work as an Interfaith Dialogue Specialist.

The conference in Geneva served as a portal to connect me to the CEINW. As the Inner Life program unfolded, I struggled to truly embody and embrace the qualities of engagement, generosity and thoughtfulness at the core of Who I Am. The completion of the two-year, intensive Practitioner Education Program in Advanced Spiritual Awareness to develop a healing consciousness unearthed these qualities within me. The program prepared me for faithful service to the largest Center for Spiritual Living worldwide – Mile Hi Church – and its 10,000 members as a licensed Professional Interfaith Practitioner and teaching assistant. By providing a supportive multicultural atmosphere at Mile Hi Church and teaching members to take charge of their lives through effective thinking and spiritual understanding to explore their own power and potential, the Universe has prepared me for rigorous engagement with various faith paths and further contemporary learning. Participating in Mile Hi Church's Interfaith (I AM) Ministry and their partnerships with the Lakota Way Healing Center and other faith traditions has taught me to be hospitable and respectful in collaboration with Indigenous spiritualities and other cultures. As a result, I wanted further study to advance my abilities to create collaborative partnerships with these communities for the good of all creation.

During meditation, words revealed themselves to me for a Google search and the Master of Arts in Indigenous Studies and Inter-Religious Studies (MA IIS) program at the University of British Columbia Vancouver School of Theology (VST) was listed at the top of the page. This theological education program has the capacity to sculpt me into an Interfaith Dialogue Specialist committed to the flourishing of people worldwide (i.e. all of humanity) feeling or knowing their Oneness with everything in the universe. Oneness raises the consciousness of humanity to respect the dignity of every living being – both human and nonhuman – and strengthens the desire for the survival and thriving of Earth and its inhabitants. The learning and scholarship I have undertaken in consciousness studies thus far has prepared me for advanced study with diligence and openness – values important to VST. In addition, VST values the

development of prophetic speech and just action in students for the love and welfare of creation, which enables me to create an open-heart ministry as an Interfaith Dialogue Specialist.

Completion of the program, which begins in August of 2022 in Vancouver, British Columbia, enhances my awareness of the commonalities, complexities, and various approaches among four traditions (Indigenous traditions, Judaism, Islam and Christianity). The in-depth knowledge of Indigenous traditions and at least one of the traditional faith paths increases my skill sets related to intercultural communication, understanding and peacemaking, so I can engage in spiritual advocacy with inter-religious leaders about the importance of nature. As a graduate of the program in 2024, I will exercise respectful communication, inter-religious dialogue and leadership skills while interacting with communities and organizations related to religious traditions. These compassionate exchanges with inter-religious leaders have the potential to create opportunities to teach them how to facilitate experiences of connecting to the Creator through relational knowing in nature for their faith path members.

Moreover, as a graduate of the program, within me will be instilled a growing self-awareness and humility to be a lifelong learner as I expand my understanding of the critical concerns of contemporary communities with the traditions on topics such as identity, authenticity, prejudice, survival, etc. Furthermore, humility ensures my ability to be sensitive to the tensions between traditions on issues such as power, appropriation and assimilation.

I feel the Earth has its own Spirit and has now called me in a powerful way to prioritize nurturing it to ensure its continued reciprocal effect to care for all of creation. Faith path members who experience the Creator through relational knowing in nature strengthen their affection, care, devotion and respect for the Earth and its inhabitants. The world maintains a balance and harmony that Hopi elders taught me once existed in the First World. As residents of the Fifth World, we experience *koyaanisqatsi* – life out of balance. Members of the Hopi nation teach that the imbalance has resulted from humanity forgetting its connection to the Creator. Reconnecting to the Creator through relational knowing in nature restores the human-earth balance. Prioritizing Earth's health ensures its ability to safeguard the health of the body, mind and spirit of humanity and all inhabitants. Nature opens the heart of humanity to the Creator, and as sacred witnesses, we are uplifted and inspired to live our full potential. We remember the Universe (i.e. God) showcases its wholeness, perfection and completeness as all of creation.

I am grateful for the Inner Life program, which created the opening to connect me to the MA IIS program at Vancouver, British Columbia. As the program molds me into becoming an Interfaith Dialogue Specialist, I welcome being a servant who strengthens humanity's ability to positively impact environmental challenges through spirituality in multicultural environments worldwide. With a humble heart, *mahalo nui loa* (thank you very much) to all those who co-created with Thomas the CEINW and the Inner Life program. I am forever grateful for my Inner Child/Inner Children/Inner Parts to feel safe enough in the program to bring forth the



clarity to become an Interfaith Dialogue Specialist, which led me to a graduate program in Canada. The courage to act upon the wisdom of the Higher Self and the confidence to be Who I Am truly meant to be have been the healing gifts of the Inner Child.

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**Eden Koljord** began her career as an environmental education specialist cultivating extensive experience working in multicultural team environments to develop and teach award-winning environmental education programs for both students and educators. An illness served as a catalyst to illuminate that a Venn diagram with circles representing nature, teaching and spirituality represent her at the soul level. Embracing her spirituality, she became licensed as a Professional Interfaith Practitioner compassionately serving congregants and the general public at Mile Hi Church Center for Spiritual Living in Denver, Colorado with confidential emotional and spiritual support. As a teaching assistant, she helps others to take charge of their lives through effective thinking and spiritual understanding to explore their own power and potential. Acting as a liaison between Mile Hi Church and other faith paths, including the Lakota Way Healing Center, she helps to foster interreligious collaboration and understanding.

# Tending the Future

by

Jessica Krause

## Part One – Inside of Me

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

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

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

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

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

The way forward needs tending.  
For the children.

To climb, or clamber  
through.

Tending.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What I have learned is that I have been creating the rituals for myself. So I can hold the door open for myself. So others can be, or not be resonant with that, but that ultimately the movements, motions and texts are available. What makes things stir is when the inner practice of the practitioner is salient and able to communicate. That's what holds the door open. The rituals are guidelines, signposts, reminders, outcroppings, etc. To develop the inner presence you need strength of will, contemplative practice, connection.

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

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

## **Part Two – The Practice: Council of All Beings**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **The Mirror**

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

### **The Bridge Between Worlds**

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

### **Sign- Welcome to the Council of All Beings**

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

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

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



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

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

Following the introduction we would have two rounds. For example, in the first round, a child that has chosen Fern might say, “Human I am Fern, and I come to this Council with the concern that too many humans are picking me for decoration. Can you please ask them to stop?” The Human might respond by saying, “I hear you Fern, thank you for sharing. I will tell the

other humans.” The child would place a rock into the hands of the Human while sharing their grief/concern. This gives a tangible presence for the child to hold. It also gives them a structure to hand over their concerns.

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



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

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



After every child/being has gone, the Council is thanked for their attending, and sharing their voices. A Conch shell is blown, or drum, or chime to signify the ending. The children exit, and cross back over the bridge, and return to being children. We then play outside and drink tea from the local plants. I don't try to process the experience with them or ask for reflections for at least a week.



### Part Three - Thoughts From the Children<sup>1</sup>

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

*~Noah, age 6*

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<sup>1</sup> We are grateful to these children for giving us permission to include their reflections.

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

*~ Wrenn, age 7*

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

*~ Ivy, age 7*

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

*~ Miranda, age 6*

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

*~ Indira, age 7*

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

*~ Henry, age 7*



*"The Council of All Beings is when a being chooses you. You look in a mirror as yourself, but then you pull down your mask and see yourself as that being. Then, you walk across the bridge. The Council is important because we want people to know that other beings are important, and they need trees and things to live. I was able to speak for my being. I loved talking to Sr. Miriam. Making my mask was challenging because I made a mask and didn't like it, so I had to make another one. An important moment for me was when I pulled down my mask because it felt so magical. I am always going to remember my mask, and what I said to Sr. Miriam. My being's gift is to eat mice, because there would be too many if I didn't eat them. I told the Human they should leave the dirt as it is, no concrete, because I need the earth to live. You learn that you are not just one person, you are a bunch of creatures, they are inside of you."*

*~ Finn, age 7*

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

- Abby, age 7

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

~ Caliah, age 7

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

~ Djuna, age 7

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

~ Olive 6



#### Part Four - Reflections

“The human venture remains stuck in its impasse. Children who begin their earth studies or life studies do not experience any numinous aspect of these subjects. The excitement is diminished. If this fascination, this entrancement, with life is not evoked, the children will not have the psychic energies needed to sustain the sorrows inherent in the human condition. They might never discover their true place in the vast world of time and space. Teaching children about the natural world should be treated as one of the most important events in their lives. Children need a story that will bring personal meaning together with the grandeur and meaning of the universe.”<sup>2</sup>

-Thomas Berry

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), 130-131.

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

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

# Ocean Beach

by

Missy Lahren

The wind-swept coastline of Highway One in California had always captured my imagination and as I contemplated a practice for my last year of the Inner Life of the Child in Nature Program, I quite naturally turned to my close relationship with a five mile stretch of white sand and tumultuous surf that San Franciscans call Ocean Beach, shown at low tide on April 13, 2022 below.



According to French historian Michel Foucault, the ancients believed that there was a right way to live, or a small set of right ways. While they didn't always agree on what that way was, there was a common commitment to the principle that there was one."<sup>1</sup> Foucault's affirmation of this ancient wisdom resonated with my own intuition and for the past 10 years I have been steadily attempting to uncover what those ways might be. I found Thomas Berry's writing on

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<sup>1</sup> Todd May, "Michel Foucault's Guide to Living" (*Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 11:3, 2006), 173-184, 174.

communion to be very enriching. Communion has the power to bridge the human endeavor with the journey of the Universe (and Earth) while making room for all the infinite layers of complexity in between. But perhaps the more pressing question was, “How exactly would I make communion real for me?”

My journey began with a book called *The Universe Story*, by cosmologist Brian Thomas Swimme and geologist Thomas Berry, where I was introduced to the concept of “interrelatedness.” In the book, Swimme and Berry synthesized multiple ways of knowing to help their readers grapple with this idea. They began by constructing a scientific account of evolution. But their account was different than what had come before- it was an account using story instead of scientific jargon. Their literary innovation allowed their readers to locate themselves in time and space while playfully reflecting upon their relatedness to the various living and nonliving members of the Earth Community.<sup>2</sup>

They used a range of creative synonyms like “communion,” “interconnectivity,” “interdependence,” “kinship,” “reciprocity,” and “affiliation” to build understanding and to make the important point that “interrelatedness” did not represent an “axiom” but rather an “experience.” And perhaps most interestingly, they emphasized that the meaning of interrelatedness would deepen and alter as future experience expanded our present understanding.<sup>3</sup> For Swimme and Berry interrelatedness was cosmogenic- an evolving and interactive process, as opposed to a rule or state of being.

The Inner Life of the Child in Nature Program gave me an opportunity to build on Swimme and Berry’s initiation by developing my own evolving practice. The Program was founded upon ten years of conversations between Carolyn Toben, founder of The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World, and Thomas Berry where he called for a “sympathetic presence” with the Earth.<sup>4</sup>

Although I began my official practice of presence with Ocean Beach months earlier in the program, I didn’t start putting anything in writing until January 29, 2022 when I wrote this short journal entry about a place called “The Labyrinth” that overlooks the Beach.

*The mystics designed labyrinths for a reason – as a way to walk in quiet contemplation with God. Today’s my day to put the Center’s advice into use as I begin this new stage of the program. I brought David Abram’s<sup>5</sup> advice with me.*

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<sup>2</sup> Brian Thomas Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992) 5.

<sup>3</sup> Swimme and Berry, *The Universe Story*, 72.

<sup>4</sup> Carolyn Toben, *Recovering a Sense of the Sacred: Conversations with Thomas Berry* (Whitsett, NC: Timberlake Farm, 2012), 98.

<sup>5</sup> David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996), 201-202.



*I ventured to an overlook above my beloved Ocean Beach...I took a few deep breaths...breathe in, breathe out (say the word love after the exhale)...I imagined the bulk of my past as layers in the Earth...*

*I gazed at the vast expanse of sky above me and called into awareness my whole future with all of the new and exciting projects that were unfolding before me...*

*My eyes returned to the point where the ground and horizon met and I noticed the center of the labyrinth. I focused on it as the single moment of the present where the past and present might meet. I contemplated the synchronicity of the earth and sky meeting at that same point, at this very moment on this very day. I wondered how many times others received an invitation in this very spot. (I was lucky to stumble upon the labyrinth today as I didn't know one was there.)*

*I imagined the present moment swelling and extending into the rings of the labyrinth and then beyond. I closed and opened my eyes. I tried to stay close to the moment and all the sensations around me. The light was bright. The air was crisp. The waves were thundering below. The wind was gentle, which was surprising on the rocky point. The visitors came and went. Strangely, their presence didn't bother me this time. There was a distinct reverence for the labyrinth in the air. The present moment hung for me to grasp longer than expected. Perhaps accessing the present moment was another reason the monks designed their famous winding pathways.*

*I wish I could have stayed longer, but life called me back to the City.*

Shortly thereafter, on February 10, 2022, I had the following experience of “home” on the Beach.

*Some would say that each thing on this enchanting beach is a gift from the Universe. Yes, it all came from the Universe and yes the privilege of living close by and being able to come is a gift. Many people experience the world's beaches as gifts because they are so beautiful to our human senses – especially on warm sunny afternoons like today. What I am so thankful to notice, and truly feel in a visceral way, is that I am not simply among a collection of “things.” So the idea I started with, which at first blush seems true, is actually not entirely true for me. I am grateful to Thomas Berry for pointing out one of the flaws of our seemingly evolved modern mind. He gave the 20<sup>th</sup> century a gift by reviving this ancient knowing.*

*The distinction between things and beings is such an enriching distinction. Every so-called “thing” I am looking at around me is actually a “being” filled with beings. Where would I be right now if I had never been invited to step so intentionally into this awareness?*

*When I come here and experience the beach with this worldview, my experience is vastly different. Instead of just experiencing a landscape, a dramatic backdrop steeped in swaths of colors and textures, I am entering a cathedral filled with others. The sand looks barren and lifeless but it's teeming with life – life so small I can't even see it. To my human eye, all I ever see here is a hermit crab or gull going about its day. Ironically, I think most of the people that drive all the way across town to come here, are coming just to feel the desolation of the elements.*

*However, once you realize this desolate cathedral is filled with beings, it's hard to experience desolation. As I write, I'm realizing that I must be choosing to come here because I feel particularly welcome. I come here with an open heart committed to justice and compassion, so why wouldn't I be welcome? Would I still feel so welcome, and be gifted my insights, if I wasn't committed to these principles? Maybe not...*

*One thing is for sure – I am decidedly welcome in the Ocean Beach fellowship of beings. I am at home.*

My weekly pilgrimage to Ocean Beach gave me the opportunity to systematically experiment with the practice of communion and before long I was inspired to deepen my understanding with the Beach in other ways as well: intellectually, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Intellectually, I studied the oceanography, bioregionalism, and indigenous practices along the coast. Physically, I began to train so I could run the entire shoreline while also managing the wind, tide, and marine layer. Emotionally, I practiced “emptying out” on my way to the rocky point and “filling up” on my way back to the car. And spiritually, I let myself sink into the grandeur of the Nature around me, various states of flow and peak experience, and the timelessness I often felt.

Before long, I realized ritualizing the experience would enhance my “communion” practice. Each trip should really begin and end the same way. I began to calendar 120 minutes but allowed the day and time to vary based on the tide. I preferred the lowest tide of the week because it revealed the smoothest sand which freed my gaze to drift across the horizon. Without the distraction of debris or deep sand, I could relax which allowed for an uninterrupted state of flow to emerge. Before long, my music, attire, parking spot, and route, were exactly the same. I didn't want to jinx anything because I grew to rely on a dependable hour of what I would describe as peak experience (blissful and timeless).

Interestingly, such a rigid routine highlighted my especially vivid moments of interconnection. After embracing repetition as a tool, I grew to deeply know and appreciate every aspect of the shoreline- every bend, smell, and sight line. According to cultural historian Richard Tarnas, Plato believed that the world was ordered and humanly knowable.<sup>6</sup> Like Plato, I began to grow confident in the revelations I gained from the order I had created.

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<sup>6</sup> Richard Tarnas, *Passion of the Western Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991) 61.

Plato was famous for describing the existence of timeless essences he called “Ideas” or “Forms”; he believed they underlaid all reality. One of the Forms was the Good, another was Existence, another Beauty. In the case of Beauty, for example, Plato described how there were many objects of “beauty,” but he also described how one might suddenly glimpse the absolute of “Beauty” at some point. He described this as Beauty itself, supreme, pure, eternal, and not relative to any specific person or thing.<sup>7</sup>

The awareness of Beauty in its purest form was the mystical moment that often occurred on Ocean Beach. The roar of the waves created a stillness in the ear that somehow allowed previously undiscovered sensory perceptions some primacy. Time and time again the commanding backdrop of sky and ocean would cease to be a backdrop and would transform into the Idea or Form of Beauty. The beach would cease to be a human idea and would transform into something more like a Universe idea.<sup>8</sup> For Plato, the primary goal of the philosopher was to directly experience awareness like this. If Plato were to answer Foucault’s question “What is it today to live a philosophical life?” he would surely answer it was to experience the Forms. I was surprised that such regular access to transcendent experience was beginning to occur.

I accepted the fact that building a cosmogenic practice was going to take time. Luckily, I had a constant reminder to do my homework since my house overlooked San Francisco Bay. It’s remarkable how the Bay commands the city’s attention, always drawing our gazes towards its shimmer. Interestingly, San Franciscans perceive the Golden Gate Bridge as the icing on the cake. It’s hard to believe that such a massive bright orange steel structure could actually enhance the natural landscape. People in the City can’t seem to take their eyes off their beloved Bridge. There are literally hundreds, even thousands of people, that flock to Crissy Field every day to walk their dogs and gaze at the uplifting orange arches.

San Franciscans don’t have the same affection for Ocean Beach which begins almost where Crissy Field ends. The critical distinction is that the Bay is inland while the Beach is coastal. The Beach is a cold, desolate, windy tempest where the surf is too dangerous to swim. The Bay, in contrast, hosts swimmers, dogs, and children all year round. The damp weather at the Beach makes it almost uninhabitable. I happen to love its desolation and the feeling of renewal that results when the unforgiving waves erase the shore clean each day. Weekly, I would calendar my run, bundle up, and drive over. I liked to park in the same spot; the last parking space at the iconic Cliff House.

As I would leave the comfort of the car and head West through the deep sand to the water, I was fully in my body, acutely aware of the cold and the need for a raincoat. Once I reached the smooth sand at the shoreline and began to head South, I would take stock of all the natural puzzle pieces- the shape of the slope, the height of the waves, the vapor in the sky, the weight of

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<sup>7</sup> Tarnas, *Passion*, 7.

<sup>8</sup> Tarnas, *Passion*, 10.

the clouds, the pattern of the shells, the sound of the wind. After about 5 minutes of struggle, and creating a rhythm through the resistance, I would inevitably lose all sense of time. I would allow myself to be swept into the colors and textures of the waves. Without ever consciously choosing, I simply dissolved into the mesmerizing beauty of the ocean. Unlike the famous nature writers like Walt Whitman or John Muir, or even our beloved ocean writer Rachel Carson, my outbound experiences remain inaccessible to me.

I would leave my dream state and come back into conscious awareness only as my third eye would catch sight of the cement barrier marking the end of the Beach. 30 or 40 minutes would have passed. Once I came back to myself, I would always find it physically difficult to traverse those last 100 yards to the turn around. I can only equate that 30 minute period to a state of rest and describe it to others as a type of moving meditation. It's also somewhat puzzling that a philosopher known for dualism, Plato, inspired my nondual experiences.

Once I reversed course and headed North, back the way I came, I would experience an entirely different set of perceptions. Heading North meant heading into the wind. Somehow I was quite present to reality on the way home. It was on the return that I would notice all the various beings, like the sea anemone below. Any form of life would take me by surprise as the sand was typically so desolate. Rarely was anything still alive. Speculation on the beings' deaths would inevitably open my heart. It's ironic how intimate you can become with another when it's actually not alive anymore.



Sea Anemone, Ocean Beach, California (February 10, 2022)

In this anemone's case, I paused for a long time to study the patterns in its body. Like jellyfish, anemones are fascinating, elegant, and mysterious to watch in the water. When you take them out of the water, they mask their mystery, however their intricate beauty can remain very compelling. Surprisingly the anemone pictured here was enormous- double the size of a cauliflower, and yet it lacked a brain, blood, or even a heart. Like jellyfish, anemones are composed of three layers: an outer layer, called the epidermis; a middle layer made of a thick, elastic, jelly-like substance called mesoglea; and an inner layer, called the gastrodermis.<sup>9</sup> An elementary nervous system, or nerve net, allows anemones to smell, detect light, and respond to other stimuli.<sup>10</sup> As you can see from the photo, they are "radially symmetric" meaning they have similar parts regularly arranged around a central axis. This feature allows them to detect and respond to food or danger from any direction. The simple digestive cavity of the anemone, seen here, acts as both its stomach and intestine, with one opening for both the mouth and the anus.<sup>11</sup>

Looking for patterns like radial symmetry is something that humans, and especially children intuitively do. The near perfect symmetry within the anemone was so captivating. It reminded me of an animal mushroom. We expect plants to be radially symmetric but do we expect animals to be? I pondered what seemed like its untimely death the whole way home. What had killed it? Its near perfect body was still perfectly intact. In *Passion of the Western Mind*, Tarnas described how pattern recognition was critical to the evolution of humanity and the evolution of thought.<sup>12</sup>

My year of practice ultimately revealed several patterns worth mentioning. When I headed South, my attention was always drawn to the sea. I would find myself emptying, probably from a mix of exertion and the sheer necessity of modern life. Having once found the razor sharp edge between intention and surrender (one sunny afternoon in a Japanese garden in Healdsburg, California), I was able to find it regularly now. I can only describe the Southern experience as "transcendence," or what others have described as nondual oneness.

When I headed North, in contrast, against the wind, my attention would be drawn to the sandy slope. I would describe this experience as "immanence" because inevitably some member of the Earth Community would catch my eye and draw me in. I often stopped on the Northern journey to look more carefully at the life I noticed or to pick up garbage. (I can't remember ever seeing any garbage, not even once, on my way South.)

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<sup>9</sup> NOAA, "What Are Jellyfish Made Of?" National Ocean Service website, <https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/jellyfish.html>, 2/26/21.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Tarnas, *Passion*, 11.

I was enlivened when I read yesterday that in the Lakota tradition the North represented the trials that people must endure while the South represented the direction of the spirit world.<sup>13</sup> In my case, some of the ancient Indigenous wisdom layered within the “Four Directions” resonated with my own experience. It was an affirmation that perhaps I was tapping into the field.

This essay has also given me the unexpected opportunity to reflect on the differences between timeless forms and intimate presence with the natural world. I have come to realize it was the timeless form of Beauty that most invigorated me and kept me coming back to the Beach for more. In contrast, it was the intersubjectivity of intimacy with Earth that pulled me back to the car to life in the City. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato accurately described the type of beauty I experienced. Using a capital B, he described it as “the most capable of rousing us from forgetfulness” and as “especially visible, especially lovable, palpable, and invigorating.”<sup>14</sup> This type of Beauty had the “capacity to quicken the soul and allow it to soar.”<sup>15</sup> Because I have yet to construct my own description, I can rely on his for now.

Of all the Forms, Plato was known to favor Beauty and I came to understand why. It was the least subjective and the easiest to perceive. Dramatic moody wildernesses like Ocean Beach made it more accessible. The geography of the landscape, the lack of development, the lack of people, the roar of the waves, the Beach’s habit of transforming into desolation wilderness, and most of all its light, brought the universal of Beauty alive. The power of the place was palpable, invigorating and allowed me to soar just as Plato described. I knew I was probably “soaring” because I would lose all track of time, all track of all my aches and pains, and all memory of arriving.

In the end, my practice revealed that cultivating presence within a city “wilderness” could serve as an open-ended gateway into philosophical and spiritual knowing. Moreover, timeless forms and intimate presence might even be able to coexist within a practice. Because Beauty, as Plato described it, became increasingly accessible to me through my practice, I grew more intrigued by his approach to “idealism.” I also developed a deeper appreciation for Berry’s spirit in matter, especially in regards to the life force within the landscape and the nonliving. The inevitable conclusion I drew was that the Universe was a plurality, and wherever you ultimately chose to participate, you were welcome.

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<sup>13</sup> Saint Joseph’s Indian School, “The Meaning of the Four Directions in Native American Culture,” Website, <https://www.stjo.org/native-american-culture/native-american-beliefs/four-directions/>, Accessed May 30, 2022. (adapted from *Lakota Life* by Ron Zeilinger).

<sup>14</sup> Plato, *Plato’s Phaedrus*, Cambridge: University Press, 1952, 250e.

<sup>15</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 251a–e.

**Missy Lahren** has worked as an environmental activist and public interest lawyer in the San Francisco Bay Area since 1993. More recently, she shifted her focus and embarked on a M.Ed. in Integral Education and a Ph.D. in Philosophy and Religion both of which centered on the emerging field of “ecozoic education.” Her masters constructed a middle school curriculum on systems theory while her dissertation focused on a curriculum for Earth Day. Currently, she is weaving law, education, and philosophy together to help expand enforceable human and ecological rights as a board member for three non-profits: Planetary Advocates, Eleanor Lives, and the Earth Law Center.

# Befriending the Familiar

by

Mary Orlando

The year was 2019 and I had been anxiously awaiting the new book, *THOMAS BERRY: A BIOGRAPHY*. Fifteen years prior to that I had been introduced to Thomas Berry through the Sophia Center at Holy Names University in Oakland, California. The Sophia Center described itself as a Wisdom School Celebrating Earth, Art, and Spirit. I flew to Oakland, California from Phoenix, Arizona every month for a period of 2 years and not only earned a Master of Arts in Culture and Spirituality, but enough inspiration to last me a lifetime. It was there that I became familiar with the work of Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme and several other transformational teachers. I've heard it said that transformation is like an inoculation; it stays in your system and it works. And that indeed was my experience of the Sophia Center.

I received the book in early July and avidly set about reading it. About half way through in Chapter 8, serendipitously titled "Coming Home," I discovered exactly what I was looking for...a program for children and the teachers of children that nurtured and prepared both groups to live in intimate I-Thou relationships with the whole Earth/Universe community. It was called the Center for Education, Imagination, and the Natural World. For a period of ten years, Thomas Berry's inspiration had guided the development of this Center and it was now offering its eleventh class of the two-year program, "The Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice". On July 12<sup>th</sup> I sent in my application to enroll in the 2019-2021 class. It truly felt like a coming home.

Five years prior to this "home coming," the Montessori school that I had worked at for almost forty years, Villa Montessori School, celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. We took this moment to ask, what would be the most deliberate, the most impactful thing that we could do that would ensure the continuation of "Growing Greatness" (our school motto) for the next fifty years and beyond. It was decided that we would create gardens on each of our three campuses primarily to provide more contact and experiences for the children in nature. Participating in this program in North Carolina was the perfect fit for me since I was the lucky one designated to oversee and implement this new project.

I was able to attend our first coming together as a class at Timberlake, a 165-acre Earth Sanctuary, in Whitsett North Carolina. It was a day of deep welcome, wisdom, and worth. The experience left me surer than ever that this was where I belonged.



The goal of the program's first year is to cultivate a Practice of PRESENCE with Nature. It had been almost two years since my husband, sister, and I moved into our new home to consciously live in community with each other. I felt it would be the perfect time to begin a relationship with the three trees in our front yard, the 2 trees in our back yard, a flourishing, robust plant in our living room that I sat next to every morning to journal, and South Mountain, a gentle mountain only 3 blocks away that we have a spectacular view of from our front window.

I speak of my Practice of Presence because it formed the foundation for the Practice I would choose for my final year at the Center. I had already given each of the trees and the plant a name and referred to South Mountain as Grandfather. As my practice deepened, I began addressing this still, beautiful mountain as Grandfather-Grandmother. The following is what I wrote in my journal just before beginning the practice:

#### My Practice of Presence

- Sit in stillness with the tree, or plant, or mountain I come to behold
- Shift my center of attention, moving awareness from my head to my heart
- Come into deeper connection by using all of my senses to deeply notice
- Begin to sense as fully as I can their interiority through deep listening
- Become aware of their recognition and welcome of me
- Continue to sit in stillness, beholding, open to communion and reciprocity
- At the end of the practice, bathe in the silence for as long as possible without rushing to break it.
- Journal about it

Thomas Berry said, "The way to the sacred is through the place of our dwelling."<sup>1</sup> I began my journaling with these familiar beings surrounding our home on January 27, 2020. I share with you one of these pieces that for me, felt like a moment of grace.

Going to South Mountain on Sunday mornings had become a bit of a habit. After sitting in the semi cozy space that had become "My Spot," I realized that a sudden burst of wind was moving everything in sight and the penetrating heat of the sun was without doubt getting my attention. All but this solitary, still, strong mountain seemed to be shouting, "WE'RE HERE, PAY ATTENTION!" so I did. I sat silently in their energy for about an hour. I had a strong feeling like they were all collaborating on my behalf. Each seemed to have a message for me. I opened my journal and began to write.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Berry, "The North American Continent" (*Chrysalis*, Fall 2021), 7.

*It is a great honor and pleasure to sit in the presence of Grandfather Sun, Grandfather South Mountain, and Grandmother Wind. Thank You! You each have been an ally for me, a symbol of presence and Inspiration, a strength. Thank you for making yourselves so present to me this morning. Please fill me with your presence, your mystery, your message.*

Then I began to address each one individually.

**Grandfather-Grandmother South Mountain**, have you called me to be with you in this final stage of my life? I am so grateful to live in your Presence every day. Your equanimity, your stillness, your strength, your groundedness is a gift to me. Please hold me in these qualities and let me remember to turn to you when I need them.

I listened... Using my intuition and imagination, I wrote:

**My message to you is:** That is why I called you to me. Let me be your Grandmother-Grandfather. I have many lessons I want to teach you. Come to me. I will teach you how to be still and listen and trust and ground yourself in the love and embrace of your great planetary Mother Father God.

**Grandfather Sun** please make me your granddaughter. Guide me in your way of extravagant generosity and warmth. Please keep your fire burning in my belly and in my heart.

I listened... Using my intuition and imagination, I wrote:

**My message to you is:** trust I am your grandfather. Don't forget or distrust this moment. We are your grandfathers and we hold you in our strength. We will teach you how to face and embrace your fears and use them as doorways to greater wisdom, love, imagination, awareness, radiance and gratitude. You are genetically coded to share your light as generously and unbiasedly as I do.

**Grandmother Wind**, you are so present with your duende, please make me your granddaughter. Please let me trust my name and live it full out every day (a shaman had once told me that my name was "Walks With The Bright Wind"). Please teach me how to walk, dance, sing, and love under the inspiration of your Divine Feminine Shakti.

I listened... Using my intuition and imagination, I wrote:

**My message to you is:** Go with the flow of your life; Trust it. Stay in the present moment. Awaken to your beauty, your duende, your wholeness, your basic goodness, your windhorse, your fundamental bravery, your unconditional confidence, your hallow little bone of no resistance. And please, be astonished every day! Follow beauty wherever you see it.

When I finished writing this, I asked, “How will I remember this moment?” I looked down and around on the ground where I was sitting and there was a green crystal stone already encased in silver wire and ready to be worn. I took it to a crystal store where they told me it was most likely Green Calcite. When I looked it up in my Book of Stones,<sup>2</sup> it said, “*Green Calcite assists one in being more attuned to nature and the spirits of plants and animals. It helps one direct the attention of the mind to the Heart assisting one in moving one’s center of attention to what the heart knows.*” Needless to say it has become a treasured talisman for me.

Because of Covid, we were unable to gather together in person at the Center in North Carolina. Peggy and the board in service to everyone’s health and wellbeing decided that it would be necessary to take an interim year and postpone the second year of training until the following year of 2021 – 2022. We discovered during this year that the program’s gatherings would still need to be mainly held through Zoom meetings, but we could at least gather together for the culminating experience of sharing the practice each of us would design and take part in a closing ritual/graduation ceremony.

In April of 2021, in a quiet, beautiful place in nature near our own home, we each participated in a Guided Solo process of “Letting Go, Letting Come.” This activity laid the groundwork for each of us to recognize a practice for the last year of the program. We were letting go of those particular things that separate us from Earth as Sacred Community and opening up an inner spaciousness for something new to “come in.”

After some time of taking into contemplation what was coming up for me as “My Practice,” and having a very meaningful phone dialogue with Peggy, I decided I would stay with “My Familiar,” keeping my focus still on what was very close to home. What became very clear to me was that I wanted to create a habit of being Present and Attuned to the Living Earth. I wanted to make myself available to a Sacred Universe. I would do this by continuing to deepen an I-Thou relationship with the seven beings that were present to me right around my own home: my five trees that grew in our front and back yard, my Sophia plant in our living room, and our beautiful South Mountain that radiated its strength, stillness, and equanimity to us all. What I added to my new practice was to place these moments of beholding, communing, and belonging within a specific, ceremonial ritual.

I began placing my weekly “Practice of Presence” within a ritual by beginning with smudging myself first with sage, which serves as a way to clear any negativity within or around me and then smudging myself with Palo Santo to bring in the good and the positive. Even the name “Palo Santo” means “holy wood.”

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Simmons and Naisha Ahsian, *The Book of Stones: Who They Are and What They Teach*, (Berkeley, CA: North American Books, 2015) 112.

I then laid out thirteen SoulCollage cards that I specifically made for this ritual, or chose from my existing deck. (Briefly, SoulCollage is a process that people use to become familiar with the many parts of their multifaceted self: personality parts, archetypes one carries, ancestors and friends that you love and turn to for support, and chakra “keepers”. Using your intuition and imagination to reflect on the images chosen for each card is an amazing way to access your own deep wisdom.<sup>3</sup>) I gathered these thirteen cards to serve as my “support team” in assisting me to attune my heart to the sacredness, beauty, and resonance of the Living Earth. For each card I wrote a Haiku prayer-poem that I would say when I laid out the card. (When I first created these haikus, I was very careful about following the 5-7-5 Haiku syllable pattern. About 5 months into my practice, I read Natalie Goldberg’s new book: *Three Simple Lines: A Writer’s Pilgrimage into the Heart and Homeland of Haiku*.<sup>4</sup> There, on page 91, I was given permission to not be so rigid. The next time I did my practice, I went back and changed those whose meaning was a bit compromised on the altar of the 5-7-5 rule. Below I share the Haiku of each card.



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<sup>3</sup> If anyone is interested in more information on Soul Collage go to [www.soulcollage.com](http://www.soulcollage.com).

<sup>4</sup> Natalie Goldberg, *Three Simple Lines: A Writer’s Pilgrimage into the Heart and Homeland of Haiku* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2021) 91.

Wise Madre Mia  
Pour into me your Stillness  
Show me the Sacred

Beloved of my Soul  
May my eyes see the Sacred  
In all that I Behold

Grandfather Sun  
Grandmother Moon  
Bathe me in your Consciousness  
Angel Guardian  
Guide me to Intimacy  
With my Mother Earth

Deer: My heart companion  
May I listen and behold  
With your Stillness

La Loba, gather  
Bones of my Ancient Knowing  
Sing the Sacred home

Inner Cosmic Gardener  
Blow your breath upon my Practice  
May its roots grow deep

Hestia, guard now  
The hearth of my Heart's Fire  
Ignite the Sacred

Warriorress, be brave  
Infuse your Holy Daring  
Keep me on This Path

Francis, my Brother,  
Strengthen all my Relations  
Guide me in your Beauty Way

Dear Thomas Berry,  
Awaken me to Sacredness  
Be my Soul-Uncle

John O'Donohue,  
Radical-Lover of Life  
Share with me your Gift

Mary Oliver, teach me  
To Pay Attention, Be Amazed  
Then Tell about It

After laying out the cards on either our front porch or back patio, I would sit in stillness with the natural beauty that surrounded me. With deep noticing, listening, sensing, and feeling, I always felt like I was drawn more closely into their mystery and their mystery into mine.

This is a journal entry from 11-23-2021:



*Feeling still a bit unsure about the “performance” of my practice, I come out on our back patio, smudge myself with sage and Palo Santo asking to open to every good around me. I lay out my thirteen SoulCollage cards saying its Haiku as a prayer. I love them and feel very much supported. I sit in stillness hoping I will open to Luna, a beautiful, Queenly mesquite tree that has grown full and tall since we moved in almost four years ago. I sit in stillness connecting first with Luna’s particularity and then with Lunita’s. Lunita was a very small mesquite tree when we first moved in. I always imagine that she is Luna’s daughter and grew naturally from a seed that blew over from Luna’s lush canopy and put down roots. She has grown substantially and the branches on her right side that have been slowly stretching towards the branches on Luna’s left side now are just beginning to touch. That makes me very happy! I am aware of my intention to open to both of their unique interiorities. I focus first on Luna and then Lunita. I feel very relaxed and feel like I might have slipped into a dream every now and then. I begin to listen closely to each one and hear the birds chirping and tapping on their bark with their sharp beaks. It appears that they take refuge for a short while in both trees, while some settle down and stay for a longer visit. Both trees seem to welcome the birds’ presence just like they do mine when I come. I walk over and stand under Luna’s canopy right next to her trunk and look up; a sense of the sacred surrounds me. I go over to Lunita. She always exudes a more youthful, light energy. I welcome and bask in it. After about two hours, I write this journal entry. I feel I have made a deliberate connection with each one and feel fuller, grounded, and more enlivened than when I first took my seat for this time of Presence with Luna and Lunita.*

When I wrote up this new Practice of Presence, I also intended to extend my attunement to the living Earth by exploring, cultivating, and experiencing ways of living within the natural, repetitive cycles and rhythms of the Earth: Night and Day, the Phases of the moon, and the Seasons of the Year. I wrote up a rather long list of how I would go about doing this.

However, true to the old adage, Man proposes and God disposes, my 21-22 school year was far busier than I thought it would be. At eighty years of age, I was slowly moving towards retirement by only working two days a week. I took on a task that five years ago would have seemed more than doable. My actual experience of carrying it to completion was that the skills needed to do just that...were no longer in my “wheel house.” The realization of that created a tsunami of feelings to face and deal with.

When I wrote to Peggy to share how I had been doing on My Practice, everything seemed to fall into place. Clearly the “dream of my practice” had not been lived like I imagined it would be. I wrote:

*The positive part of this stress, overwhelm, and frustration I experienced in trying to keep up with it all helped me to get really clear THAT THIS IS NOT HOW I WANT TO SPEND THE LAST YEARS OF MY LIFE. My greater allurements is to lead my life now in a much more contemplative way...a way much more attuned to My Practice. It's pretty synchronistic that when I wrote my practice, I never dreamed that it would give me this form of clarity. I know I had expressed a few times that I had been struggling a bit with trying to discern what is MY PART NOW in the GREAT WORK needed at this TIME. I often prayed that I would be a Bodhisattva for children and teachers, and in my mind I always saw that playing out with being involved somehow with Villa (our school). When I read about the Inner Life of the Child in Nature program, I was sure that this was the way I would accomplish that...at Villa. Little did I know that the Center for Education, Imagination, and the Natural World was offering me a "blue plan" for the rest of my life.*

When I realized that I had written "blue plan" instead "blue print," I sent a note to Peggy saying that blue plan should really be blue print.

This is what she wrote back to me: "One wonders what a "blue plan" might be, as it has something of the feeling of the flow of water and maybe even the reflection of a calm body of water. Who knows, Mary, you might be on to something here. But I will surely be happy to revise the text to read 'blueprint!'"

And when I respond by saying, "Yes, let's leave it!"

She wrote back: "Let's do let it be called "blue plan" Mary, which has something of an organic feeling about it rather than a preset plan or technical drawing. Look where our unconscious can lead us!"

Indeed it did! For the rest of my life "My Practice" will be a "Blue Plan" and I will flow with wherever my Blue Plan leads me trusting that whatever its form, it will lead me to ever greater beauty, intimacy, and wonder with the entire earth community.



**Mary Orlando** has been a teacher since 1964. She began her teaching career working as a second grade teacher in parochial schools. In 1968 she took the Montessori Training, which served as a visionary light for the rest of her years in working with children. She was certified in Montessori Training at the Primary, Elementary and Middle School level and worked with the children of those ages for ten years each at those development levels. She became a Montessori teacher trainer and a Montessori administrator and has spent the past 42 years of her life at Villa Montessori School in Phoenix Arizona. Mary now lives with her husband and sister and plans to retire when the new 2022-2023 school year begins. She has 3 grown children and 3 grandchildren and hopes that she will be able to pass on to them a great Love and Communion with the whole Earth Community.

# Practicing Surrender

by

Hannah Saunders

Surrender is the essence of my practice of communion with the natural world. A year ago, my grandmother passed away. As I reflected upon her way of living close to the end of her life, I began to think about Surrender.

While my grandmother was alive, I overlooked the wisdom in her way of living. She didn't leave the house very much if at all, and kept comfortably distracted by the TV. She didn't have many people she kept in touch with. I observed that these ways of being were ways to protect her from the haunting of earlier traumas in her life. Somehow, still, by old age she had figured out her way of Surrender, presence to her reality, and attention to what mattered. I came to acknowledge and admire this only after her passing. As I describe in a journal entry:

*She looked out the window in her stillness, and she listened to powerful music in stillness, with tears in her eyes, and the bustle of people surrounded her in her stillness, and she absorbed the love of her family in stillness. She looked forward for weeks with such excitement when my daughter and I would visit her.*

*I remember my grandmother pointing things out to me—a flower in my mom's window box, or maybe the sky—and saying "Isn't that a beautiful color?" And just basking in it for a while. She would sit silently in the living room, gazing out the window when the sunlight came dancing down through the trees behind the house.*

*Her routine was still—she woke, she made her bed, she had the same kind of coffee in the same cup every day. She didn't try to change things.*

Sparked by the memory of my grandmother and an at times crushing awareness of how rushed and overly busy I feel, and our culture feels, I decided to focus my practice on my own internal journey of Surrender.

I felt familiar with the feeling of Surrender from earlier experiences. There have been some very special places—places distant from the bustle of human-centeredness and powerful with the presence of other-than-human beings, where it is easy for me to surrender to the greater world around me. The trail at Loch Raven Reservoir near my childhood home in Maryland has never failed to sweep me up in a wonder where I become absorbed in the world of snapping turtles, eagles, pines, ripples in the water, bamboo forest, crows... As I revisit this place again and again, the sense of wonder is always available for me. The power of wonder in that place is greater than

the power of my own intentions. I know this because as an adult I would go there to jog, not to wonder. But an element of playfulness always entered in through a force beyond my control. I would stop my jog abruptly to investigate a patch of clay or moss or to walk out on a precarious fallen tree trunk over the water, and there was no going back to the jogging pace after that. I still remember the moments of stopping abruptly and feeling a bewilderment, an awe, and a reverence for the other beings I encountered there. Those experiences of fully surrendering to forces greater than I are something I have to draw upon as I continue developing my practice.

Developing a Practice of Surrender has been a slow process that requires a lot of patience and perseverance in a society full of distractions. There is also a question of balancing surrender with action. When I'm spending a lot of time inside the four walls of a New York City apartment, underground in the subway, or staring at a screen for work, it takes some initiative to get out and into a quiet place where I can hear the call of Surrender more clearly. The Surrender can happen indoors, as it did for my grandmother, and I even recognize falling asleep as a form of Surrender. But I have chosen to focus on developing waking Surrender to the natural world around me, and that is most powerful for me where I can feel the wind and the sun and be in awe of other animals, plants, rocks, water...

Next I had to acknowledge, and surrender to, the thoughts and fears that were blocking my ability to further surrender. I kept journal entries of my Surrender practice, and here is one of the early ones:

*There has emerged a feeling of holding on tight to these moments. Fear that I cannot possess and keep them. Guilt comes back, trapping me in every angle with "shoulds." I should be staying here longer. I should be making sure these moments don't escape because I need them so much. I should be grocery shopping or working or cleaning or caring for other humans. I should be figuring out a way to allow others to have these moments.*

*Then I remember myself as the moment. I learn that moments come and moments go. I learn that letting go of them is as important as was the letting come. It doesn't matter the amount of time I spent "in nature," or how deeply into "the wild" I got. The level of awareness is what matters—how much I allow myself to surrender to the moment.*

As I gradually let go of fears and anxious thoughts, I began noticing more of what was going on around me, and who was present with me. As I watched birds, squirrels, trees, the wind skipping across the water, I imagined myself as the being I was beholding. I would say to myself, I am Wind. I am Butterfly. I am Sunlight, or Squirrel, or Flower. I surrendered my sense of myself for some moments to imagine being another, and I entered into a space of deep observation of that other. I could feel my fingers move when I saw Squirrel clawing at the earth, and my spine got straighter as I observed tall, strong Tree.

Then my practice evolved into not just me and a singular other being. It became, I am Earth, and I am this Moment. I started to take walks with the intention of holding myself deliberately as part of, not separate from, the natural world. I called them “I am Earth” walks. I took these walks when I was called to, and without a particular agenda or route in mind. What resulted was a very strong feeling of Belonging with the natural world. Here are some moments I recorded of feeling a sense of belonging with the Earth community:

10/27/21

*Today I walked along the path and saw a pair of cardinals in a tree, eye level. They stopped me. They cheeped to one another, chests rising with breaths of life. In my heart I felt a love for them. A safety. They didn't mind that I was there. The red one then flew towards me, and I heard and felt the flutter by my ear. He flew over my head and into a sheltering bush. She called to him, and he called back for a time. Then she followed him, also fluttering by my head and over my shoulder. I followed them and entered their world. Another bright red cardinal friend was chatting with the first red one under the bush. They picked for seeds together. Across the way was another bush with peepings from within. I watched as a contented and unworried squirrel chewed a nut on top of a low branch of the cherry tree. Smooth, shiny cherry bark hovering over the rhododendron, peeping and cheeping inside the umbrella of leaves, a tiny sparrow with black and brown stripes inside—this community I have never stopped to notice before filled me with a peace and belonging. I stopped my worrying, and I stopped feeling alone.*

2/21/22

*The snowdrops are me, and I am the snowdrops. I notice you, I notice the thin translucent skin you slipped out of. Is that what separated you from the chill of night? Did you have everything you need to make it through?*

*I notice your sturdy and beautiful leaves. You are resilient. I touch them and feel the green, the thickness.*

*I notice your bulbs, some above the earth. And my roots are under the earth with yours. I stretch up, and I gaze down.*

*I see your shadows. We are many. We are emerging in our own time. Each of us drinks in Sun, safe, warm, and each of us casts a shadow. Our shadows stand together.*

*And your delicate bloom, I notice last. Your face. I touch it gently. The wind blows us all, and I hear the tinkling of bells.*

*I go into a wordless place, and I rest there with you.*

4/13/22

*How do I feel beneath the Cherry Tree?*

*I close my eyes. I take as many deep breaths as needed to slow down. I wait for the construction pounding to pause.*

*I feel her trunk pressing into my back. Her trunk is very hard, stable. I feel protected, safe. I look up and see thousands of stars in her blossoms. The world is beautiful, the world is good, I am safe.*

The sense of Touch was really important in developing my Surrender Practice. I used touch, with my fingers, or feeling my back against a tree trunk, or feeling the wind across my skin, as a doorway for me to access Presence. I brushed my fingertips underneath a witch hazel blossom in mid-winter and paused to feel what I felt. The same with resting on a rock or with my back against a tree, or with my fingers in the soil of my houseplants down with their roots. Sometimes it was a sparkle of intimacy, or a feeling of steadiness, grief, or wonder. I allowed the feeling, whatever it was, to enter my whole body and my whole being. Afterwards, I found that upon visiting a tree or rock again, I felt that now I had a relationship with that other being—we had shared something significant together and our boundaries had fallen away.

Touching led me to feel like I was playing, sort of dancing with the world around me. Touching the mud, and then picking it up to spread on my face. Submerging my face in a cold stream. It was a Play of experimentation and imagination—how does this feel when I do this? And how do I sense or imagine that the other feels when I do this? How does the Stream feel when I place my face in her waters? How does the Earth feel being carried around on my cheeks? Does the moss feel me when I touch the moss? The snake that dropped out of the tarp over the woodpile, how does my finger feel along its scales? Can I become the squirrel digging for nuts, and when I do, where does that imagination lead? Play in itself is a form of communion with others. Thomas Berry describes this human capacity of surrendering to communion with other beings that I was able to touch upon through my practice:

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

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

In my practice of surrender, I try to be as open in my heart and chest to my own feelings, and to the feelings or the “spirit presence” of the other. If I am able to be slow and still and present enough, I begin to feel calm. I feel supported by a great community of beings, I feel a sense of belonging, and I feel that everything in the universe is as it should be. When I observe children playing, it seems as if they are surrounded by an atmosphere of this same feeling—communion with the beings and materials around them, and such a security in the community of beings that they can be freely lighthearted. A feeling arises that everything is right in the world. Here is a moment I describe of my own renewed sense of play through which I access Surrender. I was introduced to the moment of Play by my daughter, and a pull in the morning to go out-of-doors:

*3/18/22*

*Today Isabelle and I were called, quick! quick! to go outside as soon as we could. The sun was shining and quickly warming the Earth and making the mist vanish. We went to the church garden. I spread compost. I hauled rocks and made some terraced beds. Isabelle sang dreamily and hopped on things. She placed some withered carrots outside the groundhog's hole. She pointed out a cardinal to me, and I raised my head from my focused rock-heaving and saw a red flash flutter by. He sang, and without any thoughts of reason, I whistled back to him, an echo. We went on like this a while.*

*Then we found snails. We inspected them as they slithered on the rocks, slowly and sparkly in the sun. Soon we had them on the backs of our hands, waiting for them to "get used to us." They did, and they tickled our skin with theirs, and they gazed at us with their tiny black pupils, and they trusted us as they trusted the stable rocks. We watched*

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Berry, “Contemplation and the World Order,” 10-11 (a paper available on the Thomas Berry Foundation website at [http://thomasberry.org/wp-content/uploads/Berry\\_Contemplation\\_and\\_world\\_order.pdf](http://thomasberry.org/wp-content/uploads/Berry_Contemplation_and_world_order.pdf))

*them recoil into their shells, and were amazed. They climbed on each other and we wondered about their friendships. We beheld their beautiful, striped, spiraled shells. A perfect moment, whole, love, light.*

I have found a way of entering into presence with the world full of life around me. My practice of Surrender has been a way for me to listen to “the other,” not just to myself and the noise of our modern society. The more I live in the state of surrender, the more I feel that I am living in a house flowing with life, flowing with blissful moments of activity and delicious and replenishing moments of stillness. Perhaps this is the way my grandmother felt.

**Hannah Saunders** lives in New York City where she has immersed herself in being with children in gardens and wild city parks. In 2019 she started Second Nature Outdoors LLC with the goal of facilitating convenient, safe and peaceful opportunities for young urban dwellers to connect with the Earth. Second Nature’s programs include a garden-based summer camp in the Bronx and nature walks in upper Manhattan. Hannah holds a BA in Environmental Studies from NYU and is in the process of embarking on a journey to learn more about farming through the Biodynamic Association’s Farmer Foundation Year program. She lives with her daughter and partner and spends her free time swimming, tending houseplants and neighborhood gardens, reading Astrid Lindgren stories with her daughter, playing guitar and practicing fire-building.

# Communicate Through Me, Cosmos

by  
Melissa Slovik

*"Hail to the heart!" Allow attention to move to this center, continuing the flow from brow to throat, arriving at the place where heart-as-experienced originates simultaneous inner presence with radiance. Warmth, intimacy, unity, and circulation of sacredness are felt here. Allow attention here to flow "back" to the region of the throat and to the region of the brow, and "down again," to heart.<sup>1</sup>*

~ Robert Sardello

## *Transforming Emotional Reaction into Heartful Emotion<sup>2</sup>*

Many years ago, when I was fifteen at the beginning of my sophomore year of high school, I experienced a life-changing situation that introduced me to life beyond myself. I came down with Guillain-Barre Syndrome, a rare disorder in which my body's immune system attacked my nerves. The right side of my body became paralyzed and I was hospitalized for nine days. While in the hospital, I received a treatment, which consisted of very high doses of steroids. After being sent home, I began to experience mind-altering effects from the steroids. I heard voices, I saw dead relatives right before my eyes, I experienced extreme paranoia. But along with all of the confusion going on in my brain, I also saw "the answers to the universe" that my fifteen-year-old self told my dad in the kitchen one day. I had drawn it out on a sketchpad. I drew the answers to the universe and how it all works. There were colors and shapes and lines and the entire cosmos was represented right before me in Crayola markers and crayons. I wish I could see this drawing today, but my parents quickly disposed of all the evidence of this horrific time in their lives as soon as it was over with. I fully recovered from the illness and the steroid effects. My body became strong enough for me to try out for the high school softball team several months later. But the lingering effects of this experience continued to stay with me. I knew there was another understanding of existence out there, within myself, but I had no one with whom I could relate this.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Sardello, *Heartfulness* (La Veta, Colorado: Goldenstone Press, 2017), 301-302.

<sup>2</sup> "Transforming Emotional Reaction into Heartful Emotion" is a practice by Robert Sardello in his book *Heartfulness* (La Veta, Colorado: Goldenstone Press, 2017), 325.



Thirty-one years later I read *The Great Work* by Thomas Berry. He writes of the Navaho, as prescribed in their chantways, who "through their sand paintings depict the entire cosmos and summon its powers to restore imbalances in the individual and in communal life. The person to be cured is placed at the center of the universe as symbolized in the painting. The cosmic powers depicted are absorbed into the person as the invocations are intoned to indicate the healing that is sought."<sup>3</sup> This was a moment of relief for me because I found someone, some people, with whom I could relate my experience. As well, I found solace in the act of writing this emotional reaction, this unsettled memory, as I entered it "from the place of the Silence and region of the heart, feeling the embrace of the Earth."<sup>4</sup>

I let go.

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When the first gathering of the Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice program happened at the Treehouse at Timberlake Earth Sanctuary, I came home and said to my husband, "I found my people." We met twice as a group in person where we were guided by Peggy Whalen-Levitt, each other, ourselves, and the work of Thomas Berry and his image of a "communion of subjects". I felt grounded, I went on solo walks along the moss-covered paths, I reflected, and I felt the deep connection of being one in the same with my immediate surroundings and beyond. Unknowingly, in the months to come, our world as we had known it would be presented with an entirely new challenge, the pandemic.

Throughout my time in quarantine (about five months) during the beginning of the pandemic, Peggy sent us (the group) excerpts and writings, which inspired me and reminded me of my connectedness with Living Earth. I learned to look to my backyard for sanctuary. I realized how powerful, and necessary, my felt connection to nature is. It was my lifeline. The program, the people, and the writings, brought me peace and hope. Every day, the birds and the trees and I would be in presence with each other. Every night, the sky would let me dive in as far as I wanted to go. I allowed myself to commune with the natural world and the fear of the unknown slowly slipped away.

When August came around, I was to go back to school and create a classroom where the three-year-old preschoolers were expected to wear masks, be kept 6 feet apart at all times, sanitize all surfaces constantly, and continuously wash hands. That year presented itself with continuous challenges that we had to adapt to while teaching during the pandemic. My co-

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way Into the Future* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1999), 39.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Sardello, *Heartfulness*, 325.

teacher and myself made it through the first year. Going into my second year of teaching during the pandemic, Peggy asked us to think about a practice we would like to bring forth, a "Practice of Presence with Living Earth." It could be about ourselves or working with children. I chose to focus on one that I could apply to my teaching and I was hoping it would help me through this Covid nightmare.

I tried to think of a practice that would be appropriate for my students while at the same time deepen my own presence with Living Earth. One day I happened to stumble across a copy of the book *The Fall of Freddy the Leaf*<sup>5</sup> that was on a bookshelf at school. I held the book in my arms and remembered my grandmother reading it to me after my grandfather passed away. We were curled up on my little twin bed with the pink and white checkered bedspread and she began to read a book that would stick with me my entire life. A story about a leaf coming to terms with death and realizing that it is a part of Life. This story is beautifully written and actually got the message through quite clearly to my seven-year-old self. I kept this book and cherished it, often looking at the photographs of the children playing under the tree. I looked at the photograph of the leaf, Freddy, and to me it was an individual with a soul and a conscience and friends and it lived and died.

Twelve years later I found myself in the college bookstore buying books for my sociology class. One of them was entitled *Love* by Dr. Leo Buscaglia. On the inner flap of the book cover was a list of other works by the author and included in that list was *The Fall of Freddy the Leaf*. It was as if I was being visited by an old friend.

It may not have been a children's book that created my familiar connection with the words of Thomas Berry, but it was my memories of the many moments throughout my childhood. Those afternoons that I would spend in the woods behind my house, entering into an environment that was brown, and smelled of damp soil, and rustled and snapped when I walked through it. There were birds and a neighbor's rooster and squirrels. There was a soft floor to lie down on and protection by the arms of trees. There was stillness, coldness, warmth, and freedom to be me. It was in those memories that I found the familiar and the connectedness with the words of Thomas Berry, the insights and revelations of Robert Sardello, and the many others who have studied and brought forth the unifying words of the universe. It brings me great comfort to know that I may continue to read their work, and find new and inspiring energy, which will help deepen my presence with Living Earth and fuel my teaching in years to come.

During our first year in The Inner Life of the Child in Nature Program, we spent the time diving into our own relationship with nature. We contemplated how we experience nature before that moment, and entered into a new way of being present with nature. Many in the group

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<sup>5</sup> Leo Buscaglia, *The Fall of Freddie the Leaf* (Thorofare, NJ: Slack Incorporated, 1982).

knew of Thomas Berry's work. Some worked at a school that was built and designed around his philosophy and teachings. For me it was a matter of walking through those woods behind my house again. Having my adult-self learn from my child-self. Letting go of thoughts, engaging the senses, and feeling the presence of nature as I am part of the same kingdom of existence as all of it. This time spent reconnecting and reflecting on my own way of being present with nature helped me to remember and hear what nature had been telling me since I was a young child. Nature hadn't gone anywhere since, but many things had, at times, come between us. This experience has put nature in the forefront, as the main presence in my life again. I am forever grateful for this.

When I was allowing space for a practice to bring to my students, I focused on what I felt they needed at the time. A time when we had to wear masks and be distanced. Our communication was impeded upon, our breathing was muffled, we were told we couldn't sing, we couldn't see each other's expressions, we couldn't see our full faces. Through all of these obstacles, another way of communication became present. I explained to Peggy that beyond all of the hindrances of the situation, it seemed that relationships continued to form between the students and they were managing to communicate with one another by means of feeling, perhaps. As if when one of our senses is disabled, another one may become stronger. Also, during this time, I became aware of my own heartbeat. When I had to bring my son in for a well-check appointment, his heart rate was through the roof and my own heartbeat began to speed up beyond my control. Was my heart mimicking my son's? It seemed as though it was. His heart was communicating that he was scared and my heart was listening. Do my students sense each other's heartbeats as a way of communication? Happy, scared, excited, sad? Maybe this is a form of communication that has gone on that I have not been aware of until this point. After reading Robert Sardello's practice of "Heart-Presence with Another Person," I realized I had experienced "the felt sense of heartfulness" with my son.<sup>6</sup> I decided to focus on this beating rhythm, the heart-presence, as a way of communication and bring it to my new group of students.

We began a ritual. Each day, the "Leader of the Day" started the morning meeting with their own beating rhythm on our classroom drum. They could beat as long or as short, as loud or as quietly as they'd like. Also, as a class, we had a drum session after our Guidance lesson on Wednesdays. After a half hour of talking about feelings and other's feelings, we found it fit to play out our emotions. It seemed like an emotionally charged time for the three-year-old children. We have continued with these rituals all year. This practice has been cathartic, empowering, and healing. During a time when I felt frustration and sometimes despair as an educator, it became the perfect practice for my students and myself. It brought us joy. As Robert Sardello states in the Introduction of *Care of the Senses*, he hopes his writing "can awaken the

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Sardello, *Heartfulness*, 314.

counter current, the refolding of the human being into the cosmic heartbeat of Love."<sup>7</sup> I felt that we also had entered into the cosmic heartbeat through our practice of rhythm.

With their freedom to make noise and express their inner rhythm, the students felt free to connect with the world around them in as many ways as they could find. We would talk to and dance with the trees, play music to the birds, and join in the drum circle of the universe. I found validity in this practice after reading this passage, also from *Care of the Senses* which Peggy recommended to me after discussing my "Practice in Presence with Living Earth" with her:

*"The movement, balance, touch and life sense are all integral to the early years of education, and as such, could be profoundly nurtured in the formative, first years of school, when the will of the individual is most in need of developing with inner strength."*<sup>8</sup>

This practice has inspired me as an educator and given me another pathway to travel down into my future time spent as a teacher of and learner from young children. I was merely giving the children a tool, which allowed them to express what they already had inside. They possess the interconnectedness with nature more closely within their three-year-old selves having less time for things to come between them and the natural world. Although, in today's world, babies are brought into the world and placed directly into industry, technology, synthetics, and pollutants. It is as if they are born and immediately presented with a challenge: *how do we get back in touch with nature?* Perhaps the answer is stated in Thomas Berry's *The Great Work* in which he writes, "The natural world demands a response that rises from the wild unconscious depths of the human soul. A response that artists seek to provide in color and music and movement."<sup>9</sup> I see each of my students as the artists.

It is through The Inner Life of the Child in Nature Program that I feel we are being gently guided to help the current situation of the Earth. We have been encouraged, supported, and nurtured into finding our own way of how we feel we can help. I will continue to weave this practice of rhythm and heart-presence into my classroom environment. Within the rhythm and the noise and sound of the beating drum is the expanse of the Silence. My hope is that between the sound of the beats the Silence will become more present and an awareness will show itself throughout the lives of the children. As in the conversation between Freddy the leaf and his

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<sup>7</sup> Cheryl Sanders Sardello and Robert Sardello, Introduction to *Care of the Senses* (Independently published, 2019), unpagged.

<sup>8</sup> Cheryl Sanders Sardello and Robert Sardello, *Care of the Senses*.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*, 39.

friend Daniel, Daniel tells Freddy before he falls from the tree, "there is something stronger than the tree. It is Life. That lasts forever and we are all a part of Life."<sup>10</sup>

**Melissa Slovik** is a preschool teacher at an independent school in Wilmington, North Carolina. She lives with her husband, two teenagers, and dog. She is grateful for the guidance of the universe for it brought her to this place at this time. She looks forward to continuing her journey of deepening her presence with nature.

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<sup>10</sup> Leo Buscaglia, *The Fall of Freddie the Leaf*, 19.

# The Child in Nature

by

Cambría Storms



9 July 2019

The sky is a wet blanket caught between rain and shine, and the child is so bright as they walk a little ahead of me. We go to the river first thing in the morning, we take ourselves into our own hands as we go down the side of the embankment and across the great big swinging bridge to get to the other side. We bring the child's small red bucket. The child says that we must both carry it to share the weight. I made sure that we brought it so that the child could move water around with it as they like to do. We find a long stick and pull it through the bucket's handle each taking an end, now we are a team like two horses, we can feel each other moving. The child says the bucket is for collecting leaves, rocks, and sand today, sometimes it is only for rocks but today it is for all these things. The child has collections of all these things at home that they place on the kitchen counter. I think how beautiful it is to bring the forest and the riverbank home and put it on your countertop where you make all the things that sustain your body. How do they know that all the tiny dust particles are what hold us all clinging on together? How do they know that all the bits of mountains rolling around for so many years that get under our fingernails are what is continuously holding us upright on our feet?



On the other side of the bridge we look for rocks to climb, and the child points to the very middle of the river at a group of great jumbling rocks, this is where they want to go. We make our own way down from the bank following the rocks. Everything is shallow and bright, we get our feet wet and scramble a little bit. The child climbs up the biggest rock, grasping the red

bucket in one hand and lays down on the rock's great side. I watch over the child as they close their eyes and rest, completely relaxed with the rock holding them there. After a little while, we go further up the river a little ways to reach a small bounding waterfall between two rocks and sit on the rock beside where it pushes past us. The child places their hands and feet in the water not moving from this spot for a long time. Then the child makes a little "beatbox" song for the fast moving water as it gushes and gushes cupping two small hands splashed with water around their mouth. We talk about where the water is going and where it came from, how it is pulling and tugging their dangling little legs, how it goes down, falling, and tripping over the rocks all the way up the river. The child can feel it pulling them and turning to me says, "water never stops".

**Cambria Storms** grew up nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Southwest Virginia and holds a wide background in the performing and visual arts as a mover and a shaker. Cambria is currently a musician living, breathing, practicing, and performing in Durham, North Carolina; playing the pipe organ and serving on the Executive Board of the American Guild of Organists Durham-Chapel Hill Chapter. When not making music, you may find Cambria taking photographs, walking with their dog Blue along the Eno River, deejaying on a rooftop, volunteering at their local library, self-publishing zines, or picking up trash around the city. Cambria is continuously moved to explore, create, and write by the people in their life, especially their friend, teacher, and guide, Alwyn Moss.



# Cultivating My Garden

by

Nelisa Wuilliez

Most of my earliest memories include my great-grandmother Henrietta. My mother and her three brothers were raised by her and although we lived a village away, we spent our weekends with her. I loved going on walks with her. However, my absolute favorite thing to do with her was gardening. She was the one who first taught me about the natural world. She instilled in me a love of plants and a deep respect for nature. She was of Carib-Indian descent and farmed with indigenous wisdom, cultivating her herbs and crops by the rhythms of the moon. She also taught me how to balance banana bunches and buckets of water on my head even while walking uphill. Although I have never had to use this skill in my daily life, it's comforting to know that I can. I was born and raised in Laborie, a fishing village on the Caribbean island of St. Lucia and spent my after-school hours voraciously reading on the large branches of a sea-grape tree right on the beach. Spending time with my great-grandmother who we called Ma Tie, surrounded by rivers, waterfalls and untouched rainforest areas, made me aware of the importance of balance in our natural world.

We did not watch a lot of television when I was a child, but Saturdays were for National Geographic, specifically Jaques Cousteau, the oceanographer. I wanted to be him one day. My Uncle Ray, a scuba diver, supplemented his income by harvesting Queen conch from Laborie Bay. From him, I also got my love of the marine world. After my first year of Community College, I secured an internship with the Soufriere Marine Management Area, a Non-Governmental Organization that works to promote sustainable use of Soufriere Bay, Canaries Bay and Anse-la-Raye Bay as well as conservation of resources in those areas. I caught the Marine Biology bug, working with the SMMA and loved every single minute of my time there. Years later, as a Marine Biology major at the University of North Carolina, Wilmington, I had the opportunity to take a field course in Tropical Environmental Studies in Belize. That experience solidified for me the desire to return to St. Lucia one day to work in conservation and environmental education. After College I took a job at North Carolina Aquarium's Jennettes Pier in Nags Head as an Educator. I enjoyed the work but I was searching for something more when I began to volunteer at my daughter's Montessori school in Kitty Hawk.

Montessori was always my first choice for my childrens' education. I had read about Dr. Montessori and believed in her pedagogy whole-heartedly. I especially like that nature is such a

vital part of the Montessori learning method. Dr. Montessori believed that the outdoor environment was an extension of the classroom because of the endless opportunities for experiential learning. She also believed in “Cosmic Education,” that all children should understand that they are part of a greater universe.

Whenever I question my purpose, my why, this Thomas Berry quote that was shared with Inner Life participants in the summer of 2021 comes foremost to mind:

“The human venture remains stuck in its impasse. Children who begin their earth studies or life studies do not experience any numinous aspect of these subjects. The excitement is diminished. If this fascination, this entrancement, with life is not evoked, the children will not have the psychic energies needed to sustain the sorrows inherent in the human condition. They might never discover their true place in the vast world of time and space. Teaching children about the natural world should be treated as one of the most important events in their lives. Children need a story that will bring personal meaning together with the grandeur and meaning of the universe.”<sup>1</sup>

When I first heard of the Inner Life Program I knew that I had to become a participant. Dr. Montessori is well-known for her work with children in the first and second planes of development, three to twelve-year-olds. What we know about her plan for adolescents is mainly found in the Appendix A and B of *From Childhood to Adolescence*. She proposes an “Erdkinder” for the adolescent. This term means “land-children” or Earth-children. Her plan included a boarding community where adolescents worked the land, engaged in the business of running a guesthouse and shop where they would sell the products they made or cultivated.

The education and nature connection has been a recurring theme for me for the past few years. At my first ever Montessori Conference, the International Montessori conference in Sarasota in 2016, I learned about Brian Swimme’s Journey of the Universe and Thomas Berry for the first time. This aligns so well with Cosmic Education and begins with the Big Bang. Children are given the big picture of how they have come to be and the grand scale of time and the universe.

In *Seed and Spark*, a collaborative design project by 1890 Studio and Eckenhoff Saunders, we are asked to “use nature as a model to reimagine how we learn and live.”<sup>2</sup> One of the quotes in this book that resonates with me is: “We are born learning beings—powerfully shaped by the

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), 130-131.

<sup>2</sup> 180 Studio and Eckenhoff Saunders, *Seed and Spark: Using Nature as a Model to Reimagine How we Learn and Live* (2020).

environments in which we learn.”<sup>3</sup> I have to believe that if we want to raise sustainably thinking humans who want what’s best for the natural world, we have to use nature to do it. We have to put them in the driver’s seat and give them opportunities to grapple with the problems that our planet faces. I have been using the book’s “Seeds of Growth-Identity, Information, Relationships,” “Seeds for Change-Emergence,” and “Seeds for Regeneration-Patterns, Processes” that have helped me reimagine my curriculum in a more holistic way, a more conceptual way, focused on asking questions like :

- Who (and why) we are- Identity
- What (and why) do we notice- Information
- How (and why) we create- Relationships
- What (and why) we become- Emergence
- How (and why) we work- Patterns
- What (and why) we build- Structures

For example, in a Middle School cycle focused on the concepts of Interactions and Disruptions, our geography studies involve looking at case studies of modern populations in the United States, India and China through the lens of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. In Science, we will look at the impact of humans on natural resources and ecosystems. History studies include European exploration and the encounter between the people of Western Europe, Africa and the Americas. and in art we look for inspiration from Ghanaian artist El Anatsui’s “Lines that Link Humanity.”

Concept based education is not new and is designed to help learners uncover important, transferable understandings. My hope is that instead of moving from content area to content area, my learners come to deep understandings about themselves and the world while also learning the content.

My work as an adolescent Montessori guide is extremely fulfilling. I believe that my job is to help my learners discover their “cosmic task.” I recently discovered the work of Bill Plotkin, specifically his book *Nature and the Human Soul: Cultivating Wholeness and Community in a Fragmented World*.<sup>4</sup> Plotkin, a wilderness guide in nature-based initiation practices, designed a developmental model called “The Wheel of Life,” which corresponds nicely to Dr. Montessori’s Planes of Development. It is a nature-based model of human development that is ecocentric and soulcentric. The belief is that every person carries a unique gift that is only theirs, the gift of their

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Bill Plotkin, *Human Soul: Cultivating Wholeness and Community in a Fragmented World* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2007).

soul, their “cosmic task,” and if this task is not expressed, it is lost to the world for all time. Humans discover their cosmic task in late adolescence. The model is also one of increasing compassion and a holistic world view. Montessori teachers are knowledgeable about the Planes of Development with regard to their students but Plotkin takes a look at the stages of adulthood. We are not finished developing when we become adults but instead have four distinct stages: Early Adulthood (The Apprentice at the Wellspring), Late Adulthood (The Artisan in the Wild Orchard), Early Elderhood (The Master in the Grove of Elders and Late Elderhood (The Sage in the Mountain Cave). As “The Apprentice at the Wellspring,” I am eager to learn and grow in all aspects of my life.

My practice ties my love of gardening and nature with my passion for teaching adolescents. At home, every inch of my yard is devoted to some kind of garden. On the left side, which my husband, a Biologist by degree and Horticulturist by trade, calls “his side,” are ferns, lilies, gardenias and terrestrial orchids. My side, on the right, is covered with camellias, azaleas and vast numbers of perennials and annuals each year. Along the path to the backyard, is my husband’s bonsai garden. He enjoys trimming and working on his collection of self-created bonsai plants which include junipers, azaleas and blueberry plants. In the back yard, I have a small rose garden, three planter boxes used for vegetables, a small fruit garden area with peaches and blueberry bushes and, against the trellis, there is an herb garden with a huge bay tree in the middle, rosemary, parsley, sage, thyme, stevia and occasionally lavender. On a large table in the back are numerous orchids. A lifetime ago my husband and I spent lots of time in the St. Lucian rainforest searching for and cataloging the island's native orchid species.

I enjoy spending time in my garden after school. It is where I unwind from the day. On the weekend, I usually pick an area to focus on and stick to working on that small area. In the past I have been overwhelmed with the sheer amount of work to maintain all the garden areas but have made the decision to start small and to slow down, doing what I can when I can- slow and steady.

There is a certain peace that comes when my hands are in the dirt. I get into a rhythm and I can feel my heart slow down and my mind clears. I am so aware of every sensation- the smells of the dirt and plants, the feel of the leaves or dirt on my hands, the sounds of the birds, bees and my cats who like to join me on occasion. I am very mindful of my thoughts, noticing what comes to mind for me.

I also bring my love of gardening to school. Not only do my students and I take care of garden areas at our campus, we also garden as a community service to our other campuses. Additionally, it is now a part of our microeconomy. The microeconomy or student-run business is a hallmark of a Montessori adolescent community. Dr. Montesor envisioned adolescents

participating in and managing small business endeavors in order to experience economic activity in their community. We recently acquired a greenhouse and our students now run a small nursery business they call “The Greenery.” They propagate and cultivate plants to sell to the public in order to help fund their overnight field studies and community service projects. This has opened the door to learning about so much for them. They rotate through real-life occupations such as greenhouse manager, horticulturist, accountant, soil scientist, social media manager, marketing specialist and sales person. They have all seemed to love this work. It fosters collaboration, responsibility and a deep respect for living things.

During the school day, students have a designated time for silent, personal reflection, called SOLO time. During this time they are free to read, write in a journal, do handwork like embroidery, macrame, knitting, garden or work in the greenhouse as long as it is silent, solitary work. Rachael Kessler, in her book *The Soul Of Education: Helping Students find Connection, Compassion and Character at School*,<sup>5</sup> maps seven gateways to help the souls of students emerge: deep connection, silence and solitude, meaning and purpose, joy, creativity, transcendence and initiation. By providing SOLO time we are making space for silence and solitude.

My practice has been deeply inspired by Nancy Rosenow’s book, *Heart-Centered Teaching Inspired by Nature: Using Nature’s Wisdom to Bring More Joy and Effectiveness to Our Work with Children*. In Part One, “Cultivating Our Own Garden,” she outlines 1. Preparing the Soil, 2. Nurturing Strong Roots, 3. Using Effective Gardening Tools and 4. Letting Ourselves Bloom. In Part Two, “Helping Children Grow,” she outlines: 5. Understanding Seeds, 6. Celebrating Seasons, 7. Enjoying Caretaking and 8. Weathering Storms.

On page 6, she writes:

“It would be hard to trust gardening advice from someone whose own garden was an overgrown weed patch. I suspect it’s also hard for children to believe that learning is exciting and worthwhile unless the adults in their lives actually value and enjoy learning themselves. Years ago, studying to become an educator, I had no idea the most important lessons I’d be delivering would come from the way I lived my own life. But that turned out to be the case. Children know authenticity when they see it, and they know pretense. They undoubtedly saw some of both in me.

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<sup>5</sup> Rachael Kessler, *The Soul of Education: Helping Students Find Connection, Compassion, and Character at School* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2000).

Over the years I've come to believe those of us who work with or for children have a responsibility to nurture ourselves as tenderly as we nurture the children in our care. Children deserve to be taught by people who delight in the wonders of the world and are eager to share them. Children deserve to be taught by people who teach through positive example. Consider: How can we help children see the world as a place of goodness and unlimited possibilities if we experience it as dreary and stifling? How can children trust our advice about the benefits of healthy eating and exercise if we don't practice what we preach? How will we help children learn the difficult part of conflict resolution if bitter conflicts in our own relationships remain unresolved? How can we help children discover nature's gifts of joy and wonder if we rarely delight in those gifts ourselves? And perhaps the hardest question of all: How will we help children experience themselves as unconditionally loved and loving beings if we don't feel unconditionally loving toward ourselves?

My intention in using these questions is to encourage each of us - myself included - to spend time every day cultivating your own inner "garden" before we try to help children learn to cultivate theirs. What I'm really talking about is finding ways to help ourselves keep learning and growing so we'll stay fully engaged with the best life has to offer. Doing so is what I believe helps us work with children from a place of abundance and joy, an important part of heart-centered teaching."<sup>6</sup>

This is a work I find myself coming back to whenever I need a reminder of my purpose in creating a place-based, nature and learner-centered Secondary curriculum. I envision a time after the COVID-19 pandemic when my adolescents and I can once again visit our early childhood and elementary classrooms to partner up for some meaningful nature and gardening projects. I am optimistic. Until then, I will keep tending to my gardens, both inner and outer, one plant at a time.

**Nelisa Wuilliez** is an avid gardener living on North Carolina's Outer Banks. She is the founding Secondary Guide at Heron Pond Montessori's Secondary Program in Kitty Hawk, NC. Nelisa earned a B.S. in Environmental Science from UNC-Wilmington and has been a Montessori educator for 10 years.

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<sup>6</sup> Nancy Rosenow, *Heart-Centered Teaching Inspired by Nature: Using Nature's Wisdom to Bring More Joy And Effectiveness to Our Work with Children* (Lincoln, NE: Dimensions Educational Research Foundation, 2012), 6.