

Being, Beholding, Belonging
Part II

Eco-contemplative Arts & Rituals with Children

*“We are touched by what we touch, shaped by what we shape,
enhanced by what we enhance.”*

~ Thomas Berry

Inspired by the vision of Thomas Berry, our summer programs for children have provided a unique opportunity for a small group of 12 children to make a deep personal connection to the natural world within the meadows, creeks, gardens and forests of a 165-acre earth sanctuary. Earth walks and creek walking are daily sources of joy and inspiration. Within the peace and beauty of an earth sanctuary, new eyes and ears awaken as the children create expressions out of their experiences with the earth. Mandalas, papermaking, nature journaling, universe flags and Native American flute are some of the eco-contemplative arts that enliven the rhythm of our days. Soul-centered rituals bring the children more deeply into a feeling of communion with each other and the natural world.

Contemplative Flute Music

We begin our programs with music played on a Native American flute. The music sets a tone for the day and is intended to have a peaceful, relaxing and calming effect on the listeners. The music often gives people a chance to come into stillness, presence and to breathe more evenly. The music is not a performance and is always original, unless a particular song is sung. Any instrument, including the human voice can be substituted. The music is offered with a feeling of gratitude, love and appreciation for all of creation. It is dedicated to the sun, moon, earth, clouds, birds, trees, plants, stones and to all of the people that are with us on the day of the program. An image of this “communion of subjects” is held in the heart while the music is played. The musician does not have to be a professional to play this kind of music. The effect of the music comes from the intention and feeling in the heart of the musician.

Children are often very moved by this kind of music and spontaneously share their experiences with us. Some children begin to notice the world around them in concert with the music, like smoke swirling around a log from the fire and leaves dancing on the trees. Some children say that they have felt the presence of God while others say the birds are singing along with the flute. Some children have commented about hearing something ancient in the music. Starting programs in this way creates a space for deeper listening.

Nature Mandalas

During our weeklong summer programs, we begin the day by creating mandalas. While one staff member greets families with a warm and welcoming presence as they arrive at the earth sanctuary treehouse, another staff member is sitting on the back porch waiting for each child to join her at a communal table.

As the children arrive one by one, they see that she has already begun her nature mandala for the morning. She invites the children to begin their own mandalas in the silence and peace of the earth sanctuary. This is a natural silence, a comfortable silence, and a non self-conscious silence. Silence has a gentle way of entering into what we are doing and suspending time, while giving the children a chance to be in each other's presence. During the mandala creations, silence enlarges the moment as the children become aware of the natural world that enfolds them.

Our staff member shares with the children that she is creating a circular design, and that she has started at the center of the paper. As she creates the mandala, she slowly moves to the outside of the circle. She tells them that images, symbols, or shapes may take form in their minds as they are drawing and that when this happens to her, she tries to draw those images on the paper. She also shares that sometimes feelings may arise in their hearts, and that they can acknowledge them and then let them go. This gives the children the opportunity to create from their own inner knowing. Children are given the chance to let go of their own egos for a moment and enter into an eco-contemplative way of being in the natural world.

This process allows them the space to commune with their own inner sanctuaries and the sounds of the outer sanctuary. The sounds of the birds, frogs, crickets, and sometimes the breeze in the trees surround them. At times, there may be soft flute, sitar, guitar, kalimba, or dulcimer live music to accompany the natural sounds. The presence that the children feel in the earth sanctuary sustains the silence as they create their own authentic nature mandalas.

This process also allows the children to feel a sense of community with the other children in the group and the natural world through the language of imagination. It allows the seed of imagination to be born and nurtured. The children are given the space throughout the week to cultivate their own seeds of imagination. This can be continued and followed into the next morning if the children are still working and need extra time. Some of the children add found objects from the earth walks to their mandalas and glue them to the paper.

Papermaking and Journals

Papermaking in our summer programs takes some preparation from the adults before the children start the process of making. It is ideal to have two adults setting up the screens, making the pulp, and getting materials organized.

Paper from the recycling bin is perfect for making pulp. Also paper from a shredder will work. The shredded paper is placed in a food processor or blender. Water is added and mixed until the paper turns to a pulp. The pulp is poured into a large flat container filled with water. Dried flowers are added to the mixture. Seeds can also be added and the paper can be planted to grow flowers or herbs at home.

The children take a screen and dip their screens into the pulp bath. The screens have wooden frames around them. Once they dip the screen down into the paper pulp, they bring it up and down again and again to get the right thickness. This process is intended to bring the children into the present moment and give children the freedom to go at nature's pace. It also allows children the opportunity to commune and form bonds with old and new friends while they are waiting to make paper.

Making the paper outside on the back porch, in the fresh air under a canopy of trees filled with frogs, butterflies and birds, brings us closer to the divine presence surrounding us. Bullfrogs, cricket frogs, wood frogs, and green frogs serenade us in intervals. Peace eagles (black vultures) glide in closer to get a better look. Blue lined skinks with reddish heads rest near our papermaking station. Joy permeates the air.

The water is then pressed out of the sheet of paper through several stages using wood blocks, felt, and a thick fiber paper. Then the paper is dried flat overnight. The next day the dried paper will become the cover of their journals. The children use recycled paper for the signatures, string and natural beads to bind their journals together. Some children take the paper home and enjoy looking at the paper as a work of art. Other children may want to press flower or herb seeds into the piece of paper while it is still wet and then make a card to give to someone special in their life so that he or she can plant it in a flowerpot or in a garden.

Universe Flags

The idea for making universe flags came from our eco-contemplative artist, Marnie Weigel:

My mother gave me these beautiful batik fabrics. I had no idea at the time what they would become. One day, I was at home creating and thinking of all kinds of ideas for the fabric. I started to think about flags around the world. I am particularly interested in prayer flags from Nepal. I love the idea that as they blow in the wind, they are sending prayers all around the world. I thought how wonderful it would be if children were given the chance to use their imagination and creativity to create a flag to celebrate the connection of their life with a magical moment in the natural world - a flag of gratitude for all life and creation and that is how the idea was born.

I thought of three very special moments in my life that I wanted to celebrate and honor. Over several weeks, I made three Universe Flags filled with meaningful symbols, shells, natural materials, and hand-made paper sewn to the batik fabric. I hand stitched the flag around a bamboo stick. Each flag represents a magical moment in my life that I have deep reverence for. All of these moments were connected to the natural world.

The first flag celebrated the wonderful Magical Garden at Timberlake Earth Sanctuary. The flag celebrated all the wonderful butterflies in the garden and a magical moment I experienced in the garden when I could hear the breeze beneath the wings of a butterfly flying over my head one morning.

The second flag honored the great and glorious ocean. I celebrated two special moments at the ocean with the moon and stars in the cosmos. I also celebrated all the seashells and each tiny life that lives in each one.

The third flag expressed my reverence and gratefulness for The Center for Education, Imagination, and the Natural World with a symbol of a spider web I created with vine and string. The web symbolizes life and our connection to all beings in the Universe. I remembered many magical moments noticing all the amazing spider webs at Timberlake Earth Sanctuary with the children in our day programs. There were iridescent, rainbow colors glistening in the web when the sunlight reflected off the web. A gentle breeze breathed through the web and created a delicate movement that suspended us in time. This moment allowed us to be in the present with our own breath and notice in amazement as the strength of the web changed and transformed into a living being. With deep noticing, we would see the beautiful spider that created her. There is also a beautiful stone sewn onto the fabric that was the stone I chose on a day of gratitude for The Center for Education, Imagination, and the Natural World and for all that have come together to make the dream real in the world. I traveled with this stone for months before I was called to sew it onto the flag. It represented the stability and grounding that The Center for Education, Imagination, and the Natural World has nurtured inside my own heart.

Each staff member makes a Universe Flag before the summer program begins. They bring their flags and share them with the children on the first day. After the staff members share the meaning and symbolism in their flags, the children are ready to get started on their own. Pinking shears, batik fabric of all colors, needles and thread, and an assortment of beads and natural materials are placed on the tables on the back porch to begin this communal creation with the natural world. We bring bamboo for them to sew their flags on and encourage them to find their own if they want to. One staff member plays guitar, sitar or a kalimba for us while the children work on creating their own flags. It is a two-and-a-half-day process, culminating in displaying the flags and then sharing them by hearing each child speak of the symbolism behind what he or she has created.

The act of creation can inspire related projects for the children. For example, one boy sewed two pairs of curtains for the Woodland Home, another boy sewed a quiver for hand sharpened arrows that he whittled, and other children created little “medicine bags” that were made out of small three-inch batik fabric circles tied at the top with string and filled with wishes, prayers, and feelings and other intangible substances. Some were filled with tobacco, lavender, flower petals, semi-precious stones, and tiny seashells. Tobacco is a traditional Native American offering symbolizing gratitude to the earth. They were ornately decorated with natural beads and worn around their necks or tied to their flags.

Heart Words and Secret Pals

Secret Pals has been a favorite activity during our weeklong summer programs. For Secret Pals, each child chooses the name of a child or staff member in the group from a bowl during the morning circle time following the contemplative morning arts that begin each day. Each person is invited to observe her secret pal throughout the day and to notice some of the things that make that person special and unique. At the ending circle of the day, each child shares what she has

learned about her secret pal, always with help from an earth guide if needed. Grade school age children love this ritual.

We discovered the Heart Words ritual for older children, ages 10 – 14, after being gifted with a bag of Hearthstones from the Sophia Center. Heart Words is a natural extension of our Secret Pals ritual that includes the natural world. The older children and adolescents choose a Heart Word and ponder how that word relates to nature and to humankind. At the end of the day, while we are gathered together for a closing circle, the children share some of the insights that have come to them throughout the day. Sometimes children get stuck, and other children chime in to give their perspective, which is always appreciated and generative. All of these rituals invite a kind of relational thinking and feeling with humankind and an invitation to extend that to the natural world. The Hearthstones contain 55 words etched on a natural heart-shaped clay piece: abundance, acceptance, awe, balance, beauty, believe, blessing, bliss, change, compassion, courage, delight, encourage, enjoy, excellence, faith, forgiveness, freedom, friendship, gentleness, grace, gratitude, healing, honesty, honor, hope, humor, imagine, integrity, joy, kindness, light, love, magic, Miracles Happen, openness, passion, patience, peace, play, power, praise, prosperity, recovery, respect, rest, serenity, strength, surrender, tenderness, transform, trust, welcome, wellness, willingness and wisdom. Sometimes questions arise as to the meaning of a word. If that is the case, the question of defining it is put to the group's wisdom. If there are still lingering questions, someone volunteers to look up the word when he/she gets home and to bring the definition back to the group the next day.

Mystery Bag Beholding

We have a large collection of all kinds of found objects from the natural world. We select enough for a group of children to choose from and put them all inside a bag. Some of the things that might be chosen with eyes closed could be a dinosaur tooth, a spear point, the inner ear bone of a whale, a miniature loofa, a crystal, a sea horse, a bit of fur, a seed pod, a feather, a fossilized shark tooth, or a shell. The children choose one thing and hold it in their hands with their eyes closed as they describe what they feel. After a while, they might take a guess as to what it is and then they open their eyes and see what they have held. Sometimes they know what they are holding, and other times it is a complete mystery! Middle School students especially like this activity.

Wishing Rock

Every landscape has special places that beckon to us to stop and stay awhile. We are always on the lookout for these kinds of places when we are sharing our practices with others. Timberlake Earth Sanctuary has a flat rock located right on the edge of a lake under an old Maple Tree. It was named the Wishing Rock a long time ago and there is a rustic sign in front of it. Hundreds and hundreds of children have made wishes there. This is one of the practices and places that gather silence. While one child is making a wish, the rest of the children wish that that child's wish will come true while they wait quietly for their turn. Wishes can be kept secret or spoken aloud. We are often touched by the spontaneous wishes for peace for people and for the earth.

Solo Walking and Processional Walking

This simple way of walking, in silence and with some distance between the people as they walk in a single file line, is a beautiful way to lead up to something special like a Gratitude Circle in a remote location, or for following a special event like a ceremony or dedication. It can also be used for calming down a rowdy and boisterous group of children on an earth walk.

We have engaged in this kind of walking in a wide range of Center programs. One summer a small group of children created a shrine in a beautiful place in the earth sanctuary amidst three trees. They designed and decorated it over several days. They decided to dedicate it to many of the world's wisdom traditions. They named it "The Three Tree Shrine". It was designed so that each person, no matter what their spiritual path, could kneel in silence on a bed of dried flowers inside of the three trees. After the dedication ceremony that the young teens led was completed, we all left in silence on a processional walk back to the treehouse.

Sometimes during an "Awakening to Nature" program when we have an overly active group of school children, we find a place in the forest that has a bend in the path that the children cannot see beyond or a boardwalk whose end is not in view. The earth guide walks to the end point around the bend and waits as the children walk alone and in silence to where the earth guide is waiting for them. The supporting adult stays behind and taps each child when it is her turn for the solo walk. Those who have completed the walk sit quietly and wait for each person to make the journey.

Gratitude Circle (with or without a talking stick or stone)

Any time of the day is a good time for a gratitude circle! We infuse all of our days with gratitude for each other and for all of creation through thought, word and deed. We begin each day with flute music that expresses gratitude and look for opportunities all throughout the day to share our gratitude for all of life, including each other. A gratitude circle is as simple as it sounds. Sitting together in a circle, in the natural world, we take turns going around the circle and expressing something that we are grateful for. With older students in our summer programs, this sharing can go on for a long time.