

## **Being, Beholding and Belonging: Eco-Contemplative Practices for Children and Young Adults**

### **Introduction**

*At the time I was eleven years old. My family was moving from a more settled part of a small southern town out to the edge of town where the new house was being built. The house, not yet finished, was situated on a slight incline. Down below was a small creek and there across the creek was a meadow. It was an early afternoon in late May when I first wandered down the incline, crossed the creek, and looked out over the scene. The field was covered with white lilies rising above the thick grass. A magic moment, this experience gave to my life something that seems to explain my thinking at a more profound level than almost any other experience I can remember. It was not only the lilies. It was the singing of crickets and the woodlands in the distance and the clouds in a clear sky . . .*

~ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*

In this “moment of grace,” Thomas Berry entered an inner place of belonging where he was at one with the universe – a place that brings with it a knowing that life is meaningful and whole.

The Center’s programs are designed to provide today’s children and young adults with their own “Meadow Across the Creek” moments that can serve as touchstones for their lives.

Center programs are based in a threefold practice of Being, Beholding and Belonging:

Being: bringing ourselves into stillness, quieting the chatter of our own minds

Beholding: engaging in practices that bring us into relationship with the natural world

Belonging: feeling a sense of oneness with the source of our own being

Through these practices, a feeling of connection to all living things arises within the children. New eyes and ears awaken. The selfhood of the child comes into being within the creative heart of the universe. Words of peace make themselves heard. Seeds of service to the world are sown.

In Part One, we provide a context for this way of working with children based on Thomas Berry’s call for a new courtesy toward the earth. In Part One, you will be introduced to the Center’s eco-contemplative practices.

In Part Two, we explore the Poetry of Nature.

In Part Three, we explore the art of empathetic listening with each other and with the earth.

In Part Four, we explore the contemplative arts and nature: contemplative music and contemplative visual arts that deepen a living bond of intimacy between children and the earth.

## Part I

### **Awakening to Nature: An Eco-contemplative Program for Children**

The Center’s “Awakening to Nature” programs are intended to foster reverence for the natural world, to develop the inner capacity to attend to the world around you, and to create a deep, personal connection with nature. The programs bring the inner lives of children into a new relationship with the beauty, wonder and intimacy of the natural world.

“Awakening to Nature” programs begin in a circle where children are invited to slow down and make themselves at home in nature. Guided earth walks follow, led by experienced Earth Guides, with groups of 8 eight children. The small size of the group and the “beholding” practices of the Center enable the children to enter into a living and loving relationship with the natural world. Throughout the changing seasons, children are invited to enter into silence and experience the fullness of each moment - to take in the sounds, the smells, the feel of the air, the colors and movements of the world around them.

Children then return to the circle where they enjoy a bag lunch together. The day ends with a heartwarming circle of reflection. The rhythm of the day enables the children to assimilate their experiences and to enter into community together as they share what touched them about the day.

### **Inner Preparation of the Earth Guide**

At the Center, we take great care in our approach to leading children into meaningful experiences with the natural world. Qualities of centeredness, loving attention, wonder, respect and reverence must be embodied by our Earth Guides before they can be imparted to the children.

Center Earth Guides complete our 2-year Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice program and then experience an Earth Guide apprenticeship that includes a consideration of the inner gesture of the Earth Guide, an introduction to the Center’s practices, an opportunity to practice the practices on the trails, and a review of the Rhythm of the Day for our Awakening to Nature Program. In the second phase of the apprenticeship, each new Earth Guide is given one or more opportunities to shadow an experienced Earth Guide before taking a group of children on an Earth Walk.

Throughout the year, the Director of Children’s Programs and our Earth Guides meet together after each Awakening to Nature program to share experiences from the day in order to deepen their understanding of all that is involved in bringing the child into being, beholding and belonging to the natural world.

It is also an expectation that our Earth Guides practice the practices in their daily lives between programs and find ways of making the practices their own so that they can be shared naturally with the group.

For public school programs, we all practice a way of working that speaks the language of love and communion, is not religious and does not alienate anyone. We keep careful notes after each program and refer to them before a repeat visit.

### **Preparing the Teachers**

We make every effort to meet with teachers/schools/principals that are new before a program takes place. After our introductory meeting, we work with a combined approach of snail-mail, e-mail and phone calls to contact each teacher. Phone calls preceding each visit include going over the content of our acknowledgement letter and more: rhythm of the day, length of the program, waivers, clothing (we always have back-ups), snacks, adult chaperones (limited to 3), pre-arranged groups of children, name tags and questions about any special needs.

### **Preparing the Adults That Join Us**

We ask the adults to follow the children's natural curiosity, bring up the tail end of the group and be there for the slower walkers, help us model the practices, help us maintain a focus on the children's discoveries by refraining from everyday conversation on the earth walks and to turn off their cell phones (we use ours for emergencies and program each others' numbers at the circle if needed). We ask the adults to take the time to notice nature themselves and to support the children's sense of wonder.

### **Inner Preparation on the Day of the Program**

#### **The Drive to Work**

On the way to work: no radio, notice the season of the year, the moon, the weather, the colors and the feeling of the day. Take this time to go through the rhythm of the day in our imaginations, section by section. Do we need a fire? Is it too cold to begin outdoors? What insect friends need protecting that day? (They will need a proper introduction!) What elements will be in the story that prepares the children for the Earth Walk? What names, dwellings, family relationships will be used in the story that will reflect the particular group of children? The story takes a form and a life of its own. What songs might be sung? What activities might we do after lunch?

#### **Before the Bus Comes**

Check the benches and lunch tables in warm weather for webs, check supplies, sit-upons, water and cups ready, trash can, recycle can and compost bucket, nature table put in center of the round room near the bathroom.

#### **Moment of Shared Silence Before the Bus Comes**

The Earth Guides stand together in silence and hold in trust that each child will receive what he or she needs today. Sometimes words are spoken, sometimes not.

## Welcoming and Beginning

### **The Arrival of the Bus**

The Director of Children's Programs boards the bus and welcomes the children while the lunches are unloaded. Warm welcome, so good to see them again. Who is new? Welcome! You have all grown so much! Then, one of the Earth Guides boards the bus and drives over with them to the parking place. They walk quietly down a woodland path, back to the fire circle to surprise us! We adults pretend that we do not hear them coming until the very last second. A tone is set.

### **Beginning the Day**

Once everyone is seated the Director of Children's Programs welcomes them again and introduces our Earth Guides. Then she takes out her flute and plays a welcoming song that she dedicates to everything that lives at the earth sanctuary, both seen and unseen, to them and to the sun, moon and stars. This may be a time for singing, if needed.

She notices how much they have changed and grown, and she might mention that she too has changed and grown in new ways. She asks them if the earth sanctuary is the same as it was the last time they came. She asks them what they remember from their last visit. This really helps the new students to feel more at ease.

Our beginning for newcomers is pretty much the same, except that we do not have the section of memories from past visits, and perhaps a little more time is included for addressing fears and for sharing the idea of a protected property and protecting all forms of life.

Then, our Director introduces the children to the idea of an earth sanctuary. It is a place where everything is safe and protected, including plants and insects. It is a place that will not be turned into a golf course or a housing development. Sanctuaries are found all over the world in all of the continents. She tells them that it is her job to protect everything and that she'll need their help. Will they help her? In conjunction with this subject we talk about what it means to be a guest. How does a guest behave in another's home? Respectfully. We are all guests in the earth sanctuary, including the Director. This is a time that children's fears bubble up and we look for every opportunity to address them. Daddy Long Legs. Moving webs carefully. Walking around ants. Modeling love and compassion at the fire circle.

We engage introductions to each other by introducing ourselves first and then one of our favorite animals (hopefully the teacher has remembered name tags!) We listen intently as each child speaks. There are no wrong answers. For older children, we ask them to tell a little bit about why they admire the animal they spoke about.

Snack and bathroom break (nature table inside by girl's bathroom) Please touch!

Regroup at the fire circle, settle down and prepare for earth walks with a story or an opportunity for a group mini-experience of some of the practices.

Divide into 3 groups of about 8 children each and two adults. Routes are chosen. It is important to know your trail well beforehand. Who is the leader? The Earth Guide! We will be walking slowly, at nature's pace, and we are very interested in what you notice!

### **The Earth Walk\***

#### **Being: Gathering Silence**

The practices themselves bring the children into a more peaceful space that allows them to slow down, focus outside of themselves and come into communion with life.

At the beginning of each earth walk we might gather together and center ourselves by feeling our feet rooted in the earth and becoming aware of the stars that are overhead. We take the time to breathe in and out with the trees. There is a sense of anticipation as we get ready to enter the canopy of forest. We invite the students to walk at nature's pace. We invite the students to walk with silence - to observe silence on the trails. We might ask the group why we walk with silence at the earth sanctuary. The answers serve as an inner guide that comes from the children themselves. If we feel that the word "silence" might be difficult for a particular group, we might simply ask the children to walk quietly and keep their voices down during the Earth Walk.

The Earth Guide role-models the silence on the trails. We do not ignore the children when they speak with us, or tell them to be quiet. We might smile, nod, and direct our focus out. We might tell them that we'd love to hear their story later, at lunch. The pace is slow. Earth Guides are at the front.

There are many ways to gather silence on the walk. The practices, especially the listening practice, can bring this about. The stillness of our bodies as we do the practices together is very quieting. Non-verbal communication during the Trail of Beauty and Behold practice foster this peace and silence. Silent Walking between two sticks brings a rowdy group into a quieter space. There is a way of walking back to the Treehouse, in a silent spaced processional, that brings about a profound peace. The ritual of a solo Marsh Bridge crossing can bring students into a quiet space of Being, Beholding, Belonging.

Every group is different, as is every day. The experience of silence is of a different quality with grades K – 2 compared with grades 3 – 8. The natural sense of wonder, joy, mystery and curiosity bring the children into a focused attention that brings them into periods of deep communion and moments of curiosity, wonder and joy. We strive to maintain a balance of attention to exuberance and quietude with the younger groups.

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\* We are indebted to Joseph Cornell for the seed thoughts for many of our practices, which we have adapted and made our own over many years with an eye always toward ways of working that cultivate soul capacities in the child.

## **Beholding: Deep Noticing, Trail of Beauty, Listening, Beholding**

### **Deep Noticing**

One of the first practices that we present to the children during our Earth Walks is Deep Noticing. We stop along the trail and invite the children to stand very still and to notice the particular place that they are in. We ask them to start by noticing movement, any movement at all, both large and small, high and low. During this brief period of time, the sounds and the smells and the air come to greet us and the moment is enlarged. We might add noticing as many different colors as can be seen and later include shapes of tree trunks and bark. Depending on the age of the group, we invite them to silently count on their fingers as they discover new movements. When this practice is over, we might invite the children to share their Deep Noticing. Noisier and more active groups appreciate this. If the practice has brought silence to us, we continue our journey without a need for speaking at that time.

### **Trail of Beauty**

This practice is done with partners. We begin by modeling the practice to the children ahead of time during our circle time or on the trail, emphasizing non-verbal communication as a means of directing their partner's attention to something interesting or to something beautiful. It is important to designate a beginning and ending point on your trail and to space the couples out evenly as you begin, so they are not all bunched together and have space to explore. Each child leads his/her partner to something beautiful and the partner notices it deeply, acknowledges when they are done (with a thumbs up or sparkle in the eye!) and then they take turns.

### **Listening**

Find a place where everyone can sit down comfortably. This could be on the side of a bridge or on a leafy floor. If it is damp or wet, we bring sit mats. We begin by asking the children if anyone has a problem with closing their eyes for a few minutes. This can be hard for younger children, and if it is, we show them how to cover their eyes with their hands. We take out a watch and explain that we will be still as a rock while we are listening, and we practice being rocks for a moment. Then we explain that we will be still and listening for all of the sounds around us, near and far, loud and soft, for one or two whole minutes. When the time is up, they will hear a soft whistle, which signals them to open their eyes. We invite them to open their eyes slowly and softly and to let their sight rest upon the first thing that catches their attention. Once again, if the group needs a little help with focus, they are invited to count on their fingers as they hear each new sound. At the end of this practice we bathe in the silence as long as possible without rushing to break it or going on to the next thing. Sharing is a wonderful way to deepen the Listening Practice.

### **Beholding**

We model this practice at circle time and/or during our Earth Walk.

In pairs, one person closes her eyes and allows herself to be guided to something to behold. The guiding partner says "Behold!" when just the right subject is discovered and the blind partner opens her eyes and beholds deeply, noticing every detail. Then she closes her eyes and brings the image back into her mind's/heart's eye for as long as she can. When she is ready, she opens her eyes and beholds it again. What did she notice the second time? This practice has to be done in a safe

location and adapted carefully to the age of your group. The language is carefully chosen for your intended age group.

### **Belonging: Expanding Circles**

Begin by selecting a site where you can see both close up and far into the distance. A pond or field is a good place to do this. Standing very still, imagine that you have a light in your heart (put your hands over your heart) that you can shine brightly whenever and wherever you want to. Tell the children that they will only see what their light is shining upon. Using a pond in this example, invite them to shine their light on everything between them and the edge of the pond. Do they notice any movement? Then invite them to shine their lights brighter out across the pond. What do they notice? (They answer this silently inside, not out loud!) Their light then shines out farther to the canopy of trees surrounding the pond, on into the sky and then, right through the atmosphere of the earth and out into the universe! Imagine the planets and the stars and the comets and the beautiful galaxies! We tell them that their light meets the light of the stars. And then they are invited to come back to their center, the way that they left, back through the universe, through the atmosphere of earth, over the tops of the trees, across the surface of the pond and into the grass and back into the heart of the traveler. And they are reminded that the light is always there.

### **Lunch Time**

All three groups converge after the Earth Walk at the fire circle! We practice the poem that we will say together before lunch before we sit down to eat.

After lunch we have free play by the dam. There is a lot of energy to run off. We might play animal games like Find Your Partner or Charades in groups. Adults tend to be tired at this time, so our attention is important to manage the group energy. It is important to offer a water source after recess.

### **Ending Circle**

Closing reflections are led either by the Director for the whole group or by each Earth Guide in smaller groups, depending on the age of the group. For the younger groups, the guide will recreate the earth walk to give the children some help in remembering something that was special for them. For the older groups, the Director will ask each child what was special for them.

We end with an echo ritual with gestures. Each child is asked to speak a word that captures his or her experience of the day and to accompany that word with a gesture as it is spoken. For example, the word joy might be spoken while the child lifts her hands to the sky. Then, the whole group is invited to echo the word and gesture. When we have come full circle, we go back around with the gesture only, one by one around the circle with the whole group echoing back.

### **Waving Goodbye**

We stand together and wave and smile and sign I LOVE YOU as the bus pulls away.

### **Clean Up**

We clean the facility where our programs take place, leaving it as we found it.

### **Looking Back on the Day**

Our staff meets after every program to share their experiences of the practices and the responses from the children during the small group Earth Walk. This is very illuminating and gives us new ideas to explore and new language to help us in sharing this work with our diverse populations. We also share our perceptions of the adults' participation during the Earth Walks.

Our aim is to make ourselves deeply available to a sacred universe by offering loving attention to the natural world and to bring ourselves into that deeper Presence that surrounds us. Unlike many mindfulness practices in which “attention” is a goal in itself, in our practices the intention is “relationship” and “resonance”. We behold the natural world in a deeply listening and receptive way. We behold with a loving eye and an open heart. Our practices might be viewed as “holding at bay” our habitual ways of “knowing about” and accumulating information. Through these practices we are awakening the unitive imagination, that more subtle faculty which unifies and moves us beyond the dualism of an I-It relationship with the world. We are discovering our own inner capacities to open to life in new ways. We are attuning ourselves to the soul of the world.