



# Chrysalis

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*Newsletter of  
The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World  
at  
Timberlake Farm*

*When I'm back in nature after months of walking around on concrete and living in boxes, I feel a palpable internal shift. It doesn't happen right away; I have to settle into it. Sometimes it takes a while to shake off the urban frenzy. But inevitably, that serenity – that stillness – takes hold, and when it comes at last, it's like taking a deep breath and saying, "Oh yeah. I forgot about this."*

*Losing something is one thing; forgetting what you've lost is something else. Maybe I shouldn't generalize from my personal experience, but I do believe that our civilization has come perilously close to forgetting what we've lost and then forgetting that we've lost it.<sup>1</sup>*

~ Al Gore

Dear Reader,

In his compelling book and movie, *An Inconvenient Truth*, Al Gore paints a vivid picture of the human estrangement from the natural world and its consequences for both the human and the Earth. At the heart of the matter is Gore's understanding that "the relationship we have to the natural world is not a relationship between 'us' and 'it.' It is us, and we are of it."<sup>2</sup>

If we were to remember our deep belonging to the natural world, it would be unthinkable to render it harm. We would, as human beings, find ways to evolve in the direction of compassionate intelligence and love.

But, as Gore points out, there is a great forgetting. While our ingenuity has enabled us to develop technologies that might allow us to live harmoniously with nature, our consciousness of belonging has been lulled to sleep. In our technological and fast-paced world, the capacities that enable us to feel a connection to the heart of the universe lie dormant.

Forgetting and remembering. What, we might well ask, would contribute to a remembering of our essential reciprocity with the natural world? What might support a more loving relationship between the modern human being and nature? How might a bond of intimacy with nature be nurtured in the human community?

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<sup>1</sup>Gore, Al. *An Inconvenient Truth*. Emmaus, PA: Rodale Press, 2006, p. 160.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, p. 161.



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It is instructive to read an account by Thomas Berry of a moment in his childhood where he felt such a connection to a meadow near his home:

*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 . . . .*<sup>3</sup>

This childhood memory, it turns out, is more common than we might think. Edith Cobb, in her groundbreaking book *The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood*, documented similar accounts in autobiographies of creative individuals from antiquity to the twentieth century. More recently, a deep resonance between the child and nature is revealed in Edward Hoffman's *Visions of Innocence: Spiritual and Inspirational Experiences of Childhood*, Robert Coles' *The Spiritual Life of Children*, and Tobin Hart's *The Secret Spiritual World of Children*.

Through these accounts, we see that children readily sense the inner qualities of the world around them. They engage in a heartfelt presence to the inner qualities of the natural world that is at one remove from action of any kind. As Edith Cobb says, the joy expressed in these childhood accounts "is the joy of recognition, a delighted awareness that knowing and being are in some way coincident and continuous within a larger process."<sup>4</sup>

While these experiences of presence come naturally to children, they are not generally nurtured in the culture. Yet, these are the very experiences that prevent us from "forgetting what we've lost and then forgetting that we've lost it."

<sup>3</sup> Berry, Thomas. *The Great Work: Our Way Into The Future*. New York: Bell Tower, 1999, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> Cobb, Edith. *The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1977, pp. 32-33.

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The mission of the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World is to bring to life a new vision of the relationship between the inner life of the child and the beauty, wonder and intimacy of the universe. Since the onset of our work in the year 2000, we are frequently met with the response that our programs must be for the youngest children, for surely they outgrow the need for a sense of wonder once they enter school.

This is a serious misunderstanding of the crossroads that we find ourselves at as a culture. The remembering that is now called for is a remembering that must permeate every stage of childhood, young adulthood, and adulthood. It is a remembering that will, ultimately, transform our understanding of what it means to “know” the world. It is a remembering that will infuse our more abstract ways of knowing with a more qualitative and compassionate cognition.

In this issue of *Chrysalis*, it gives us the greatest pleasure to announce a new Center project, “The Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice.” Partnered by the national organization Hooked on Nature, the project will be an intensive two-year co-research with a group of twenty educators interested in nurturing the interior life of the child and young adult in relationship to the natural world.

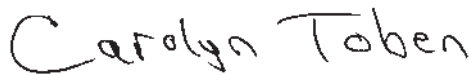
Also in this issue, we offer Jessica Towle’s final research paper for her BA at Prescott College, “A Sense of the Sacred in Education.” Through a study of Montessori education, Waldorf education and the Ridge and Valley Charter School in rural New Jersey, Jessica explores the question of whether the institution of education can offer children a way of experiencing the sacred aspect of the Earth.

Finally, in “Where the Sense of Place Thickened,” Andrew Levitt gives an account of a moment in the natural world where “unexpected connections were made between time and space” that will long be remembered by the students in his ninth grade English class.

The year 2006 has brought many blessings to the Center. We have been selected by Hooked on Nature to be one of ten national sites recognized for its work on the child/nature reunion. The TOLEO Foundation has given a three-year grant to continue our Special Design program in “Judaism and the Natural World” with B’Nai Shalom Day School in Greensboro, NC. And many individuals and foundations have come forward to support our annual fund and sustainability circle. For all this, we are deeply grateful.

In closing, we want to share you with a poignant moment on the occasion of a visit to the Earth Sanctuary by the second and fifth grade classes of B’Nai Shalom. A group of children were gathered in a grove of trees and asked to listen to what a particular “tree pal” wanted us to hear. David, a fifth grader, returned to the circle saying, “My tree said: ‘Tell them to remember.’”

With warm regards,



Carolyn Toben,  
Co-Director



Peggy Whalen-Levitt,  
Co-Director

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

Since its beginnings in 2000, The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World has worked closely with ecotheologian Thomas Berry to re-imagine the child’s relationship with the natural world. Seminal to these conversations is the following quote from Thomas Berry:

*There is a certain futility in the efforts being made – truly sincere, dedicated, and intelligent efforts – to remedy our environmental devastation simply by activating renewable sources of energy and by reducing the deleterious impact of the industrial world. The difficulty is that the natural world is seen primarily for human use, not as a mode of sacred presence primarily to be communed with in wonder, beauty and intimacy. In our present attitude the natural world remains a commodity to be bought and sold, not a sacred reality to be venerated. The deep psychic shift needed to withdraw us from the fascination of the industrial world and the deceptive gifts that it gives us is too difficult for simply the avoidance of its difficulties or the attractions of its benefits. Eventually, only our sense of the sacred will save us.<sup>1</sup>*

In considering the education of children and young adults in our culture, we have come to believe that this “deep psychic shift” that Thomas Berry refers to is the central task of our time. To what extent does the schooling of children contribute to their view of the natural world as a commodity? How might we create a context within which children awaken to the wonder, beauty and intimacy of the natural world? What might be done to restore a sense of the natural world as a sacred presence in the lives of children? These are the questions that have concerned us.

In response to these questions, the Center proposes a two-year pilot project entitled “The Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice,” designed to prepare educators to (1) develop capacities to nurture the deep inner faculties of imagination and intuition in children, and (2) create contexts within which children are given the opportunity to develop a bond of intimacy with the natural world.

For the purposes of this proposal, the term “educator” is used generally to describe any adult entrusted with the care of children. We propose to work with a group of twenty educators intensively over a two-year period. The group will be comprised of teachers, parents, child psychologists, guidance counselors, art educators, and others who are entrusted with the care of children and who indicate a deep interest in creating a new vision of the relationship between the inner life of the child and the natural world.

Viewed as a co-research among participants, one of the goals of the project is to begin to understand how the education of children might embody a shift away from a view of the world as a collection of objects toward an experience of the world as a communion of subjects. How, as Thomas Berry says, can children be given the opportunity to know the natural world as a “sacred reality to be venerated?” In order for this shift to take place, what qualities and sensibilities must the adults working with children bring to their education? What learning and natural environments support such a change? What is the image of the human being and of the natural world in education? What is the view of the future that guides education? These are some of the questions we hope to address in a final report of the project. We also expect new questions to emerge from the process.

We envision a threefold program as follows:

(1) In the Fall of 2006, the project will begin on October 7, 2006 with a day-long retreat entitled “Presence” in which educators will engage in a process of reconnecting to the natural world themselves through ecostories, solo time in the natural world, and beginning a practice of keeping a nature journal throughout the year. Central to our way of working with educators is the belief that the sensibility of the educator is the single most important factor in bringing children into a deeper connection to nature. Co-Directors Carolyn Toben and Peggy Whalen-Levitt will lead this retreat.

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(2) Following this personal experience, the educators will engage in a series of three retreats intended to introduce them to different perspectives on the inner life of the child in relation to the natural world. The following presenters have agreed to participate in these retreats:

Autumn Retreat (November 11, 2006): **Natural Play and the Interior Life of the Child**

“Children live through their senses. Sensory experiences link the child’s exterior world with their interior hidden, affective world. Since the natural environment is the principal source of sensory stimulation, freedom to explore and play with the outdoor environment through the senses in their own space and time is essential for healthy development of an interior life.”

~ Robin Moore

Presenters:

**Robin Moore**, landscape designer, Co-Founder of the Natural Learning Initiative and co-author of *Natural Learning: The Life of an Environmental Schoolyard*.

**Nilda Cosco**, Co-Founder of the Natural Learning Initiative

Winter Retreat (February 24, 2007): **Unveiling the Child’s Spiritual Connection to the Cosmos**

“Children perceive the world in a deeper way than we may have come to believe. Their inner senses may reveal a world that is vastly richer than we may have imagined.”

~ Tobin Hart

Presenter:

**Tobin Hart**, psychologist, Founder of ChildSpirit Institute, and author of *The Secret Spiritual World of Children*.

Spring Retreat (April 28, 2007): **The Elemental Imagination and the Education of Children**

“With so much contemporary education stifling . . . solitary learning – asking of children too often only those questions that require quantifiable answers – we lose something of our original knowledge. We are made to forget the essential relationship between our thinking and feeling, and the life forces existing throughout the natural world.

~ Richard Lewis

Presenter:

**Richard Lewis**, Founder of the Touchstone Center for Children in New York City and author of *Living by Wonder: The Imaginative Life of Childhood*.

The “Rhythm of the Day” for each retreat will be as follows:

Opening and Introductions  
Presentation  
Solos on earth sanctuary trails  
Lunch  
Dialogue  
Closing

This retreat format, refined over the last six years at the Center, is designed to bring seed thoughts into a circle of participants, to include communion with the natural world as an essential dimension of thinking about the natural world, and to nurture dialogue through which new thoughts surface and are made visible.

(3) Finally, the participants will meet on June 27 and 28, 2007 for a two-day Summer retreat entitled “Practice” in which they will envision a new practice of nurturing the inner life of the child in relationship to the natural world within their own context of educating children. Center staff will work closely with each educator during the following school year to support and develop these emergent practices. During the second year of the pilot program, educators will be asked to keep a diary in which they describe the practice they are initiating, particularly the children’s responses to what they are offering. They will be guided in this diary-keeping process by an introduction to ethnographic method. In the Summer of 2008, participants will reunite for a sharing of practices.

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Center staff will conduct an ongoing evaluation of the project through in-depth reports on each phase of the project based on observation, interviews with educators, and analysis of educator journals and diaries. Recognizing that the relationship between the inner life of the child and the natural world eludes quantitative measurement, we will use educator diaries as an effective means of creating a thick description of situated practice. In our evaluation of the program, we will be assessing the program format itself, as well as the practices that emerge from the process. A culminating manuscript will document the entire process and serve as a model for replicating the program in the future.

The goal of the pilot project is to create a model for working with educators that enables them to develop capacities for participating in the psychic shift needed in our time away from educating children into a view of the natural world as a “commodity to be bought and sold” and toward an educational practice that allows children to experience the natural world as “a sacred presence primarily to be communed with in wonder, beauty and intimacy.” Based on the pilot project, the Center expects to become a leading advocate and model of a view of educational practice in which the imagination and intuition, in all their unifying capacities, are seen as central to the development of a mutually enhancing relationship between the human and the natural world. Such a view, if practiced at all levels of learning, can begin to change our understanding of the role we play within this life-bearing process we know as “nature.” Looking to the future, the Center has the potential to become a national and international resource – a remarkable gestating environment for reflection and practice that can lead to practical outcomes affecting the child, the natural world, and the culture at large.

We invite you to consider being a part of this exciting project. Applications may be downloaded at our website, [www.beholdnature.org](http://www.beholdnature.org). For further information, please call the Center at (336) 449-0612.



Photo courtesy of Annie Dwyer

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# A Sense of the Sacred in Education

by  
Jessica Towle

*Jessica Towle began an apprenticeship at the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World in the Fall of 2000 at an Earth Guides Retreat led by Thomas Berry. Over the past six years, Jessica has continued her relationship with the Center through work and study. Through an arrangement with Prescott College, Thomas Berry and Center Co-Directors Carolyn Toben and Peggy Whalen-Levitt have served as mentors for Jessica's coursework toward a BA degree. The following article is Jessica's culminating research paper for Prescott, written under the mentorship of Center Co-Director Peggy Whalen-Levitt.*

## The Great Divorce

By the time I was seventeen and graduated from high school, I realized that humans had unintentionally split the world apart. I saw that the sacred had been taken out of the Earth and the Earth had been taken out of the sacred. It was as if, for a period of time, my vision completely changed and all I could see was the pain of this reality. I liked to call it the great divorce, because I saw all splitting apart as coming from this source. My intense need to reunite in myself that which was split apart led me to Genesis Farm and, eventually, to cultural historian Thomas Berry. In Thomas Berry, I found someone who understood what had been missing from my education. In an article entitled "Our Children: Their Future," Thomas writes, "Our children need to understand the meaning and grandeur and sacredness of the earth as revelatory of the deep mysteries and meaning of the world."<sup>1</sup> Thomas elaborates on this theme throughout his work, perhaps nowhere more eloquently than in his introduction to a collection of writings by Thomas Merton, *When Trees Say Nothing*. There, Thomas makes it clear that the development of a sense of the sacred is the fundamental, essential change needed in our time:

*There is a certain futility in the efforts being made - truly sincere, dedicated, and intelligent efforts - to remedy our environmental devastation simply by activating renewable sources of energy and by reducing the deleterious impact of the industrial world. The difficulty is that the natural world is seen primarily for human use, not as a mode of sacred presence primarily to be communed with in wonder, beauty and intimacy. In our present attitude the natural world remains a commodity to be bought and sold, not a sacred reality to be venerated. The deep psychic shift needed to withdraw us from the fascination of the industrial world and the deceptive gifts that it gives us is too difficult for simply the avoidance of its difficulties or the attractions of its benefits. Eventually, only our sense of the sacred will save us.<sup>2</sup>*

In this research paper, I will explore the following thesis: In order to reveal the depth of how to participate in this psychic shift, the institution of education needs to offer children a way of experiencing the sacred aspect of the Earth. The question I would like to offer for this research paper is: "Is it possible to give a child a sense of this inherent 'meaning, grandeur and sacredness of the earth as revelatory of the deep mysteries and meaning of the world' within the institution of education; are there forms of schooling that are conveying this somehow? I will address this question by looking at three forms of schooling that my preliminary research has led me to consider: Montessori, Waldorf, and the new Ridge and Valley Charter School in Warren County, New Jersey. I will attempt to describe the way in which the sacred is taken up in each of these approaches, to offer a comparative analysis, and to conclude with my own imagination for the future. First, however, let me consider some of the obstacles to introducing a sense of the sacred in education.

The nation is currently engaged in a public debate over Darwinian evolution vs. Intelligent Design. Proponents of Intelligent Design want to make sure that students learn that evolution via the Darwinian approach is just a theory that should be examined critically and conscientiously like any other theory and not regarded as fact. They believe that Darwinian evolutionists are missing an important aspect of evolution: the Intelligent Designer. They believe that this universe is too complex to be random.<sup>3</sup> At the other

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<sup>1</sup>Berry, Thomas. "Our Children, Their Future," *Chrysalis* (Spring 2004), p.8

<sup>2</sup>Berry, Thomas. Foreword, *When Trees Say Nothing* by Thomas Merton, edited by Kathleen Diegnan, Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, pp. 18-19.

<sup>3</sup>Raffaele, Martha, "Divided by Design," *Greensboro News & Record*, November 2, 2005, p. A2.

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end of the spectrum, there are scientists who believe that the insertion of the concept of Intelligent Design next to the theory of evolution in science books undermines the status of science in this culture and also brings ideas that are not credible to science into the scientific domain, therefore weakening the practice of science itself.<sup>4</sup> This type of dualistic thinking makes it challenging to present the idea of the sacred aspect of the Earth for fear of entering into the complex dilemma of the separation of church and state.

In this paper I will not expand on this issue, but rather recognize that as a culture we often view science and religion as being irreconcilable. As a result of this, we often fail to see beyond the dualism of reverential thinking and rational thinking as being diametrically opposed. This creates a climate in which a sense of the Earth as sacred is a taboo subject in schools. In an effort to move beyond this impasse, I will look at three different educational institutions that have maintained integrity and awareness around this complex issue of science and religion, thereby creating a context in which the child can experience the grandeur and sacredness of the earth. Although there are other schools that might have been considered, I have chosen to limit the focus of this paper to two established forms of schooling, Montessori and Waldorf, and one new charter school, The Ridge and Valley Charter School in Warren County, New Jersey. As I consider these forms of schooling, I will not attempt to be comprehensive, but rather will focus on those aspects of each philosophy of education that seem to shed the most light on how children are brought into a sense of the Earth as sacred.



A distinguishing characteristic of Montessori schools, for example, is the concept of Cosmic Education. Maria Montessori, the first female doctor in Italy and the founder of Montessori schools, was invited by the Theosophical Society to lecture in India. While traveling and lecturing there, Maria and her son Mario (an advocate of her teachings, and also her translator) were interned from 1939 to 1946 by orders of the British government because of their status as citizens of fascist Italy. During this seven year period, Maria, then 70, came in contact with several religions outside of her own Roman Catholic upbringing. While maintaining her own religious beliefs, Maria was open to the wisdom found in each religion. She and Mario spent time with many people, especially children who were exposed to cosmologies other than their own that contained a deep sensitivity to the profound sacredness of the universe. During this time, they traversed a very rural, mountainous part of India where they had prolonged exposure and contact with the natural world. This, along with the growing relationship to the Theosophical Society, seems to have influenced the development of the concept of “Cosmic Education” which was birthed in those years.<sup>5</sup>

Cosmic Education seeks to give a child the largest educational context available, the universe. After first discovering the universe in its totality, then moving through the diversity of life forms, including the galaxies and planets, the earth and waters, the elements, creatures, plants, and microbes, etc. the child is more aware of his or her place in the universe. Michael and D’Neil Duffy, authors of *Children of the Universe: Cosmic Education in the Montessori Elementary Classroom*, state that “Cosmic Education is intended to help each of us search for our cosmic task as a species and as individuals. To do this, we must understand ourselves in context. It is only against the background of our place in the universe, our relationship to other living organisms, and our understanding of human unity within cultural diversity, that we can attempt to answer the question ‘who am I?’”<sup>6</sup> It is with this question that education begins. Montessori believed that this was not only an appropriate question for education to consider, but that it should be the central question. She believed that the only way to explore this question properly was from the largest contextual reality available, the Universe.

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<sup>4</sup> Nichols, Peter, “Creative License: A Biologist and a Philosopher Dissect a Pseudoscience,” *Penn Arts and Sciences*, Fall 2005, pp. 14-17.

<sup>5</sup> Duffy, Michael and D’Neil, *Children of the Universe: Cosmic Education in The Montessori Elementary School Classroom*, Hollidaysburg, PA: Parent Child Press, 2002, pp. 3-4.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. 6.



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Montessori saw the universe as a harmonious and ordered creation, with each being having cosmic significance within the whole. She believed in a cosmic plan that served the “great Purpose of Life,”<sup>7</sup> and thought it more significant to show a child awe and wonder through evolutionary dynamism, rather than facts about evolution itself. Montessori saw the universe as revealing a sacred dimension in its unfolding. This mystical interpretation gives a child the sense that the world he or she dwells in is inherently revelatory of the sacred dimension of the universe. By putting a child in front of the immensity and intimacy of the universe, there is a sense that the child is participating in a deep cosmic unfolding. With the idea of the cosmic task, not only does the child feel like he or she is partaking in a venerated event, but that the human has a very distinct and important role, and so does that child. There is meaning everywhere, purpose is imbedded into matter itself, there are no mistakes. This is how the child can answer the question “who am I;”<sup>8</sup> this is how the child finds an identity.

Maria Montessori seems to have understood the very thing that mathematical cosmologist Brian Swimme is trying to convey today. In an interview by Joy Turner in *Montessori Life*, he says, “I’m convinced that if we begin to have a sense of our planetary and even cosmic significance, then we’ll see that it’s absolutely necessary for us to teach children a sense of the whole and of the universe, because they’re never going to get any sense of our true role here unless we do.”<sup>9</sup> When asked about how he came across the Montessori theory of education, Swimme points back to cultural historian Thomas Berry, with whom he wrote the book *The Universe Story*. In the same interview, Swimme recalls a moment when Berry calls him on the phone, very excitedly and said “Brian you have got to go out and get *To Educate the Human Potential* by Maria Montessori (1948). It’s our book, but she wrote it 50 years before we began! It’s a good thing we didn’t know about her, because it would have taken away our enthusiasm for the project!”<sup>10</sup> Montessori, Swimme and Berry see the universe as being the central cosmology for the child. Reflecting upon Brian Swimme’s book *The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos*, Montessori educator Joy Turner observes “that today’s children do get initiated into the universe, but sitting around the fire listening to stories has been replaced by sitting in the TV room and being inundated by commercial advertising.”<sup>11</sup> Swimme suggests that the antidote to this technological enculturation is to “inspire awe for the beauty of the universe, in children and parent alike.”<sup>12</sup> It is with this insight that Maria Montessori developed Cosmic Education.



## Steiner’s Phenomenology

While Montessori developed her views on Cosmic Education in the mid-twentieth century, the Austrian philosopher Rudolph Steiner initiated Waldorf Education in 1919 when he was asked to create a school for the children of the Waldorf cigarette factory in Stuttgart, Germany. In order to fully appreciate the ways in which Waldorf Education brings children into a sense of the Earth as sacred, it is helpful to consider the experiences that shaped Steiner’s own relationship to nature.

As a young student, Steiner befriended an herb gatherer named Felix Koguzki who had a profound influence on his thinking about the natural world. Steiner describes Felix as “a simple man of the people” in whom “it was possible to speak about the spiritual world as with someone of experience.”<sup>13</sup> Felix was uneducated in the usual sense of the word, however Steiner perceived in Felix a man who was deeply connected to the spiritual dimension of the natural world. Steiner says about Felix:

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<sup>7</sup> Wolf, Aline D. *Nurturing the Spirit in Non-Sectarian Classrooms*, Hollidaysburg, PA: Parent Child Press, 1996, p. 90.

<sup>8</sup> Duffy, p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Turner, Joy, “The Universe Story: A Conversation with Brian Swimme,” *Montessori Life*, Spring 1999, p. 28.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>13</sup> Steiner, Rudolf. *Rudolf Steiner: An Autobiography*, Blauvelt, NY: Steinerbooks, 1977, p. 60.

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“One soon realized that he read books only because he was seeking in others what he already knew. What he read did not satisfy him. He gave the impression of being simply the mouthpiece for a spiritual content seeking utterance from hidden worlds. When with him, one could enter deeply into nature’s secrets. On his back he carried the bundle of healing herbs; in his heart he carried the results of what he had won from nature’s spirituality while gathering them.”<sup>14</sup>

It was in these early encounters with Felix that Steiner seems to have developed a sense of the more profound aspect of the Earth. Felix became a doorway through which Steiner was able to see into the sacred dimension of the natural world. This led Steiner to pay closer attention to his own study of philosophy. In his words, “It was of deep concern to me that none of the philosophies I studied could be developed into spiritual insight.”<sup>15</sup>

Later, between the ages of 21 and 35, Steiner took on the project of editing the scientific writings of Johann Wolfgang Van Goethe. This experience had a deep effect on Steiner, who had already become discontent with the reductionist tendencies of natural science. In his introduction to Steiner’s book, *Nature’s Open Secret: Introductions to Goethe’s Scientific Writings*, John Barnes suggests that Steiner’s study of Goethe led him to a whole new way of knowing the natural world that includes, rather than excludes, a spiritual dimension:

*Through his study of Goethe’s science, Steiner laid the foundations for a scientific worldview that opens itself to the rich qualities of the sense-perceptible world and comes to see them as expressions of creative spiritual principles.*<sup>16</sup>

Based on his Goethean studies, Steiner concluded that a new approach to knowing the world was called for in our time; a qualitative and participatory approach in which the human being would come to know the natural world as an “expression of creative spiritual principles.”

If the sensory world is an expression of spiritual principles, how might the human being come to know it? Steiner believed that it was in the realm of the soul, through the cultivation of inner capacities, that children could truly enter into knowing the natural world. He says:

*At first glance, it is not easy to believe that feelings of reverence and respect are in any way connected with knowledge. This is because we tend to see cognition as an isolated faculty that has no connection whatsoever with anything else going on in our souls. Thus we forget that it is the soul that cognizes.*<sup>17</sup>

The Waldorf approach to schooling is based on this idea that “it is the soul that cognizes.” Therefore, Waldorf education was created in such a way that it directs children to their own inner capacities in order to know the world. As Steiner says, “the Waldorf school does not want to educate, but to awaken.”<sup>18</sup>

To invite the soul into the process of cognition and to remind the children that their lives are embedded in a sacred cosmos, Waldorf schools begin the day with what is known as “The Morning Verse.” The Morning Verse is recited by the children in unison at the beginning of each day in order to set a reverential tone. The same verse is recited daily throughout the lower grades, while a different one is recited with the upper grade students. The verse encourages a feeling of reverence toward the natural world which opens the door to a sense of the sacred in the child for the day. According to Waldorf educator Martyn Rawson, the morning verse is a practice “in which humanity’s spiritual connection to the kingdoms of nature is stressed.”<sup>19</sup> Through this daily practice, children are brought into a loving relation to the cosmos.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 60

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p.62

<sup>16</sup> Barnes, John. “Introduction” in Rudolf Steiner, *Nature’s Open Secret: Introductions to Goethe’s Scientific Writings*, Great Barrington, Anthroposophic Press, 2000, p. xi.

<sup>17</sup> Steiner, Rudolf. *How to Know Higher Worlds*, Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1994, p. 22.

<sup>18</sup> quoted in M.C. Richards, *Toward Wholeness: Rudolf Steiner Education in America*, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1980, p.63.

<sup>19</sup> Martyn Rawson, “The Human Being is the Archetype of All Creation,” in *Waldorf Education: Exhibition Catalogue of the 44th Session of the International Conference on Education* (Stuttgart, Freunde der Erziehungskunst, 1994), p 21.

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## Morning Verse for the Four Lower Classes

The sun with loving light  
Makes bright for me each day;  
The soul with spirit power  
Gives strength unto my limbs;  
In sunlight shining clear  
I reverence, O God,  
The strength of humankind,  
That thou so graciously  
Hast planted in my soul,  
That I with all my might  
May love to work and learn.  
From Thee come light and strength,  
To Thee rise love and thanks.

## Morning Verse for Higher Classes

I look into the world;  
In which the sun shines,  
In which the stars sparkle,  
In which the stones lie,  
The living plants are growing,  
The animals are feeling,  
In which the human soul  
Gives dwelling for the spirit;  
I look into the soul  
Which lives within myself.  
God's spirit weaves in light  
Of sun and human soul,  
In world of space, without,  
In depths of soul, within.  
God's spirit, 'tis to Thee  
I turn myself in prayer,  
That strength and blessing grow  
In me, to learn and work.<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, the Waldorf day ends with a verse at the closing bell. In this way, the Waldorf day is framed by a sense of the sacred of the human within the cosmos:

## Prayer at the Evening Bell

To wonder at Beauty,  
To watch over Truth  
To esteem what is noble,  
To resolve on the Good:  
It leads human beings  
To Aims in their life,  
To Right in their action,  
To Peace in their feeling,  
To Light in their thinking;  
And teaches them trust  
In the working of God  
In all that exists:  
In cosmic worlds,  
In depths of soul.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Steiner, Rudolf, *Prayers for Parents and Children* (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1995), pp. 45-47.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

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One way of connecting the depth of soul with cosmic worlds in Waldorf schools is to bring children into relationship with animals and plants through the imagination. A foundational belief of Waldorf education is, as Teilhard de Jardin says: “In the consciousness of each one of us, evolution has a perception of itself.”<sup>22</sup> Steiner believed that in the human lives the archetype for all creation. In the creativity of every human lives a particular expression of the entire cosmos. Every human essentially has the capacity to perform the functions that are represented among the creatures of the earth. By bringing children into a living imagination of the gesture of each animal, “children experience through strong identification a deep connection to the animal kingdom, a relationship which later can transform into a profound sense of responsibility and stewardship.”<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, Waldorf education nurtures in children an experience of indwelling in the plant world. In her book, *Toward Wholeness: Rudolf Steiner Education in America*, M. C. Richards describes the Waldorf approach as follows:

*Like other artists, educators rediscover spirit through turning to the physical world. . . . Steiner directs our attention outward, to every flower, every animal, every person. We are to look upon the plant not merely externally, but to participate in all its processes, so that our thinking joins in the life of the external world. We are to sink into the plant to feel how gravity goes down the root into the earth, how formative forces unfold above ground; we are to feel from the inside the blooming and fruiting.*<sup>24</sup>

By virtue of joining the plant on its own journey, the child is developing new capacities of perception and a way of knowing the plant as an expression of creative spiritual principles.

Waldorf education is based on a radically different epistemology than most American education for children. According to Walter Hiller, “a phenomenological approach to natural sciences and the humanities plays a major role in Waldorf education.”<sup>25</sup> This means that knowledge and understanding are rooted in perception and experience at the soul level. At the heart of this phenomenological approach is the question “how do children experience the world?”<sup>26</sup> The role of the teacher in guiding the child’s developing reciprocity with the world is central. According to Hiller, “the meaningful experiences the world has to offer will be discovered if those working with children realize their task of being temporary windows through which the child can look out into the world and find questions rising within.”<sup>27</sup> In small children, the emphasis in Waldorf education is on developing the senses. As they grow older, the children reflect on what they have perceived. Waldorf schools, therefore, attempt to create an atmosphere where both perception and reflection can be nurtured – where head, heart and hand are interwoven and where the “world of space, without” and the “depths of soul, within” are reunited in an unbroken whole.



## The Ridge and Valley Charter School’s Earth Literacy

While Montessori and Waldorf schooling are forms of independent education, there are new initiatives in the public sector that show promise of bridging the divide between the sacred and the Earth. In rural New Jersey, for example, a group of dedicated parents and community board members have worked diligently for the past six years to create a school for children that reflects the deeper consciousness that they believe is necessary for moving into the future in a “mutually enhancing” way. The publicly funded Ridge and Valley Charter School, named after the bioregion it dwells in, opened its doors in 2004 to the first group of K-8 students. Ridge and Valley has been greatly influenced by the work of Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme, as well as Genesis Farm, a center for Earth Literacy, which many of the parents and board members have been connected to and inspired by.

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<sup>22</sup> Rawson, p. 20.

<sup>23</sup> Rawson, p. 21.

<sup>24</sup> Richards, p. 79.

<sup>25</sup> Walter Hiller, “Learning to Love and to Know the World As It Is,” *Waldorf Education: Exhibition Catalogue on the Occasion of the 44th Session of the International Conference on Education of UNESCO in Geneva* (Stuttgart: Freunde der Erziehungskunst, 1994), p. 26.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27

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The charter school was developed with Earth Literacy as its core value. Earth Literacy, as described by Miriam McGillis, founder of Genesis Farm and former board member of the charter school, is the idea of “enabling an education that helps people understand that they are imbedded within and dependant on the whole evolving universe in its inner spiritual capacity, as well as its outer physical process.”<sup>28</sup> She goes on to explain that “you can have wonderful environmental education where new awareness and skills are gained, but that is not Earth Literacy.”<sup>29</sup> Earth Literacy marks not only the physical evolution of the universe, but the psychic evolution as well. I asked Miriam how the term ‘Earth Literacy’ came into being. She told me the story of how, in the late 1980s, Genesis Farm hosted a group of parents who wanted to start a charter school. Even back then the idea lived to have a charter school that could teach children through a similar context in which adults were educated at Genesis Farm. At that time, Thomas Berry was a regular presence at Genesis Farm. He came often to give talks to the community on various subjects. On this particular occasion, he was talking with this group of parents about their charter school idea, when he commented, “children are no longer earth literate. They don’t know who they are. They don’t know where they are in the universe.”<sup>30</sup> Miriam remembers that moment well. The thought of Earth Literacy struck a chord with her and she called the next course she taught at the farm “Earth Literacy.” It is this idea of perpetuating Earth Literacy that helped create the inception of the charter school and is the primary context out of which the children begin to understand the world they live in.

In a letter to parents, David Wylie, Academic Coordinator of Ridge and Valley, articulated the school’s Mission as follows:

*Children are born with an immense potential. Their innate curiosity and fascination with the world around them is the fundamental basis of their human search for meaning, purpose, love, satisfaction and community.*

*Ridge and Valley Charter School believes that it is committed to developing this immense potential. By encouraging our children ‘s relationships to home, family, school, town, region, nature, Earth, and universe, all life becomes the context for their learning.*

*Our school will encourage children to wonder, to think, to discover, and to question. They will be cherished and respected, and learn to do the same with the world around them.*

*Ridge and Valley Charter School believes that it is possible to create a more ecologically sustainable future and that our children have a right to a planet of pure air, clean water, a vibrant natural world, and a more just and equitable human community.*

*This vision is not only a right, but a possibility. We believe it is the purpose of a democratic society to lay the foundation of such a future.*

*The result of a Ridge and Valley Charter School education will be children who grow into adults who love the earth, and who are passionate about its ability not only to survive, but to thrive.*

Most of my research on the charter school is collected from personal interviews and conversations with the teachers, known at the school as ‘Guides,’ as well as with the administration and the board members. I also had the great fortune of observing a classroom on a few occasions. I found this to be the most direct way to retrieve information on my particular question given that this school is still in its infancy. In my interviews, I proposed the question, “Does the Ridge and Valley Charter School point toward the Earth as having a sacred dimension? If so, how is this conveyed?”

Since Ridge and Valley is a public school, I felt right away from the staff that one has to be very careful about how one conveys the depth of what is happening there. Academic Coordinator and Guide of Guides, David Wylie, suggests that even though they are “not teaching a spiritual approach, everything they do every day is moving toward that direction” of Earth Literacy, which does inherently honor the sacred aspect of Earth. When I asked him if he feels limited by being a charter school, he responded by saying that “I don’t find it limiting that we are a public school. We are a model, and we are teaching sustainability through that prism of Earth Literacy. The kids are going to be a bridge between deep time and real time. Sustainability is the first step, and that can lead to cosmology. . . the great emergence. There’s all kind of intelligence in children . . . it’s just making them shine, that’s the challenge. We are evolving. We have to be palpable to the masses.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Conversation with Miriam McGillis at the Hermitage, Greensboro, NC, 2/23/06.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Conversation with David Wylie, Ridge & Valley Charter School, Warren County, NJ, December 2005.

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While the “Guides” themselves may come up with some incredible ideas of how to integrate the cosmology of Earth literacy into the daily lives of the children, such as reflecting on “How am I the Universe?” and “Is nature a part of me?”<sup>32</sup> they still have to comply with state issued curriculum standards. Reflecting on their relationship to state standards, Board member Evonne Reiersen says, “The main intent at this time is to create a living curriculum through experiential events. The state standards can be creatively expressed through the children’s own experiences. Teachers given degrees in traditional universities are not exposed to the Universe, in Thomas Berry’s words. The attempt to be one of the first schools to focus on the unfolding universe as its core is a formidable and exciting frontier.”<sup>33</sup>

The efforts to bring to consciousness the sacred aspect of the Earth are expressed in various ways. School principal Nancy Divorsky states that, “The main thing we are trying to capture is the awe and wonder of the world. Without using the word sacred, the children know that, and feel that inherently. In most schools, they are removed from this. So, at this school we let them find the awe and they discover the sacredness on their own.”<sup>34</sup> A lot of what the Guides seem to offer in this way is contained in the essence of how they approach the day, and the tone they set individually. Nancy Divorsky goes on to explain this by saying, “ In the morning we have music. This helps them to know it’s time to settle in. Most guides light a candle in the center of their circles when they gather as a group. People need to learn to come together with attention - to evoke the feeling that this is something important, serious. Every guide is learning and modeling how to do this. Everyone is aware that a child’s relationship with the Earth is central.”<sup>35</sup>

When I observed Guide Mike’s classroom, one of the things that stood out most for me was the ability of the children to move into silence. From that place of silence, the children were able to move into deeper places inwardly and were able to communicate and reflect with a deeper attention and sense of reverence. I found these times of open communication through respected silence to reveal the amazing depths to which children are able to go.

1st and 2nd grade Guide, Dena, reflects on how the sense of the sacred aspect of the Earth lives in her classroom. “It really depends on the guide specifically to understand how this aspect is conveyed. For me it is subtle. I just carry it in myself. I do talk about it; it comes up all the time just in what we do naturally. It comes up when we are talking about Henry David Thoreau, talking about how he valued the natural world. It is in the little things.” She goes on to give an example, “When I teach the children about herbs, I do it from the approach of the Cherokee. The Cherokee give thanks to the plants when they take them for food or medicine. At first I wasn’t sure about doing this with them. Then it just became natural, and uncomfortable not to. If we are to gather the plants, we are to honor them.”<sup>36</sup> This seems to be a theme for the Guides. Their approach to creating a learning community is this combination of what they are teaching, along with how they teach it and the energy they bring.

Board member Evonne Reiersen says, “The sacred is manifesting itself when we allow ourselves to believe we are as sacred as the Earth, a divine being as miraculous as any other creature, rock, or plant. Awe and wonder are fostered here. We do exercises that help us feel connected to living systems and help us witness our interdependence. As this school is only in its second year of education, the manifestations are appearing in each and every movement toward the deeper awareness of what education truly is - a transformation of the human through the experience of the sacredness of the Universe/Earth.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Conversation with Guide Mike, Ridge & Valley Charter School, Warren County, NJ, December 2005.

<sup>33</sup> Conversation with Evonne Reiersen, Ridge & Valley Charter School, Warren County, NJ, December 2005.

<sup>34</sup> Conversation with Nancy Divorsky, Ridge & Valley Charter School, Warren County, NJ, December 2005.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Conversation with Guide Dena, Ridge & Valley Charter School, Warren County, NJ, December 2005.

<sup>37</sup> Conversation with Evonne Reiersen, Ridge & Valley Charter School, Warren County, NJ, December 2005.

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## Reason for Hope

I began this research paper with the question “Is it possible to give a child a sense of the ‘meaning, grandeur and sacredness of the earth as revelatory of the deep mysteries and meaning of the world’ within the institution of education?” Through my research, I discovered that Montessori education, Waldorf schooling, and the Ridge and Valley Charter School each offer a different pathway for bringing the earth and the sacred back together again for children.

In Montessori education, an attempt is made to frame the education of the child within the context of the history of the universe. It was Maria Montessori’s hope that the child could awaken to this universe story through awe and wonder, rather than simply through learning facts. Inspired by the story of the universe itself, the child is encouraged to see himself/herself as part of this revelatory event. Therefore, a central question for the child in Montessori education is “What is my cosmic task?”

Waldorf education is essentially concerned with how to know the world in its spiritual depths. Rudolf Steiner believed that the sense world was the expression of creative spiritual principles. Consequently, he felt that our scientific ways of knowing the natural world were inadequate to knowing the world in its fullness. For Steiner, it is not just the mind, but rather the soul, that cognizes. Waldorf schools, therefore, bring children into a relationship with the sacred depths of reality by developing soul capacities for a new form of cognition. A central question in Waldorf education is “How do children experience the world?”

The Ridge and Valley Charter School is working with understanding the universe in its physical as well as psychic dimension, in order to more fully understand the role of the human. Since the Ridge and Valley School is a public charter school, its affirmation of the sacred aspect of the Earth must be covert. The Ridge and Valley School finds itself on the frontier of bringing questions about the sacred dimension of the earth into the public domain. One of the ways they do this is to create a context within which children can be led to their own experiences of the sacred. Another way is for the teachers to carry this sensibility within themselves. When I visited the school in December 2005, I saw happy children who were thinking out of a new paradigm.

Thomas Berry has said that the deep psychic shift needed in our time is a shift toward seeing the natural world as a “mode of divine presence.” Each of these forms of schooling goes a long way to enabling this shift to take place in the lives of children. Knowing that children are being educated in these ways throughout the country is reason for hope. These schools are at the cusp of a radical transformation of consciousness in our time.



*Artwork by Liz Levitt*

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# Where the Sense of Space Thickened

by  
Andrew Levitt

I value the times as a teacher when the inspiration of a moment compels me to abandon my plans in order to allow a felicitous accident to carry the day. Often those are the classes my students and I remember most fondly. This is the account of such a class in ninth grade English at the Emerson Waldorf School on a sunny spring day in May. I like to refer to it as our “vertical class.”

But now that I have introduced this story as the story of an accident, I have, in part, to retract the claim, for I know, of course, that although they may be unexpected, accidents in human affairs are never wholly accident. In retrospect, we can often see where an apparently isolated event fit into a sequence begun before it and echoing after it. When we do, that sets it in an arc of destiny and attributes poignant necessity to the event itself, in much the same way a landscape contains and gathers at a center where the sense of place thickens. So to convey the feeling of the experience, I must also account for the context in which the class occurred.

Because we have four grades and only three classrooms in the main building of our small high school, I teach my English classes in a rented space that used to be the office of the horse farm adjacent to the school property. It is a two hundred yard walk downhill from the high school to the English classroom, known as Spence’s. Spence is the name of the man who owns the farm. On this particular day, I was on my way downhill with the heavy volume of *Nature Writing* edited by Robert Finch and John Elder. I was prepared to read Scott Russell Sanders’ essay, “Buckeye.”

The essay is one among others by Robert Benchley, G. K. Chesterton, Annie Dillard, Aldous Huxley, Anne Lamott, and John Muir, I ask students to read for our study of the personal essay, which culminates in the last assignment of ninth grade English to write a thousand word personal essay on a topic of one’s choosing. My goal is to have students recognize essay writing can be moving and fun. The so-called, “thousand word essay” has become a *rite de passage* of the ninth grade. When I receive the finished work, the essays are invariably worthy to celebrate, for the students bring much of themselves to bear on themes for which they have intense interest.

So Scott Russell Sanders’ essay is one I offer students as a model of elegant essay writing. But I also choose it for its content. In it, Sanders writes about learning to know trees and love the troubled landscape of his childhood in the northeastern corner of Ohio. The two buckeyes his father carried

in his pocket as a talisman to ward off arthritis and the walnut box his father made from a plank bought at a farm auction in Ohio release reflections on how the land Sanders knew as a child changed. Moved by the sense of loss, he summons the hope to create new maps and new stories for other ground so we can know where we are and “dwell in our place with a full heart.”

Sanders’ essay is one among several nature writings I assign because I take it as a part of the imperative of the naturalist focus we carry in our high school to develop in the students consciousness of the relationships between the human and the more than human realms. In a part of the year devoted to poetry that comes just before the study of the essay, I ask students to attune themselves to reflective relationships between human beings and nature, to read poets who have ears and eyes for nature, and to record what they hear in contemplation outside as their own poems in the anthology of the poetry of nature. So by the class on which I here report, students were awake to nature around and within them.

Between the main building of the high school and Spence’s farm lies what is known at our school as the “Fairy Meadow.” It is a grassy side of a hill with a dogwood tree in the center and a stand of old cedar trees off center. The meadow is bounded on three sides by forest—hardwoods and pines—and opens toward a field at the horse farm on the fourth side. A path from the high school comes down through the woods to this green space. It is called the “Fairy Meadow” because the natural world seems refreshed there and the very youngest children in kindergarten and the early grades, who learn folktales and fairy tales as part of the curriculum and are sensitive to such things, often spend part of each day in this space. Even those without such sensitivity or imagination find in it a peaceable place removed from the scurry of life at the school and the town of Chapel Hill.

On this particular day, I was passing through the Fairy Meadow on my way from the high school to Spence’s. I heard a rustle in a cedar as I walked and figured one of my students was hiding there to startle me as I passed. When I looked into the branches of the tree, I discovered not one but all five students of our small ninth grade were up in the tree. Instantly I realized this was not a moment to be missed. So instead of reprimanding them as insurance risks, I told them to be quiet and to listen. Then I sat down on the bench at the base of the tree and read them “Buckeye” by Scott Russell Sanders. I read:



*"I learned to recognize buckeyes and beeches, sugar maples and shagbark hickories, wild cherries, walnuts, and dozens of other trees while trampling through the Ohio woods with my father. To his eyes, their shapes, their leaves, their bark, their winter buds were as distinctive as the set of a friend's shoulders. As with friends, he was partial to some, craving their company so he would go out of his way to visit particular trees, walking in a circle around the splayed roots of a sycamore, laying his hand against the trunk of a white oak, ruffling the feathery green boughs of a cedar. "Trees breathe," he told me. "Listen."*

As I read, we all realized how coincidentally perfect it was that they were all up in the tree. No one interrupted my reading as I continued to read.

*"All those memories lead back to...the place where I came to consciousness, where I learned to connect feelings with words, where I fell in love with the earth."*

As I read those words, I thought to myself that this was what I wanted for my students right there. I continued, *"How could our hearts be large enough for heaven if they are not large enough for earth? ... The only paradise I know is the one lit by our everyday sun, this land of difficult love, shot through with shadow. The place where we learn this love, if we learn it at all, shimmers behind every new place we inhabit."*

When I finished reading and told the students to climb down to go to math class, everyone was surprised to realize the time had passed. The next day I asked the group to write a short reflection on their class in the cedar tree. Here are selections from their accounts:

*"As Mr. Levitt became visible, walking slowly down to Spence's, the tree broke out in whispers of, 'Shut up! Levitt's coming. Nick, go hide.' To our immense delight and surprise, he suggested, with a smiling amused face, that we stay in the tree for the duration of our English class."* (Emily Frachtling)

*"I wanted to climb to the top but I knew everyone would get mad if I tried."* (Dayyan Borhanian)

*"As I ascended to the upper branches, I was slowly separated from the earth."* (Nick Gorken)

*"It was a beautiful tree which had most likely seen many happy children climbing on its arms, reaching to the heavens... I remember feeling our tree talk to me."* (Mitchell Metz)



*"It was one of those rare moments when the students truly love being there and find deep excitement in every minute of the class. The uplifting, open feeling of clinging to a tree, possibly risking one's health, is such an exciting change of pace as to make the entire day feel lighter, more interesting, less terrible. What a wonderful class."* (Sandy Brady)

On another day later in the week as we walked together to Spence's, someone shouted out, "Let's all climb the tree again." "No, no," said Sandy, with the recognition that we had shared a unique and sacred moment together. "It will be too predictable."

Why do I like to call this class our vertical class? The first obvious reason, of course, is that all the students were up in a cedar tree instead of on the ground.

Another reason is that our class that day seemed to find a juncture where unexpected connections were made across time and space so that what Scott Russell Sanders wrote about his own life experience in Ohio during the 1950s seemed to intersect with descriptive understanding of the immediate moment of our lives in North Carolina in 2006. During the reading of the essay, we all had a feeling of poignant necessity, as if we could almost identify our moment in the arc of destiny. With that, it seemed that the sense of place thickened around the cedar tree. At the conjunction of time and space, it seemed, a vertical axis formed to reach high and deep to where the sense of the lofty met the chthonic power of earth.

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# Special Design Programs: An Invitation

The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World is located at Timberlake Farm, a 165-acre earth sanctuary in Whitsett, NC. The earth sanctuary is a unique place of beauty with wildflower meadows, an organic garden, and five miles of gentle woodland trails, small streams and twin lakes. It is a setting where the pace of life slows down and the presence of the natural world can be fully experienced.

Since 2000, the Center has sponsored day programs for schoolchildren at the earth sanctuary. These programs offer a one-time nature awareness experience for children where they begin to make a personal connection to the natural world. It is our hope now to extend this experience into ongoing partnerships with schools. Beginning in 2004, the Center has invited schools to consider entering into a partnership that will bring the rhythms of the natural world more pervasively into the school year.

The Center welcomes inquiries from teachers and schools, pre-school through college. We offer many possibilities for educators to partner with the Center in order to weave a new way of knowing the natural world into the academic year.

Our Special Design Programs begin with an exploratory meeting between Center staff and a teacher or school. When we sit down with teachers to create a Special Design Program, we engage in a dialogue about where a possible collaboration might take us. What are the values of the learning community? How might the child-nature reunion be nurtured there? How can we provide continuity of experience for the children or young adults so that their connection to the natural world deepens over time? These are some of the questions that open up possibilities.

To date, the following schools have partnered with the Center in this way:

- Blue Ribbon Mentor Program – Chapel Hill-Carrboro Public Schools
- B’Nai Shalom Day School
- Elon University
- Emerson Waldorf School
- Greensboro Day School
- Greensboro Montessori School
- Jackson Middle School
- NC State University Science Camp
- NC Zoo
- River Mill Academy Charter School
- Youth Focus

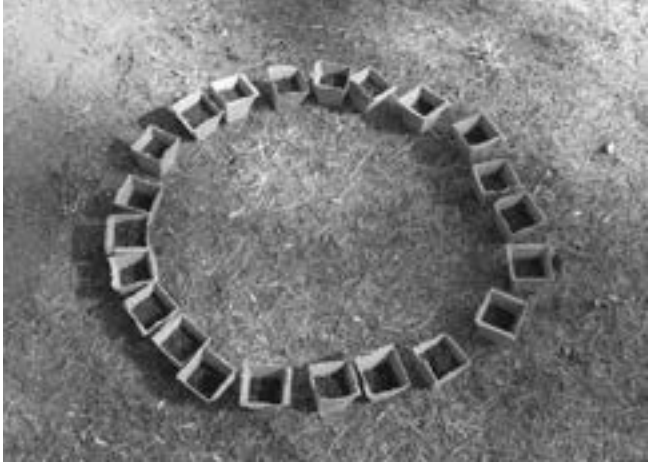
The Center staff brings years of experience to the creation of Special Design programs with teachers and schools.

Co-Director **Carolyn Toben** has taught in Greensboro public and private schools and colleges with an emphasis on alternative and interdisciplinary education. She served for 18 years as a seminar leader at the North Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teaching in Cullowhee and at the Center for the Advancement for Renewal in Education in San Francisco. Her article, “Teacher Renewal: Pilgrims and Passages” was published in the *Holistic Education Review*. Carolyn serves on the Board of the NC Environmental Education Fund.

Co-Director **Peggy Whalen-Levitt** holds a Ph.D. in Language in Education from the University of Pennsylvania, where she co-created a graduate Course of Study in Childhood Imagination. She has written widely on aesthetic communication in childhood and is the editor of *Chrysalis*, the Center newsletter. Furthering her interest in the evolution of consciousness, Peggy completed the Foundation Year in Anthroposophical Studies at Sunbridge College in Spring Valley, NY in 1995.

Staff Naturalist/Educator **Sandy Bisdee** brings over twenty years experience as an educator of young children to her work at the Center. A gifted storyteller and musician, Sandy has engaged in a deep study of Native American perspectives. She will soon complete her studies to become a certified environmental educator with the North Carolina Environmental Education Certification Program.

If you are interested in exploring a Special Design Program for your school or group,  
please contact the Center at [beholdnature@aol.com](mailto:beholdnature@aol.com) or call us at (336) 449-0612.



*B'Nai Shalom Tu B'Shevat Special Design  
February 13, 2006*

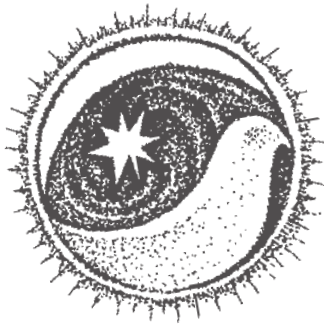


*Blue Ribbon Mentor Program Special Design  
Chapel Hill - Carrboro Public Schools  
April 8, 2006*



*Greensboro Montessori School Special Design  
May 3, 2006*

*Photos by Sandy Bisdee*



# Center Programs 2006 - 2007

## Programs for Children

### **Earth Guides Program for Schoolchildren**

**9:30 am - 1:30 pm**

**Ages K-12, \$10 per person**

**September-November, March-May**

The Earth Guides program is an all-day program for schoolchildren focusing on nature awareness through sensory experiences, art, story, and a visit to our organic Magical Garden.

### **Tiny Kingdoms for Tiny Folks**

**9:30 am - 12:00 noon**

**Ages 3-5, \$10 per person**

**September-November, March-May**

A magical morning at the Center begins at the Treehouse and then awaits the children on the trails and footbridges where they will observe the enchantment of forest and stream. A hayride and stop at the organic garden are part of the morning's pleasures. Pre-schools welcome!

### **Children of the Forest**

**An Afternoon Program in the Natural World**

**3:30 - 5:00 pm**

**Kindergarteners: Tuesdays, September 19 - October 24**

**First & Second Graders: Thursdays, September 21 - October 26**

**\$150**

Once a week, rain or shine, a group of 10 children will explore the Autumn forests, fields, creeks and organic garden of Timberlake Farm Earth Sanctuary. Unhurried by the pressures of time, they will be guided in natural play and exploration by Sandy Bisdee, staff Naturalist/Educator, who brings over twenty years' experience with children and the earth to her work at the Center. The program will be entirely outside in the fresh air, sunshine, wind, rain, fog and all kinds of weather!

Parents may drop off their children or stay for a parent tea with Center Directors, followed by solo time on woodland trails.

*To reserve a place in "Children of the Forest," please download an application form at our website, [www.beholdnature.org](http://www.beholdnature.org), and send a check for \$150 (payable to CEINW) to the Center by August 31, 2006.*

## Programs for College Students

### **Earth Guide Apprenticeship**

**Saturday, September 23, 2006**

**9:30 am - 4:00 pm**

**free (lunch included)**

The Earth Guide apprenticeship is an opportunity for college students to prepare to lead Earth Guides programs for schoolchildren at the Center. Earth Guides attend a full day apprenticeship and make a commitment to a weekly schedule of service during the Fall and/or Spring Semester.

## Programs for Parents

See "Children of the Forest" above.

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## Programs for Educators

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

**2006-2008**

This is an intensive two-year co-research project with a group of twenty educators interested in nurturing the interior life of the child and young adult in relationship to the natural world. Please see details on pages 4-6 of this issue of *Chrysalis*. Educators are invited to apply by September 1, 2006. Applications can be downloaded at our website, [www.beholdnature.org](http://www.beholdnature.org). Center staff will select twenty participants from the pool of applicants by September 15, 2006. Participation is free.

### **Seventh Generation Teachers' Program**

**A Two-Part Program**

**9:30 am – 3:30 pm**

**Saturday, October 21, 2006 and April 21, 2007**

**\$145 (lunch included)**

Now in its fifth year, the Seventh Generation Teachers' Program provides a context for teachers to deepen their own personal connection to the natural world and to be co-creators of ways to bring nature awareness to all paths of teaching. Through two day-long retreats at the earth sanctuary, teachers reconnect to the natural world through solo time and nature journaling, consider Richard Louv's book *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*, and re-imagine educational practice. CEU credits available.

### **Special Design Programs**

We invite schools to consider entering into a partnership with the Center in order to bring the rhythms of the natural world more fully into the school year. The Center welcomes inquiries from teachers and schools, pre-school through college, who wish to tailor a program to their particular situation. Please see details on pages 18-19 of this issue of *Chrysalis*.

*Applications can be downloaded at [www.beholdnature.org](http://www.beholdnature.org)  
or requested by contacting the Center at [beholdnature@aol.com](mailto:beholdnature@aol.com) or (336) 449-0612.*

## The Wes Sexton Teacher's Scholarship

A dear friend of the Center, Wes Sexton, died suddenly on December 10, 2005. Through his rare depth of soul and compassion, Wes served the children of Siler City Elementary School as a counselor for 35 years. He found his way to the Seventh Generation Teachers' program in its inaugural year, drawn there by his love of the natural world. This year, after receiving word of the fourth year of the program, Wes wrote to us saying that the communication "was all I needed to remind me that's what I really wanted to do. After getting the book, *Last Child . . . and*

beginning reading it – I'm excited about being part of the next Seventh Generation program." Wes died shortly after our first retreat, during which Wes shared the hope of bringing the woods back to children at Siler City Elementary School through a nature trail behind the school. In honor of Wes, we have created the

Wes Sexton Teacher's Scholarship that will enable one teacher a year to attend The Seventh Generation Teachers' Program for free. Through this memorial, Wes' quiet presence will continue to inspire us to bring love into the world.



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# Mission Statement

The mission of the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World is to bring to life a new vision of the relationship between the inner life of the child and the beauty, wonder and intimacy of the universe.

Presently, the natural world is viewed as a commodity to be used rather than as a sacred reality to be venerated. A shift in our way of relating to the natural world is essential if we hope to participate in nature's unfolding rather than in its demise. This shift is nowhere more crucial than within the field of education where the child's way of relating to the natural world is formed.

Located within the beauty of a 165 acre earth sanctuary, the Center's way of working is threefold: First, the Center offers a setting within which national presenters explore the relationship between the inner life of the child and nature from diverse perspectives. Second, the Center provides a context for teachers to deepen their own personal connection to the natural world and to be co-creators of ways to bring nature awareness to all paths of teaching. Third, the Center designs programs for children, young adults and college students which call upon their inner faculties of imagination and intuition and enable them to form a bond of intimacy with the natural world.



## Advisory Council

- Thomas Berry    Ecotheologian and author of *The Dream of the Earth*, *The Universe Story*, and *The Great Work*.
- Joseph Cornell    Founder of The Sharing Nature Foundation and author of *Sharing Nature with Children*, *Listening to Nature*, and *Journey to the Heart of Nature*.
- Richard Lewis    Founder of The Touchstone Center for Children and author of *Living by Wonder*, *The Bird of Imagining*, *In the Space of Sky* and *Cave: An Invocation of the Beginnings of Art*.
- Richard Louv    Founder of Connect for Kids, columnist for the San Diego Union-Tribune and author of *Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*.
- Robin Moore    Founder of the Natural Learning Initiative at North Carolina State University and co-author of *The Environmental Schoolyard*.
- Anthony Weston    Professor of Philosophy at Elon University and author of *Back to Earth: Tomorrow's Environmentalism*.

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# The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World at Timberlake Farm

1501 Rock Creek Dairy Road, Whitsett, NC 27377

(336) 449-0612 (phone & fax)

E-mail: [beholdnature@aol.com](mailto:beholdnature@aol.com)

[www.beholdnature.org](http://www.beholdnature.org)

## *A Brief History*

During the 2000-2001 academic year, the Center invited a group of educators to participate in a series of retreats with ecotheologian Thomas Berry (*The Dream of the Earth*) and writer/educator Richard Lewis (*Living By Wonder*) entitled "The Biological Imperative: Nature, Education and Imagination." These retreats marked the beginning of our work with educators in which we considered the question "Can we establish a new form of dialogue between ourselves and the extraordinary phenomenon that make up our living universe?"

Beginning in the Fall of 2002 and continuing to the present, the Center has offered a yearlong intensive program for educators entitled "The Seventh Generation Teacher's Program." Through a series of retreats, teachers share their own ecostories, keep a nature journal, and transfer new ways of listening and responding to the natural world to their practice as teachers. Seventy-nine teachers have participated in this program during its first four years.

The Center's Next Generation Children's Programs, including an Earth Guides Program, Tiny Kingdoms Program, and Summer Nature Camps, have served over 3,000 children from more than 40 public and private schools in the foothills of North Carolina since the Center's inception in the Fall of 2000.

In the Fall of 2004, the Center initiated Special Design programs for schools. Tailored to the values of particular learning communities, these programs provide continuity of experience for children so that their connection to the natural world deepens over time. To date, the Center has co-created 15 Special Design programs, three of which have spanned an entire school year.

The Center publishes a biannual newsletter, *Chrysalis*, which reaches an international audience. Published since the Fall of 2004, *Chrysalis* is a forum where thoughts on the relationship between the inner life of the child and the natural world are exchanged, as well as a vehicle for making Center programs visible to the general public.

Now entering its seventh year of existence, the Center was featured on NC Now, UNC-TV's flagship news and information series, on April 17th 2006 and has been selected by the national organization Hooked on Nature to be one of ten national sites recognized for its work on the child in nature. With support from Hooked on Nature, the Center will initiate a two-year pilot project entitled "The Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice" in the Autumn of 2006.



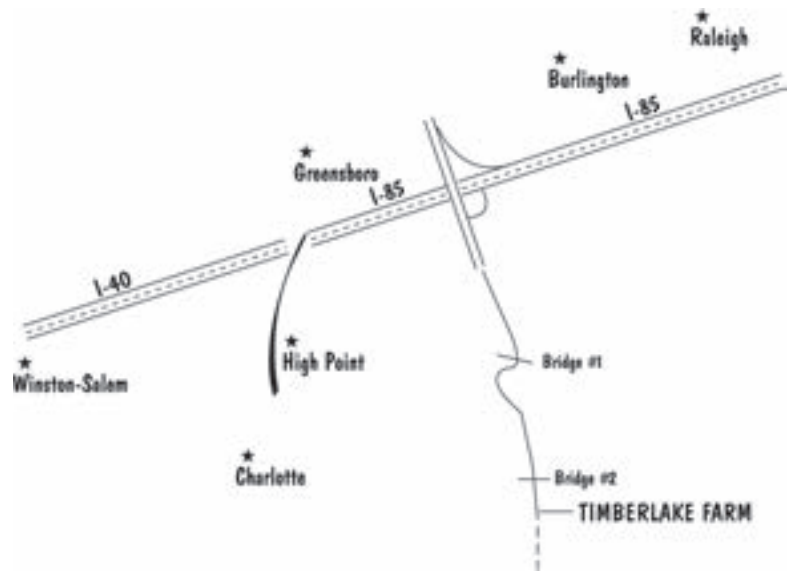
*Camomile* by Sarah Evans

FROM WINSTON-SALEM/  
GREENSBORO

Take I-40 East to I-85; continue about 13 miles beyond Greensboro towards Burlington. Exit at Rock Creek Dairy Road (Exit #135). You will go under the overpass and loop around. Turn left at the top of the exit and go just over two miles. The Timberlake Farm entrance is on the left at the top of the hill.

FROM RALEIGH/DURHAM/  
CHAPEL HILL

Take I-85 South towards Greensboro. Continue on I-85 about 10 miles past Burlington. Exit on Rock Creek Dairy Road (Exit #135). Turn left at the top of the exit and go just over two miles. The Timberlake Farm entrance is on the left at the top of the hill.



*The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World is a non-profit organization that champions inclusiveness and actively discourages discrimination based on race, religion, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, socio-economic status or any other factors that deny the essential humanity of all people. Furthermore, the Center encourages a love and respect for the diversity of the natural world.*

Center for Education, Imagination and The Natural World  
at Timberlake Farm  
1501 Rock Creek Dairy Road  
Whitsett, North Carolina 27377

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