

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

2015-2017



Edited by
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Foreword

Today, in this crucial moment of history, we are called to recover the inner vision of a society in harmony with nature, and the urgency of reciprocity of care between ourselves and our environment.

This newly recognized relationship between us and the surrounding natural world rests on our experience of its wonder, beauty, and call to intimacy. In preserving and augmenting these responses, we realize, perhaps never before so vividly, that, as the consciousness of that world, we have an indispensable role to play. More than just protection against pollution and extinction of life forms, that role calls us, further, to revere Earth as that community of which we are a part, the source of our life and livelihood, and, above all, the primary means of our recognition of and communication with the divine.

The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World . . . restores a relationship with the natural world based, not on a view of other beings as objects to be used, but as subjects to be communed with in an integral and sacred society. ~ Thomas Berry, July 2008

I write this Foreword on the 8th anniversary of Thomas Berry's crossing on June 1, 2009 and on the day the President of the United States of America pulled out of the Paris Climate Agreement. Many fell into despair today, and yet I would give you reason to hope.

Assembled here are the practices of the Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice class of 2017. When we began our work together in the fall of 2015, we were called into presence with the natural world in a deeply listening and receptive way. We were invited to "hold at bay" our habitual ways of "knowing about" and accumulating information. We were asked to attune to the natural world as a "communion of subjects."

Midway through the program, we met over the course of two days to engage in a process of letting go, letting come – "Letting go" of all that separates us from Earth as Sacred Community and opening up an inner spaciousness where something new could come in as a practice for our second year together – "Letting come."

We took time to get in touch with our foundational holiness, our first nature, as a place to begin. We surrendered to our deepest identity connected to Source and listened to what would flow from there. We took guidance from Frederick Buechner's view of vocation as "the place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep need."¹

As our second year drew to a close, we asked everyone to pause and reflect on their practices so far, not with a sense of closure, but simply with a pause for reflection. Written from a place of belonging and reverence, these practices give us a new sense of the future of humanity and the world that is neither apocalyptic nor beyond reach, but is rather a future created with each evolving moment of reciprocity of care between ourselves and the Earth.

Peggy Whalen-Levitt, Editor
June 1, 2017

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

Observations and Reflections of a Student Teacher Taking Children Outside

by

Amber Adams-Kuebler

Introduction

I, like many other people in this day and age, am an incredibly busy person. My “to do” list is almost always a page long and it seems that I am always simply attempting to keep my head above water. While I have always felt a strong connection to nature (especially as a child), I have never really thought much about it until participating in the Inner Life of the Child in Nature program. Because of this, I first wanted my personal practice to involve a deeper introspection into my connection with nature and I wanted to do this through art.

Unfortunately this was a difficult practice for me to pursue. Not only does painting itself take a significant amount of time, but painting from life in the outdoors (painting indoors would limit the connection I am trying to develop) requires a different set of supplies, additional time, and perfect weather conditions. I decided that the best practice may in fact be something I incorporate into what I am already doing – student teaching. While I wanted the opportunity to deepen my spiritual connection with nature, I also want the opportunity to work with children and help foster a love of nature within them. Because I knew I wanted to take students outside, I thought it may be nice to journal and reflect upon that experience – especially as a first time teacher.

Fall 2016

For the fall, I had the opportunity to not only observe a second grade classroom, but I also taught a ten-lesson integrated science unit on sound. Because I only had one subject to plan, I was able to be a little more creative and flexible in the lessons I created as part of my unit. The following are some journal entries of my experiences when I took students outside as a part of this unit:

November 2nd, 2016 – Nature sound walk

Today was my first day taking the students outside. I was a little nervous, but also pretty excited because I thought it would be a very fun activity both for me and the students themselves. I learned that students work best outside when they have a small energetic activity at the beginning of the lesson from my weeklong training in Vermont so I decided to start the lesson with a quick stretching activity. It seemed to center the students in what we were doing in the moment and prepared them to be better listeners when I read the story to them. I read *The Listening Walk* aloud while the rest of the students sat in a circle on the grass. The story features a girl who goes on a listening walk in the city and the park and

some of the different sounds she hears. At the end of the book, the author invites the reader to listen to the sounds around them so we had a short moment of silence and sharing of the sounds people heard. This served as a nice transition to the listening walk we had on the nature trail. Students were guided to walk in silence around the nature trail and write at least two to three things they heard while they were walking down in their nature journal. I invited them to listen to my flute when it was time to return to the circle. This was not only the students' first time hearing my flute, but it was also my very first time playing for any kind of audience. I was a little nervous, but the result was definitely worth it. It was such a peaceful and calming way to return back to the circle and while I am no professional flutist, the students still seemed to appreciate the transition.

November 9th, 2016 – High & low pitch activity

Because this was only their second time going outside, I spent a decent amount of time reviewing the expectations for behavior outside. Because they were listening for different sounds it was particularly important that everyone remain quiet. Before I took them down to the nature trail, I did a quick activity to help them expel a little bit of their excess energy and excitement. When we got to the grassy area in front of the nature trail, I provided students with thirty seconds to find the loudest leaf they could find and return to their spot in line. There was a mad dash and when everyone returned to their spots in line we were able to have a leaf symphony. We then entered the nature trail and when we got down to the outdoor classroom something magical happened. The most beautiful bright red spider was weaving its web right above one of the benches! Most of the children were scared, but I channeled my "inner-Sandy" and expressed my wonder of the moment and how special it was. Students were surprised at first, but they seemed to realize that this creature was something that should be respected and not feared. We agreed that we would not disturb it while we had our meeting. The students continued with the lesson and worked with a buddy to find different sounds out in nature (high pitch-high volume, high pitch-low volume, low pitch-high volume, and low pitch-low volume). Unfortunately when we returned to the meeting place, the beautiful spider was gone. We had the opportunity to share some of their findings before coming back inside. While I think the outside part of the lesson went really well, I realized that students were not quite prepared to work on distinguishing the differences between pitch and volume on their own.

Spring 2017

After winter break and Elon's Winter Term, I returned to the classroom I was in during the fall semester to conduct my student teaching. I started only teaching a couple of subjects, but gradually picked up more and more until I had taken over the class entirely. I had thirty days of full-time teaching before I slowly began to give subjects back. Because I was teaching all of the subjects at once as well as taking a lot of the lessons from the other second grade teachers (at this school, each teacher plans a different subject), I felt as though I had less flexibility in my lessons. The following are some journal entries of my experiences when I took students outside over the course of my student teaching:

February 7th, 2017 – Whole group reading

Today we went outside to read *Henry's Freedom Box*. I decided not to go down to the nature trail for time purposes and instead we sat on the grass surrounded by leaves. I chose this

location because of the pervasive leaf imagery throughout the book. The children were originally disappointed that we did not get to go down to the nature trail, but were overall excited to be outside. The leaves added an interesting element as well as an attraction for many of the students who chose to play with the leaves rather than pay attention to the story. I was a little stricter on this matter and I am not sure if that was the correct approach. There was a particular magical moment while I read the book aloud, however, when I discussed how the leaves were blowing around the main character and all of a sudden a small breeze picked up and the leaves blew around us.

February 8th, 2017 – Whole group reading

Continuing on with the activity and book from yesterday, I took the students outside once again. Because the leaves serve as a symbol of children's families in this book, I had the students go find the leaves they felt best represented their families. The students absolutely loved this activity and were given the opportunity to share before we went back indoors. Some did it based on the color, shape, texture, or number of edges to the leaf. It was truly an opportunity for the children not only to connect to the book, but also to think out of the box in a way they are not generally given the opportunity to in school. One student was set on having five little acorns to represent his family so I let him. Once we went back inside, I took each of the students' leaves to create a class family tree that is now hanging outside of our classroom door. I feel like this was a much more successful and engaging activity than the original lesson I was given that involved students writing their family members names on cut out paper leaves.

February 13th, 2017 – Whole group reading

For this lesson, I really tried to incorporate our unit we just finished on maps in *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt*. Today we split up into two groups and my cooperating teacher and I took students around the school to determine what kinds of things we may want to incorporate on the map or "quilt" of the school we were making. We discussed important landmarks, colors, textures, etc. We also began to touch on how things might look like from above like on a map than from the side. The students were, of course, super excited, but I really struggled to keep them quiet when we were walking past classrooms. I ended up having to be stricter than I had originally intended just so that we would not disturb the other classes. I also had a student who thought it would be funny to run off and hide behind something while we were having a class discussion so overall the management piece was just an interesting one to navigate. When I could tell they needed to expel some energy, I took them to a part of the campus that was further from possible classrooms we could disturb and I incorporated a running exercise into their observations. When we came back to the classroom, we had the opportunity to compare what the two groups talked about and make some conclusions about the quilt we are making tomorrow.

February 27th, 2017 – Whole group math

Today I took the students out for math for the first time. It was a little more interesting because this involved having a centimeter ruler and an inch ruler, a pencil, and a worksheet. It was not impossible to juggle these extra supplies, but we did have a couple of students misplace theirs somewhere on the nature trail. Because we are wrapping up the unit on measurement, I thought it would be nice to teach them about finding the sum and difference by having them measure various objects outside. Some children really ran with it, but others were so excited to be outside they turned in an empty measurement sheet. Other children

came up to me saying they couldn't find a single thing to measure on the entire nature trail. I had to help them find simple objects like sticks and leaves before they were able to begin to work on their measuring skills.

March 2nd, 2017 – Science

Today we started inside reviewing with the song they learned about the states of matter. They absolutely adored learning the song and I think they could benefit from the incorporation of more music and songs into their lessons. We then transitioned outside where students wrote a t-chart in their science journals and made note of all the different states of matter they noticed on the nature trail. Gas was by far the most difficult, but we had a very interesting discussion about how many of the objects around us are solid. We even were able to get into a discussion about how there is liquid inside the human body and what types of liquids those may be. Because there appears to be a lack of appreciation for being quiet out in nature, I decided in a spur of the moment decision that we would try walking back differently today. I told them that on their way out of the nature trail I just wanted them to focus on the feeling of their feet on the ground and the sounds that they made. The children were really thrown off by this odd suggestion and seemed to enjoy the challenge. I think it would have been slightly more effective if we had first tried it somewhere else with their shoes off, but that would have to be its own activity.

March 6th, 2017 - Science

We reviewed with the states of matter song again before we transitioned outside. I decided not to take everyone down to the nature trail because for this activity we were going to need to be able to run around. We talked about the molecules in a solid and how we would model that with our bodies (all clumped together). We then did the same for a liquid (not touching but closer and flowing) and gas (all spread out and far apart). While I thought this would be a fun activity, the kids got a little too excited and students ended up getting hurt. Whenever we had students come back into "solid-form" it would just end up in some kind of giant dog pile where some small person was smushed at the bottom. Even though I attempted to address the problem through multiple reminders to be careful, students still decided not to listen to instructions. I ended the lesson early and we got to just go back inside and sit until it was time for them to go to specials. I am slightly upset because I really don't want the students to associate sitting in silence with a punishment, but I was at a loss of what to do and I really did not want any students to get hurt as a result of a fun activity I had planned. I am still not sure what would have been the best way to handle the situation.

[Unknown date] – Recess

Today children were very distressed because we had a very strong smell of gas in our room. I began to slightly panic myself because it was incredibly strong and I knew it was not healthy for anyone in there. Children started yelling saying they were going to be sick and one student stated that it smelled exactly the way it did before her house caught on fire. Long story short – the whole class was panicking and I was not handling it well. I immediately sent for help and decided to take the students outside for an early recess. The children were still very uneasy so I invited those who wanted to join me in a meditation circle where we just kind of sat there, closed our eyes and took deep breaths of the fresh air. Some kids really got into it while others couldn't take it seriously and after a little while just decided to leave. One student fell asleep and just enjoyed the quiet. Some stared up at the clouds and some took the time to investigate the ground around them. It felt like a really magical moment even if I

did get some weird looks from the other teachers. The student who fell asleep said that he really enjoyed it and asked if we could do it every recess. I said that maybe we would do it sometime in the future, but it was also important for him to use the time to get up and move around as well.

[*Unknown date*] – Recess

Today some of my students stopped to look at the clover patch we have before we reach the playground for recess. Because my cooperating teacher was able to watch the children on the playground, I was able to stay with the small group at the clover patch. They were determined to find a four leaf clover, but had very little luck. We were able to find a ladybug however and the students had a wonderful time carefully transferring it from hand to hand before it decided to fly away.

April 17th, 2017 – Small group reading

This week we are reading a book called *Going Camping*. Because I haven't taken my students outside in so long, I decided to take my small group of five out to the nature trail so we could read our story out there. We had the opportunity to discuss the connections of the location to the story before I let the students find a place to read and I walked around to listen to each of them. It was one student's first time down to the nature trail (he was from another second grade class) and he really wanted a chance to explore so I ended the lesson a little early and we were able to walk around and take notice of some of the things we saw. Working with the group of five students was significantly more manageable than the twenty I had tried to take down to the nature trail previously. I was able to make it much more personal and we were able to remain much more quiet when we were exploring. We were able to listen for sounds of wildlife and one of the children had the blessing of seeing a bunny out in the wild. The children felt so special that their reading group had the opportunity to go outside that they all agreed they would keep it a secret and tell no one else when we returned. One of my students was set on collecting pine cones to take home and while I originally said no (I did not want to set a precedent for students taking nature trail objects home in their book bags) I reconsidered when she explained that this was a present for her mother who was going to be leaving soon. Knowing that this child has a difficult relationship with her mother, I thought it would be best for her to be able to take the pinecone and share it with her mother.

Overall Reflection

First, it may not appear to be a very novel idea, but children need to spend more time outside. Not only did they always seem to have more fun and be more engaged in the learning process, but they also need to have the experience. It made me so sad when I saw how novel playing in the leaves was for some of these children. A couple were so excited and distracted by these novelties, they were unable to focus on anything I was saying. While I would have liked to have given them hours to just play in the woods, it is not currently within my power to do so. If students had these kinds of opportunities at home or maybe even during recess, they may be able to focus a little more during lessons outdoors.

One of the aspects of teaching I realized I struggled with the most when taking my students outside was the balance between letting kids be kids and keeping the time spent

outside academic and related to what we were learning in class. While I realize time out exploring freely was important, the school's structure and culture made me feel pressured to make sure every moment spent was one spent learning in some way or another. I feel like the pressure is even increased a little for time spent outdoors because it isn't part of the norm. Because it isn't something accepted that teachers do on a regular basis, one almost feels like they have to justify what they are doing even more so. I feel like I had a little more flexibility as a student teacher because I had a supportive cooperating teacher and I didn't have to worry about being fired, but I still felt some of the pressure.

One of the things I tried to incorporate throughout my lessons, but I think I could do more of is adding the element of magic to my lessons. A lot of my lessons were more academic, but I think part of what could help foster their love and connection with nature is providing them with opportunities to see the magic it can hold. There is something special for students when they come to Timberlake Earth Sanctuary that makes it this magical other place, but I struggled to create that in a place so close to school. I plan on continuing to work on this no matter what school I end up teaching at.

Lastly, I really enjoyed having the opportunity to take my students outside for a variety of subjects. Many teachers feel like they can only take their students out for science if they take their students outside at all, but I found a way to take students out no matter what subject I was teaching. I felt like this not only made the lessons more enjoyable, but also varied their interactions outside so that they were able to see the various ways to connect with nature and the course material.

Amber Adams-Kuebler graduated from Elon University with her Bachelor of Arts in Elementary Education in May 2017. She completed both her student teaching and undergraduate research thesis at Alexander Wilson Elementary in Graham, North Carolina. She has always felt connected to the natural world, but it was not until recently that she began to more fully explore it. As a beginning teacher, she greatly looks forward to incorporating what she has learned into her teaching and experiences working with children. She has not only had the opportunity to participate in the Inner Life program, but she also has attended multiple workshops that count towards a NC Environmental Educator certification and a week-long outdoor education training in Vermont. Amber has accepted a position teaching abroad in Thailand for a year before returning to the United States and eventually pursuing a Masters in a field related to environmental education.

Remembering Home

by

Nicole Almeida

At times I find myself at a loss for words to convey the gratitude that I feel for the blessing of the Earth and the area in which I live. The Earth has so many ways of holding us and with the recent onset of spring I feel this more acutely than I have in quite a while. The majesty of the billowing clouds that roll in with the fog over the mountain tops; the gentle kiss of the rain as it soaks the thirsty earth; the warm caress of the sun as I sit by the garden in the presence of the first small shoots stretching toward the sky; the smell of freshly cut grass and the quiet hush of the late afternoon. All of these remind me that I am Home and that I am held and known by this Home in a way that meets the most intimate yearning of my soul.

When I began my practice my intention was to set aside time each morning and evening to sit in silence and to say a prayer of gratitude and a gentle request for guidance. I did this for a bit, and I enjoyed these moments, but over time I found it difficult to maintain this routine. It became stilted and forced and eventually fell by the wayside. As more time passed I began to feel like a bit of a failure for not having any type of formal “practice”. Eventually, what I came to realize is that it is not in the formal practice, but in the recognition of the holding, and the experience of gratitude that the blessings are found.

A little over a year ago I made the decision to move out of the city and into a place where I am immersed in nature everyday. This past year has been an unfolding process of remembering to see and to feel this place that is my home. Remembering to pause amidst the busyness of the day to take a breath and tilt my face to the sun; delight in the blooming flowers; truly smell the fresh mint brought to me by the small hands of the kindergarten children at work, and pause to be fully present to the larger web of life of which I am but a small part.

Sometimes I do a better job of remembering than at other times, and I am grateful for the gentle nudges that the universe provides when I forget. The other day as I was driving home on auto-pilot, my mind already on my next task, I saw a couple stopped on the side of the road. Abandoning their car for a bit, they had walked down the road to snap some pictures of the amazing views. In the middle of running from one task to the next I was jolted back into the present moment and struck with the very obvious realization that people come from all around to experience the majesty of the mountains that I am held by every day. It seems so simple and so obvious to say how important it is to be present with all that is around us, but in our fast paced society it is so easy to forget to simply slow down for a moment.

I know that it can be very beneficial to set aside time simply for deep listening, and in no way do I want to brush that aside as unnecessary, but the bigger learning for me has been that we are not separate. We are not “connected” to nature only when we are disciplined and have large amounts of time to sit in meditation by the side of a river. We are always connected, we are always being held, and it is in this recognition during the small moments throughout the day, that we begin to feel this connection and to remember who we are.

Coming Home

Coming home to my own breath
To the remembering.

To the remembering that I am intimately held
By the sun
And the rain
And the trees that are my friends

And by those that are not my friends
Those that want their own space to grieve.

Their job is not to hold me, but to be held
Perhaps by me, perhaps not
But without doubt, they too will find their home
In the deeper remembering

Nicole Almeida is a long time advocate of holistic education. She was lucky enough to begin her education in a Waldorf school in Western Massachusetts and to grow up playing in the fields and streams of the northern Appalachian Mountains. She later received a degree in dance education and after a variety of work experiences in both the arts and in more traditional office settings she found her way to The Learning Village at Sacred Mountain Sanctuary in the mountains of Western North Carolina. She currently serves as the Director of Programming at TLV where her daughter Diana also attends classes.

Two Photos, Stars, Struggle and Boundless Gratitude

by

Kathy Chambliss

“When my star meets your star, we become a we-star”

On a sun-drenched North Carolina afternoon, we made a commitment to our practice in a ceremony where we walked down a path and crossed a bridge, after which we placed our intentions in a woven basket held by Peggy. We continued beyond Peggy around part of the lake and headed off (again) into our lives away from the sanctuary known as Timberlake. Before we began the ceremony, a few photos were taken. I took one of them, a photo of Andrew, Sandy and Peggy together on the lawn, sharing a moment of laughter. Sandy took a photo of the members of the Inner Life of the Child in Nature program, of which I am part, as we assembled across from our three teachers. I am in the front row of that photo, sitting on the ground, looking at my cellphone and smiling. In that moment, I am delighting in the photo I just took of Sandy, Peggy and Andrew. I am thrilled I snapped a photo of the three of them together. In that smiling-at-my-phone moment, I am full of gratitude for what Sandy, Andrew & Peggy created for us. Here is why.

Each time we met for our program, I experienced a warm welcoming circle of sharing and beauty. We shared reflective silences, music and readings that were haunting, beautiful, powerful, resonant reminders to the deep parts of me I forget as I rush through daily “to-do’s.” People spoke courageously from their hearts about their learning and their practices and their trials navigating mainstream culture, and the challenges inherent with the gift of being alive. Each visit to our encircled community was a booster shot, a strengthening of my resolve to become more present and compassionate and mindful in my daily life. A year and a half after we began, what I have learned in North Carolina has become integrated into my life.

For example, I often begin classes with new students in a circle outside, sharing with them what Sandy taught us one afternoon in a short session by the side of the lake. We root our feet into the ground like the trees around us. We breathe with the trees. We look for what is moving around us, and we point to what we see moving for a moment or two or three. We put on our fox or deer ears by cupping our hands around our ears to channel sound into them, and listen intently to the sounds around us. Then we use our noses to notice the scents floating on the air and try to put words to the smells we encounter when we focus on that sense. We use our skin to feel the fluttering wind, the soft rain, the biting chill or the warmth of the sun, and try to describe these sensations also. Before we leave on a walk where we pair up in silence and share beautiful subjects with our partner, we listen to the soft tones of a singing bowl, opening our eyes and raising our hands after the sound has

ceased. Primed now to pay attention to the subtle sounds and colors and scents around us, we move to a stream or other ecosystem to discover more about what is hidden within, and our connections to and interdependencies with that system.

Outside of work, I have shared Andreas Weber with a beloved friend and together we read and discussed and ruminated about *The Biology of Wonder*. We also read together, regularly, the enchantingly brilliant words of John O' Donohue. Furthermore, Thomas Berry's words, words that brought me to the *Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World*, are always with us, guiding us. And yet, even with such richness in my life, richness for which I am so grateful, I struggle. Too much of my life right now is being taken up by things that appear necessary but are not meaningful. In too much of my life I feel bounced around by the choices made by others: my autonomy slipping through my fingers. I want to read more and reflect more and write more and be in genuine relationships with people; instead, I am repeatedly taking my car to be repaired, running from one event to another one, trying to balance a budget, and coming up short again and again.

As I move through this chaotic phase, I will continue to refer back to our circle, to remember the deep centering wisdom inherent in the music, the words read and spoken, the lunches prepared with much intention, the stories shared. I will remember the commitment I made to further develop a compassionate presence. A presence not only for others, but for myself, also. Lastly, like preschoolers already know, I will remember that when my star meets your star, and your star, and your star, etc., we become we-stars. Together in our practices and the sharing of our practices, we will remain deeply connected, despite the physical distances between us.





I end this piece with heartfelt gratitude to everyone in the program. Each and every one of you has so greatly enriched my life. Thank you.

Kathy Chambliss, who lives with her beloved trees and animals in Maryland, is happiest when working alongside others to achieve shared goals that are regenerative and giving, and when she is photographing, “hanging out with,” and beholding other species in wilderness areas. She is particularly enchanted with birds, and greatly inspired by the phenomenon of migration and the birds that travel vast distances over the seas that connect us all together. She considers periods of reflective silence essential for her wellbeing. As a traveler who likes to volunteer, she has worked on scientific and cultural projects in Thailand, Laos, Canada, Alaska, Delaware Bay, Midway Atoll, and Haiti.

Professionally, Kathy serves NorthBay, a MD organization, as an educator, program co-developer, and coordinator for the Teacher Professional Development Program. Her formal education includes a B.Sc. degree in Plant Science; a M.Ed. in Secondary Education with a teaching certification in Secondary Biology, and an Endorsement Certificate in Environmental Education; and a Ph.D. in Sustainability Education. She co-founded, with members of her Ph.D. cohort, the online *Journal of Sustainability Education*. She taught environmental education to children and adults with Delaware Nature Society, DE, and taught science to elementary, middle, and high school students at Tower Hill School in Wilmington, DE, before joining the staff at NorthBay.

To an Oak Tree

by

Christopher Coffey

I see you, first,
When I come out of the bare wood.
The purple mountains beyond,
I see them second.
You are the saint seekers miss;
Either bound too closely to the senses
Or lost in their own recycled thoughts,

I remember when you first called.
You had your leaves, then,
Surrendered to the Autumn,
Not quite mature to bear seeds;
I was alone, and you invited me
To rest under your branches.
Here, held by the earth
I remembered what you have always known

This time, late winter,
I came unto you
With stones in my heart
And approached you with uneasiness,
You did not speak;
Yet I felt that you knew me.
But still, I passed you by,

I returned and rested.
Looking up through your branches
Into the cool blue breath of God,
I remembered those worlds,
The solid embrace of the earth.
The Self that runs deep beneath the surface
And spreads itself out
In all directions like your roots

Then I was seized by the present.

Your brown rustling leaves,
That you won't yet shed,
The winds moving over stalks of gold,
The song of the bluebird,
The self that I am not,
God
All became silent with me.

You never have to speak again;
Once is enough:
I love you in the silence.

Christopher Coffey is originally from north Georgia. He attended Middle Tennessee State University and majored in English Literature. He later attended Antioch University in Keene, NH, and received a Waldorf Teaching Certificate. He is teaching a 2nd/ 3rd grade class at The Learning Village in Candler, NC.

Transformations

by

E. David Garcia

On a warm and clear Sunday in the Spring Season of 2007, I was unprepared for an event that would change the course of my life forever. For a brief instant of time, my eyes pierced into a scene that made me witness a moment of unspeakable beauty. I thought about that event long after it happened, returning each Sunday for weeks and months to the same location at the same time in hopes of getting one more glimpse. But although I never witnessed it again, the event became the power that would thwart my career as a business executive and fully transform my life purpose; redirecting me into a new and meaningful relationship with Earth and the natural world all around me. For the past two years, the “*The Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice*” has been an important part of my new journey; it has given me the ample room to observe and reflect on the deep transformation I’ve experienced within.

When observing a tree, one can often be taken by its striking attributes – the vibrant colors during the Fall Season, the grandeur of its size when fully grown, or even the benevolence it offers to the community that it lives in; offering food and shelter to the hundreds of living organisms throughout its lifetime. To me, however, a tree amazes me by the simple, miniature and unassuming seed it produces. Holding a tree’s tiny seed can often reveal magic if reflected upon long enough. Sure, one can contrast the enormous size of a tree that can emerge from a small seed, but the real magic lies in that a tree begins its emerging process in the darkness of the soil. And as it grows, a tree seems to grow from nothing; sequestering chemicals from the air and the ground that are all invisible to us humans. “*The Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice*” felt somewhat like that emerging process of a tree. During my time in the program I sensed I was in a special period of incubation, nurturing a seed within me that was longing to express itself. For the most part, it was a solitary process and as a result I would occasionally receive a new glimpse of understanding by doing nothing more than being out in the woods. My constant forays into the forest soon brought forth a series of inner transformations leading to greater awareness and a deeper connection to the natural world.

Part of my practice centered on seeking to discover the inner wonders and depths of nature through a range of contemplative methods. I recall how one transformative cycle came to me when I paid attention to what felt like Earth’s invitation to the power of sounds. In the past, the distant sounds of bird songs, cricket calls and croaking frogs were but mere “sounds of nature”; the background noise that signals a place of pretty sceneries or recreational retreats. But my deepening awareness soon revealed that I was being invited into a new form of conversation. It was a new form of communication that was not based on verbs or nouns, but on a more powerful yet subtle way of communicating. It was a surprise

to discover that the silence in between the sounds was as equally important as the sounds themselves. Silence, I soon learned, is not so much the absence of noise, but rather, allowing the presence of what is already there. The more I listened, the more I felt part of a bigger community. The more I walked in the forest, the more I understood it – the sudden silence from a croaking frog spoke of danger, the call from a bird was often its recognition of my presence, the rain at night communicated a fern’s moment to lunge spores to the moist soil to reproduce, and so forth. Slowly, I began to feel that I too belonged in this community, not because I offered the woods any type of load-bearing ecological value, but rather, by simply being there to participate as a mode of existence that is capable of observing and reflecting on Earth’s wonders. At such times, I’m reminded of the iconic nature photographer Ansel Adams. Surely, he seemed small and insignificant in comparison to the grandeur of the landscapes he would capture. But that tiny aperture of the camera and Ansel’s eye gave meaning and context to the enormity of the scene.

The Earth, as I soon began to understand, is revelatory. It is the primary teacher, the primary healer, the primary inventor, the primary provider, the primary artist, the primary source to the mysteries we seek to understand. Once I began to internalize how it was a primary source of life, it only followed that it was also the driving force behind my transformation. Thomas Berry in his essay “The Meadow Across the Creek,” describes how his life was profoundly shaped by an experience he had as a young boy in the presence of a meadow. He writes:

As the years pass, this moment returns to me, and whenever I think about my basic life attitude and the whole trend of my mind and the causes that I have given my efforts to, I seem to come back to this moment and the impact it has had on my feeling for what is real and worthwhile in life.¹

Similar to Thomas Berry’s moment, my experience on that clear day in 2007 is one that continues to return to me. At the time, I was living on the Dutch-Caribbean island of Curacao and playing in the ocean at my usual surf beach. As I caught the energy of the ocean and began to race down the face of a wave on my board, the bright orange and red colors of the sunset reflected on the water all around me. Maybe it was the combination of the pelican gliding just above the water ahead of me, the sounds of distant seagulls, the taste of seawater in my mouth, and the red hues of sunset inside the wave. I don’t know what made the moment so special, all I know was of the unspeakably beautiful moment that was revealed to me.

Another important practice I undertook during “*The Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice*” was to craft creative and innovative presentations in my work as a naturalist and nature interpreter. As I began to change, so did my presentation style. I relied less on diffusing scientific information to the public and aimed more at engaging people with inspiration, humor and clarity; helping people connect their lives with the wonders found in nature. My only aspiration in my role is that I serve as a conduit to the magic and marvels the Earth wishes to reveal. One day, just maybe, one of my programs or a phrase I say in a

¹ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way Into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 13.

presentation may lead someone onto their own road of self-discovery and life-purpose by way of nature exploration.

It's evident that the Earth has entered a time of great transformation. So much of Earth is rapidly changing, mostly driven by human presence. As anthropocentric influence has begun to change the composition of the air, the water, the land, affecting all of Earth's life forms, we are beginning to realize that we humans have become a planetary force. We are now at par with the forces that brought about the emergence of life on Earth; the atmosphere, the hydrosphere and lithosphere. To the many of us who have been called to this great work of transformation, a key step will be our ability to discover and acquire the wisdom needed to function at the level of a planetary force. As such, and in the midst of our present day uncertainties, our path to the source of wisdom leads us once again back to nature itself. Earth's revelatory promise can guide us through this transformation if only we, as a collective species, are willing to listen. "*The Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice*" program is an important step along our path.

E. David Garcia has a passion for nature education and interpretation that emerged out of an unusual route: an early career in the resort industry that took him to live in nine countries. He now works as a bilingual naturalist for NOVA Parks in Northern Virginia. David delivers outdoor interpretive nature programs for thousands of people each year in NOVA Parks' 12,000-acre system of 32 parks, which serve the most populous region of the Washington, DC, area.

Present to Earth Through Song and Poetry

by

Morgan Josey Glover

I once heard a powerful statement from poet David Whyte, one that I've carried close during my journey through The Inner Life of the Child In Nature program. Whyte said, and I paraphrase, that as humans, we are the one part of creation that knows what it's like to live in exile. However, the moment we name the ways we feel we don't belong, we're already on our way home.²

His words came to mind during one of the exercises at Timberlake Earth Sanctuary in June 2016. In a moment of frustration, I decided to sing the ways I felt inadequate and disconnected from the natural world around me. Soon enough, the land started to sing back.

Present to you,
Present to you,
Here in my emptiness,
I'm present to you

Why am I here?
What do I do?
Here in my emptiness,
I'm present to you.

Earth speaks to me
But I cannot hear.
Despite my emptiness,
I'm present to you.

Estranged from the land,
No home that claims me.
Here in my emptiness,
I'm present to you.

Too smart to see,
Too deaf to hear.
Here in my emptiness,
I'm present to you.

² I heard this in an audio or video talk, but a version of Whyte's statement can be found here: <https://www.brainpickings.org/2015/06/29/david-whyte-belonging/>

*Tall and erect,
Rain on our leaves,
Ignored in our fullness,
But present to you.*

*Tiny in size,
Exposed to your world,
Crushed under foot,
But present to you.*

*Greener than money,
Outlasting your wealth,
Sustaining your breath,
We're present to you.*

*Voracious in youth,
Dissolved in cocoons,
Transforming your consciousness,
We're present to you.*

*Dense and exposed,
Red like your pain,
Washed out to oceans,
But present to you.*

*More ancient than worry,
Deeper than dreams,
Cradling all my children,
Earth's present to you.*

I suppose most of us who are on this path of earth listening and tending must grapple with feelings of inferiority before we discover our gifts and callings. Feelings of being too silly, weird or “woo.” Of being too educated or not educated enough. Of carrying too much privilege or not enough privilege. Of being too citified or suburban. Of suffering under the weight of our environmental sins. Of not being “indigenous.” But I’m learning that those inner demons are doorways to discovering the various roles we’ll play in the Great Work.

Facing my grief and inadequacies straight-on have enabled me to recover my poetic voice, one that I’d neglected since my college days. I decided to take up a practice of working with the exercises in Bill Plotkin’s book, *Wild Mind: A Field Guide to the Human Psyche*. The purpose of the book is to assist contemporary Westerners in developing psychological wholeness and the capacity for encountering soul and spirit through a nature-based approach. That wholeness includes capacities to be nurturing and generative (North), emotive and sensuous (South), clear-minded and light-hearted (East), and adventurous and visionary (West).

I spent the most time with two of those dimensions -- the Wild Indigenous One (South) and the Muse-Beloved (West), because those seemed to be areas that need cultivation. Even now, I am still learning to express and embody my emotions, eros and openness to grief, darkness and the imaginary realms.

In the summer of 2016 I traveled to Well of Mercy in Iredell County to spend a couple days relating to the land through the “Wild Indigenous One” archetype.

One walk in the damp woods behind the guest houses, I encountered a dragonfly, which to my amazement sat on a leaf for several minutes while I told it about myself and my various feelings of not being enough. In response, the dragonfly offered this song with me, one I later shared with my daughter:

I don't need much (3X)
To be beautiful

I carry Earth's magic within me
She opens my heart to her mystery
To enter her dream is my destiny
It sets me free

I don't need much (3X)
To be beautiful

On another walk that weekend, I beheld the stones, plants and insects on the trail, the experience triggering memories of my childhood in Jacksonville, North Carolina. And I was gifted with this song:

We're hidden from your vision
Do you have eyes to see
The wildness of creation
That lives in you and me?

We eat, we crawl
We dance, we fall
Our world is brown and green.
As you walk by, reserved and shy
We hope that we'll be seen

Release the over-cultured fears
That keep you bound inside
Learn our ways, you won't be afraid
Let nature be your guide

The comforts of your old world
We offer not to you.
Just the wildness of creation
And the beauty of your truth

I even contemplated Plotkin's use of the provocative phrase "polymorphous eroticism" and how it's reflected in my visceral connection with the plants and animals I encounter both at home and out and about in Greensboro.

I'm learning to relax,
To blush freely at the ripening fig and
Moonflower unfurling at dusk.

The towering poplar in the city woodland
Draws me out of myself. So too,
The spicy aromas of tulsi and lavender,
The motionless blue heron in the bog garden, and
The inscrutable moon traveling the night sky.

Of course, there's grief too.
So many beings I've ignored for too long,
So much wildness banished within and without,
So much suffering to hold within the soul,
So many shadows to coax back home.

Now I'm learning to relax,
To sing, to touch the polymorphous Earth,
And to weep freely.

I've encountered many teachers – Stephen Jenkinson, Brian Swimme, Robin Wall Kimmerer, and others – along the way in my journey toward soul discovery and earth connection. They've helped me sit with the cultural poverty of the modern Western world and explore both practical and creative ways of engaging the times we live in. One of those teachers is Nigerian poet-philosopher Bayo Akomolafe, whose counterintuitive explorations of human agency have spurred me to reevaluate my notions of power and listen for the voices within trees, stones and clouds.

"To touch the universe is to lose one's ground. To arrive is to be dismembered. To be born is to be reborn – and not in a neat way. I like to say that 'we are coming down to earth, and we will not arrive intact'. In saying this, I lunge at different expressions of hope that embrace shadows and the promiscuity of the world. A hope that situates us as part of a tapestry of sympoietic emergence, whose logic is always in the making. A hope that troubles and redeems all at once."

I too am still in the making. And I'm coming together in new ways, through following an earth-based spiritual path, and writing poetry and singing more (perhaps one day with other

³ Bayo Akomolafe, "The Edges in the Middle." <http://bayoakomolafe.net/project/the-edges-in-the-middle/>

people!). I'm committed to learning soul as "psycho-ecological niche"⁴ and to teaching my daughter the Universe Story and how to approach life from ecocentric and soulful perspectives. My 9-year-old daughter and I have worked on a Universe Story journal for the past year and we plan to participate in eco-contemplative fly fishing lessons with a former Inner Life graduate later this spring. I realize that I cannot genuinely encourage or affirm my daughter's encounters with the natural world if I have not developed my own capacity to be present to Earth.

I sometimes waver in my commitment to the "Great Work" and to entering Earth's dream during this time of political instability, social stress and environmental catastrophe. But programs like the Inner Life of the Child in Nature are like a beacon, leading back to this path through the cultural darkness.

You're needed now.
Don't be afraid to set out
Into the dark night.
Be curious.
Be conflicted.
Be uncertain about the revelatory
Powers of your peculiar dreams.
The fire will consume it all.
You once needed guarantees.
Now, each moment of
Becoming is your light.

Morgan Josey Glover lives in Greensboro, North Carolina. She has been on a path of discovering her place in the earth community since encountering the work of Thomas Berry and other cultural visionaries a decade ago. She previously wrote about green living and sustainability at the News & Record and has facilitated related discussion groups at Presbyterian Church of the Covenant. She now considers herself an apprentice to the plant world and her bioregion. A former journalist, Morgan works as a communications specialist at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

⁴ This novel and timely definition of soul comes from Bill Plotkin in his book, *Nature and the Human Soul: Cultivating Wholeness and Community in a Fragmented World* (2008, New World Library).

Softening to the Seasons

by

Heather Hill

Feelings of uncertainty flood my being as I stutter to begin the task of a written reflection on my practice. I sit down not truly knowing what my practice has been. This past June, I whole-heartedly set the intention to practice yoga outside, or incorporate physical movement, into my attempts to commune with the natural world. This was entirely inspired by a day at Timberlake Earth Sanctuary when the wind was particularly chatty, the trees danced a uniquely vibrant dance, and the prana within me was stirred, in much the same way the wind stirred the leaves in the trees. The intention was true but, as the year progressed, it changed in deep and unexpected ways.

As an after thought, I included the intention to continue to read philosophies, theories, and ideas that my cohort and I discussed during our bi-monthly meetings. The beauty of the language and beliefs used in the eco-contemplative writings of Thomas Berry, Robert Sardello, and Bill Plotkin have given me tools to communicate about this deep connection I've felt with the natural world since girlhood. While reading these great works, including publications from the Center for Education, Imagination, and the Natural World, as a 30-something navigating a "modern" world which does not make sense in too many ways, I recognize in myself the same longing for connection with the natural world that is so thoroughly discussed in the above referenced texts. An unnerving understanding that this "modern" world fosters loneliness despite access to ample "friends" via cables and radio waves, was all too apparent and inspires me to take action on these ideas. I want connectedness with the Mother Earth for the purpose of wholeness and mending the world one small action at a time.

My intended practice was meant to redirect the fear ignited by the modern world into a way to connect with the natural world. The few times I practiced yoga outdoors, I felt more self-conscious than connected. I thought setting an intention to practice yoga in the natural world would allow me to better connect with and commune with it. I connect with the inner Divine so well through practicing yoga, including the postures, breathing, and meditation. That connection to the Divine feels so similar to the connectedness with the natural world, likely because it is the same Divinity. But, through reflection, I have come to realize yoga may not always be the direct path to connect with nature, or the tool I need to experience the Silence and stillness Sardello so beautifully describes.

I think back to Colette Segalla's entry in *Only The Sacred* entitled "Research: Mother Nature Has Some Ideas About This, Too."⁵ Her research is intriguing and necessary, but, as I reflect on my practice, I return to the closing segment of her entry. She makes a very specific point about the "chance" encounters that brought her to the Center, a principle at work in her meeting Carolyn Toben, the invitation to join the Inner Life of the Child in Nature program and the beginning of her graduate program. She writes, "That principle is that this work serves a larger purpose that has its own ways of ordering things which may at times be beyond our conscious awareness."² While I do feel my way to this program was completely by chance, I'm struck more by the realization of Mother Nature's role in the evolution of my practice. When I was called to connect, I found a way to connect purely.

I spent the previous summer submerged in the natural world, guiding and encouraging young adults to notice and be present to the natural world around them through outdoor yoga practice, meditation, silent nature walks, and the "ripple" activity shared by Sandy last year. I noticed a huge difference in their interactions with me, with their campers, and with the natural world. There was an appreciation and honoring of the Earth amongst the whole group that I hadn't noticed in past summer staff.

As fall approached, a new career, location, and lifestyle required an adaptation to my practice, which felt less natural. I practiced yoga in my front yard, worried and stifled by the stigma my conservative community may place on the "weird lady, doing weird things." I looked to the stars and moon to find comfort daily in a community in which I didn't quite know how to fit in. My husband and I slowly began to find trails to hike and the simple yet majestic, welcoming waterfall within walking distance of our new home. Walking to and meditating by this waterfall became a favorite way to incorporate my practice of yoga in the natural world. The water made slowing the mind and breath happen so naturally. The rushing water was so loud that separation from the natural elements almost seemed impossible. The waterfall almost willingly cleared my thoughts and joined in the whisper of my mantra. Leaving that waterfall each time was like walking away from time spent with a dear old friend, feeling fulfilled, loved, and open to connect more readily with others.

The oranges, reds, and yellows of the changing leaves made way for grays and browns as winter slowly crept in. A mild winter allowed for occasional hikes and walks to the waterfall. But still, much as the Mother Earth, the need for movement gave way to the need for stillness and hibernation. Gazing at the moon and stars, an ever constant and quick way to connect, became my primary way to commune. There is something to be said for the clarity of a winter night sky. Beyond my deep pleas to the sky in the dark, the winter months inspired me to share mindfulness practices with a small rambunctious group of second grade boys. It was quite an experiment and with each group session, we grew closer and deeper in our connection with one another. However, it wasn't until we started taking our quiet walks around the school that the group dynamic started to shift. Small moments of sharing in the

⁵ Colette Segalla, "Research: Mother Nature Has Some Ideas About This, Too," in *Only the Sacred: Transforming Education in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Peggy Whalen-Levitt (Greensboro, NC: The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World, 2011), 71-79.

² *Ibid.*, 77.

communion of the natural world led to deep connections with other beings, as well as a visible settling for these youngsters.

With the reemergence of the melodic songbird tunes and blossoming of colors this spring, movement has become a part of my practice again, but with a desire to pause more amongst the movement. My urgency to connect with nature has become more fervent, as this spring has also brought the blessing of a new soul, connected to my heart and body. I walk around our neighborhood or to the waterfall eager to take it all in with a completely different reason to connect. I feel that he/she is connecting and benefiting from the Silence in these moments. Not through the senses, but through the essence of connectedness and stillness. The intensity of this connection is so much greater for me these days. Tears literally flood my eyes with the changing colors in the sky. I giggle without control when hearing the mockingbird showing off in the branches of the walnut tree next to our porch. The dogs in our neighborhood seem to know me now and their excited wagging-tailed greetings spread the warmth of love through my body. The fields of soybeans dance as the breeze blows, and I get chills knowing all the plants thrive together. The trees tower over me as I walk along the sidewalk lining our street, making me feel small and protected. I stop in my tracks when I unexpectedly see a bird nesting, warming its offspring in hopes for the future.

My practice has changed with the seasons, without direction from my own willingness or intentions. For once, I relinquished control and with that release, a softening overtook my practice. Mother Nature's hand in the seasons of my practice has directed me to seek Silence through a means that was perfect for each moment. In my application for this program, I expressed hope that I may personally explore this connectedness with the natural world more deeply in hopes of sharing and fostering that with my nieces and nephews, and hopefully my future children. The timing of our first child does not go unnoticed and encourages the softening toward another unexplored season of my life.

Heather Hill is a school psychologist in Burke County Public Schools, camp director at heart, yoga instructor, wife, aunt to nine, and a mother-to-be. An old soul who connects with her inner child by climbing trees, playing tag with her nieces and nephews, and singing silly camp songs with anyone who will join in. Communing with nature began as a young child for Heather in the mountains of North Carolina at John's River Valley Camp. She still continues to eagerly explore the endless possibilities of connection with the natural world.

Animal Arts

by

Joy Kennedy

This morning was a beautiful, cool, rainy morning with fog covering the mountains and just enough rain to feel it's touch but not enough to feel like your hair was getting wet, just damp from the gentle drizzle. The Beaver Clan (first grade) helped me feed the horses, filling the grain buckets and handing them out to each horse. We observed the silent language of the horse. Hart, the lead horse, pinned his ears and with this one swift gesture he told the rest of his herd to stay back while he ate and we all *listened... Boundaries*. Then we sat in silence, watching, listening to the horses chew their food. Crunch, crunch, crunch... Sitting on the other side of the fence we began chatting quietly about how incredible it is that horses chew up to 40,000 times a day! After some time, the Beaver Clan thanked me and the horses, and we began to talk about what we would be doing for our Animal Arts class that afternoon as we walked back towards the red Yome to start their school work. Last Thursday we spent the afternoon lying in the grass observing our new baby chicks as they foraged on a sunny day while we protected them, building a fence with our legs and bodies. We had so much fun talking about how big they look when we lay down and look up at them and how different the perspective is when we make ourselves as small as they are. Each child took a turn sharing what they loved about each baby chick. Some were silly, some were so tender with their comments — admiring their beautiful feathers, beaks, and wings... Today, I told the Beaver Clan, we will be learning about our new Livestock Guardians, two sister Great Pyrenees puppies, Virago Pearl and Lyra, who just moved to the Sanctuary to protect the horses, sheep, chickens, bees and bunnies. I can't wait for today's class.

At the foot of Young Pisgah Ridge is 90 acres, a Heart-Moving place called Sacred Mountain Sanctuary where a circle of individuals are dedicated to the recognition, cultivation and preservation of sacred connection with self, others and the natural world. Our mission is to provide an environment and immersive experiences that awaken one's being to the sacred nature of all things. Here we have a kindergarten and four learning circles up to eighth grade (High School starting in the fall, 2017). Beyond the four Yomes, which are home to the grades children's learning circles, there is a field that is a couple of acres, surrounded by forest. The field is oblong in shape and is home to horses, sheep, chickens, bees, bunnies, two livestock guardian dogs, and a garden. This is Rumi's Field. The horses live on an outer ring that makes a completed kind-of circle; there is an outer fence and an inner fence that spans anywhere from 12 to 20 feet apart in width, which creates a track system, called a Paradise Paddock that our horses live on. This system allows the horses to always be moving and grazing on hay, this mimics their life grazing in the wild, before we domesticated them and put them on highly cultivated grass fields. They travel along this track all day, moving

and eating at different hay ‘stations’, spending time in the shade of trees or under one of their shelters or down at the trickling creek that carries the overflow from our delicious spring, known as Moira’s Well. Inside the horse track live the sheep, where they are rotated through to graze, giving other pastures a rest, to re-seed and grow again. Inside the sheep pasture will be a garden and a beautiful structure that provides shelter for our bunnies and for our Animal Arts classes. Here in the very center we will also have bees and a garden. It is also where our two guardian dogs live. Describing this gives me chills and brings tears to my eyes thinking about the fact that this exists and in some cases is currently being born into existence — the bunny habitat is almost finished and the bees are moving to the center over the next few weeks. I can hardly believe that I am a part of co-creating this experience that is a part of the children’s daily education. Every morning the children of The Learning Village tend one of the aspects of the animals and land, completing their morning chores. Each morning of the week a class will feed the horses, next day the bunnies, the chickens, the sheep, etc. They also rotate caring for the spring and the land or gardens. In the afternoon I have the privilege of teaching Animal Arts classes to each learning circle.

“Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I’ll meet you there.
When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase “each other” doesn’t make any sense.”¹

~Rumi

I’m not entirely sure I have a full understanding of how I came to be where I am doing what I’m doing but somehow I was offered an opportunity to start an Animal Program for a small homeschool cooperative. A door opened for me to do something that rang a bell so loud and so clear that not even my greatest fears or doubts could have stopped me from following this path. No obstacle was too big... and still isn’t. The program thrives and lives within me and on the land and within the children in ways that I could never have imagined. I am brought to my knees day and night with a deep and overwhelming understanding that this unfolding was beyond myself. I can feel something so deep within me acknowledging a truth so awesome, a knowing that this is right where I am supposed to be. I know I dreamt of this possibility when I was a child, when everything was possible, before so many told me that so many things were impossible. It’s just not true. Everything is possible, the dreams you dreamt of as a child, the things you loved the most should and can be a part of your daily life, unfractured, whole and complete. The seeds of dreams that were planted in your youngest imaginations are real and they should never be ignored.

When I began this journey two years ago to start an Animal Program for The Learning Village, I knew with a deep soul quivering knowing that this was ‘it’, the big ‘IT’. So, here I am co-creating an Animal Arts program for children, teaching Equine Forest Yoga and

¹ Jalaluddin Rumi, *The Essential Rumi*, translated by Coleman Barks (Edison, NJ: Castle Books, 1997), 36.

managing a Community Supported Horsemanship program for those who want to ‘own’ a horse in community, in Sanctuary, in an environment that holds sacred every living thing and holds sacred every living moment... the experience of riding a horse through the woods is a spiritual experience, sitting in a field watching sheep graze brings a smile to your face, finding eggs every morning brings excitement and anticipation of a daily gift, holding a bunny calms your nervous system, hearing the humming of bees is enlivening, the dogs bring joy to your heart and digging in the dirt makes you feel real, watching things grow and die and grow again. I had no idea that my path, my deepest work would be to create an Animal Arts Curriculum, to birth it into being, to share it, live it and literally never put it down. This is my life, my love, my passion. It is deeply humbling work.

It is so hard to translate the real life Animal Arts curriculum that occurs every day. The moments when a child walks up to a horse in the field all by themselves or when a child holds a newborn bunny for the first time, or when they can not spend enough time with baby chickens because they love them ever so much. I consider these moments the real curriculum.

Each class does have scaffolding, a structure — little mini- lessons that are about 10 to 25 minutes. Every class, even my riding lessons and equine yoga classes open with this verse:

“I am here in this time and place
The Earth is below me the Sky is above me
Air, Fire, Water and Earth surround me
I am rooted in the Earth
I reach through the Stars
I come to my center
Within me Earth and Sky entwine.”²

We begin our classes with topics that teach us about the animals, giving us a deeper understanding of how they ‘work’ anatomically and how they think, why they live in herds or dens or hives. We learn about teeth, digestive systems, diet, basic needs, animal psychology, anatomy, safety, husbandry, we polish tack, and mend structures. These lessons are short, 10 to 25 minutes based on the age/grade of the children. After the mini-lesson we may spend time Beholding the animal, be it bee, bunny, sheep, horse or dog, making our own observations about what we’ve just learned. Then we have the opportunity to ride a horse or care for the animals, administering medicine if needed or completing a chore, filling water troughs, mucking manure or grooming the animals. This is the ‘academic’ work. Most importantly, each class teaches us how we can relate to the animals and connect with them, approaching the animal’s boundaries with reverence and respect, love and understanding. We learn the silent language of the animal and they in turn learn ours, building a deep inter-species community through daily communion.

² quote from contemporary astrologer Diotima Mantinea, who wrote this verse for guided meditations and is aware of the fact that I use it daily with my classes.

“Human to Animal Communion is unfailingly a bridge to our reunion with Earth Soul. Within the human-to-animal communion here, lies the purest return to the totality of our Belonging.”³

Sigh, I am here in this time and place...

"All the birds and creatures are unutterably themselves. Everything is waiting for you."⁴

Joy Kennedy lives and works at Sacred Mountain Sanctuary where she stewards the Animal Program for The Learning Village, teaches Animal Arts classes, gives private horsemanship experiences for all ages, teaches Equine Forest Yoga, manages a Community Supported Horsemanship program and offers guided trail rides. She is mother to Henry and wife to Ben.

³ quote from Septimbor Lim, Founder of The Learning Village at Sacred Mountain Sanctuary.

⁴ David Whyte, *Everything is Waiting for You* (Langley, Washington, Many Rivers Company, 2006).

Reflections on a Year of Devotional Dawns

by

Joe Klein

One in All One

sitting silently in stillness
the forest feels like it flows
around and under and through me
as I settle down and loosen up
my tensions untangling
the societal wiring learned into me

connection with source
collects again and concentrates
my focus into the all oneness
where no separation isolates me
into only human beingness

sounds of wind in branches above
and creeks flowing below
frame the silence of this escarpment valley

what emergence
what restful welcoming
this presence

this water flowing from this steep crevice
this moss that's growing from rotting tree trunk
this fresh budding branchling sprouting out from oak bark

this is me
this is we
this is all of us

Gaea emanating
this is all part of me
all that grows and flows
around and through me

all that I'll ever be
and what my flesh and bones
will eventually return to be
buried within and recycle into

manchild of living sacred ground
my true identity
earth walking as a man

Devotional Dawns ~ Morning Sabbaths

My practice for the past year has been to devote the morning hours to cultivation of deep gladness and a sense of the sacred. Inspired by the writings of Thomas Berry and my mentors and fellow members in the two-year Inner Life cohort at the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World (CEINW), I kept it simple in the planning and simple in the execution. I had set myself up with a day job where on most days I did not have to go anywhere till 10 am or later. So, I often had the luxury to wake, stretch & meditate and then go for a silent meander and sit outside in the yard or forest near my Blue Ridge mountain home.

Whatever I found myself doing in these dawn hours, I paid close attention to the joy I was feeling as my more-than-human neighbors in the yard around me were waking into the day with a morning chorus of birdsong. I made it my devotional practice to intentionally take in and viscerally feel the blessing of the gift of this life in Earth. Author Rick Hanson (*Hardwiring Happiness, Just One Thing & Buddha's Brain*) invites us all to spend more time *taking in the good* by intentionally dwelling on and prolonging the visceral and emotional experiences that bring us joy so as to strengthen the neural pathways associated with these states of mind and body.

Brother David Steindl-Rast invokes us to remember that each new day is given to us ~ “It’s given to you. It’s given, and the only appropriate response is gratitude.” I often began this remembering right from the moment my eyes opened – or even before that when I heard the first notes of the morning chorus. How sweet the sound. I work at training my brain to keep attending to just those sounds and not get pulled into listening to my own mental chatter of thinking about personal problems or the societal needs and worries of the day ahead. No easy task that training.

I have spent the past 17 years practicing the daily disciplines of meditation and mindfulness and even teaching it for the past 8 years – still the mind has a mind of its own and it’s so self-centered and anthropocentric by habit. So often my mind attempts to go straight into it’s focus about people centric events and strivings while tuning out the more-than-human cornucopia that presents itself for my beholding, belonging and contemplating pleasure.

“Not this dawn, not on my devotional watch,” I would sometimes say to myself as I listened more intently to the birdsong, looked out the window to take in the weather or smiled some inward recognition of how lucky I felt, how rich, how happy to be waking up here where the wild things still dwell. While I did not start any of these practices new this year, I did bring a renewed intention and enthusiasm to get to know my more-than-human relatives in my neighborhood more intimately and to steep my consciousness in the gladitude and happiness of a man who knows the richness of his life.

After a year I have come to know eight specific bird couples in my yard by sight and song. I follow the teachings of Jon Young and Tom Brown Jr. for my outside morning meanders and Sit Spot practice where I give full, undivided attention to birds and all else moving in the yard and forest. As Jon Young says, this practice allows my brain patterning to revive the pathways and chords of connection between my senses and my consciousness and the whole eco-community within which I live. As these chords grow I feel and know that I am no longer a stranger, tourist or by-passer in the natural world. I am re-immersed as a full-fledged member of this vibrant community.

Now as the spring comes on I have the new plants sprouting all around me to attend to. I'll be using my senses and *Botany in A Day* to learn 7 major plant families in the coming months. How rich am I!!

Joe Klein is a Licensed Professional Counselor who specializes in working with youth, families and groups struggling with addictions, eating disorders, grief, loss and trauma. Joe holds a vision of a new paradigm in youth development where teens are supported in cultivating their birth-right capacities for joy & love, wonder & curiosity, deep Earth connection, wisdom & inner genius. He is the co-founder of Inward Bound Mindfulness Education ([iBme](#)), a non-profit organization that runs mindfulness retreats for teens and young adults. He teaches a graduate course on mindfulness applications for counselors and educators at Radford University and leads workshops and retreats on Mindfulness as Self-Care for Helping Professionals in Southwest Virginia. In 2014 Joe helped to found Springhouse Community School, which provides learner-centered and project-based education through mentoring for students in grades 7-12 in Floyd, Virginia. Joe brings playfulness, Earth connection and whole brain/whole body integration to his work with students and professionals seeking to find balance in modern lifestyles and professional careers. Joe is an avid gardener, outdoorsman and athlete.

In March of 2017, Joe helped to launch a new addiction treatment program for adults with severe substance use disorders in Southwest Virginia that incorporates mindfulness, yoga, chi kung, ear acupuncture, nutrition, art, poetry and daily connection to nature as the primary therapeutic interventions. Clients come for 6 hours/day, 5 days/week and steep in these practices for 8 weeks to develop new healthy behavioral habits and brain pathways. It is called Recovery Dojo and it is where people train to gain balance, strength and serenity.

A Flight of Silence

by

Stephanie Kriner

On the banks of the Potomac River in Southern Maryland, where a shrine to a Piscataway Indian Chief has weathered and fog often rolls in, Canada Geese congregate. I used to visit this place regularly while studying creative nonfiction in graduate school. During my trips there, I did not find a reason to take much notice of the geese. Nor did I find the silence.

I only became aware of the geese while researching a story of the late chief's funeral there. But I simply could not bring myself to envision a moment described by several witnesses, when a flock of geese in V-formation swooped over the grave of the fallen chief, just after the last shovelful of dirt fell upon it. I wrote: "The birds create a rude ruckus – hyperventilating, screaming, bantering and squawking – but the mourners recognize an image of peace and perfection in them." Since encountering silence, I have started to understand why I struggled to capture the story I so desperately wanted to tell. Yet, I have just begun to believe in the depths of my own abilities to connect with other subjects in the natural world.

My practice sometimes unfolds ritualistically in the mornings, when I am alone and everybody else in my house is asleep. I watch the cycles of the moon through my kitchen window. Or, I step outside onto my deck just before or after sunrise to hear the chorus of birds in my backyard.

In the dark, cool mornings, I practice listening. Sometimes I can sense my feet on the earth. Sometimes I can feel, not just see, the presence of the trees. In moments of insight, I have anticipated the wind before it ruffled the branches tall above me or heard the rush of rain before it dampened my skin. In the interplay between a rising sun and fading moon, I try to remember where or who I am. I practice opening myself to the silence.

In this space one January morning, when shades of orange and pink powdered the horizon and the moon lingered behind the dusk, I heard the familiar honks of Canada geese, and I looked up to behold the beauty and grace of their perfect V formation; I actually *saw* these birds for the first time. As my heart showered them with a warm welcome, a rush of energy and wonder for the universe awakened in me.

Like most of my encounters with silence over the past two years, this one came unexpectedly and lasted for just a moment, only until the geese disappeared from my view, their honking out of earshot. The moon's outline now hung barely visible among the clouds. The horizon glowed a solid, brilliant orange. A vague awareness of where I stood swept over me before fading into the obscurity of the brightening day.

Then my stomach sank as my senses registered what I already knew, that something was terribly off. Time ceased making sense. It was winter but the geese were already flying back south. In a few weeks, spring would arrive early in much of the southeastern United States, and I would weep while listening to a scientist on NPR who had witnessed the increase of melting ice in the Arctic. Even before knowing these facts, on that morning when the geese arrived, the natural world seemed on the brink of imminent danger.

My mind drifted to other surreal thoughts. I wondered whether the newly arriving geese were heading to mix with the permanent resident geese living yearlong at the lake near my house. Would they know how to relate to those who never developed the instinct to fly home?

How did some geese lose that instinct?

How did I lose mine?

Slowly, I have begun to recognize the wonders of the Earth, to wrap myself in the comfort that they provide answers to some of these questions (if only I can learn to listen more intently). I went walking with my 7-year-old son in mid March, deep into our early spring, and wondered why many trees were blooming in red instead of green. Then my son scooped a bundle of the red “leaves” from the ground. Gently he clasped them between his tiny, dirt-smudged fingers and held them up to show me.

Oblong, teardrop-shaped petals dangled in a cluster of tiny branches that had broken off a limb from the wind. Their colors swirled in hues of rose, burgundy, yellow and lime. The petals paired together, facing each other like broken hearts. Immediately, my son recognized what I could not. “They are helicopters. Mommy,” he said, “and here are their seeds, inside this pouch.” Aghast, I did not know that these colorful petals would transform into the brown Maple seedpods that my children toss into the air, and I did not realize, until then, that their job was to carry seeds. I stroked the delicate petals as tenderly as I would a beloved pet. Then my son tucked them gently into his pocket, as if we now had a compass to guide our walk. When we arrived home, he placed them in our yard and within weeks, they dried and turned a recognizable brown, whirling magically when we tossed them into the air. I marveled at how these beautiful sacks carried and delivered hope for new life.

Weeks later while camping on a lake in Virginia, my son pointed to what I recognized as stubby, decaying stumps jetting out of a murky pond. “Those are roots that will grow into trees,” he said. Immediately, I doubted his observations but soon I doubted my own instead. “How do you know?” I asked and he replied, “Because I have watched them.” My own child possesses an ability to know and imagine beyond my comprehension. I had to smile at the irony that *I* once felt compelled to bring my children closer to the natural world.

I am embarrassed that I still do not know a lot about the living subjects that I have come to behold in a new way: the names of trees or birds; the depths of space; the various stories that make up the universe. (My least favorite subject in school, Science, never interested me until now). Yet, I yearn to connect to the natural world through my senses, and I have developed a surprising fondness for squirrels, owls, trees and geese. I can’t help but giggle inwardly at squirrels chasing one another, and I hug trees with my cheek pressed soothingly

into their bark. Like a child, I must sniff, touch and embrace the world outside. But for geese, I feel most grateful.

Today, I no longer hear a ruckus from flocks of geese and, like the mourners at that funeral so long ago, I sense that these birds represent something much deeper. I am learning that their various honks have different moods, tones and pitches, and their banter captivates me with a message I long to understand. Without knowing how to listen, I undoubtedly missed an essential component of that story about the chief's funeral.

At least now, I would notice the beauty of the geese that reside on that Potomac River bank where he was laid to rest. I believe that geese know something much more – much bigger – than I do. I feel overwhelmed, yet secured, by the power of their wings, the purpose and direction of their flight: so definitive and so true. Perhaps this assuredness of time and place allures me more to migrating geese over their stationary counterparts. A realization that their wisdom of the universe could spread from their joints to their wings' tips, taking them where they need to go, compels me most. My body braces to take flight.

Yet, in the moonlight, I have searched for stillness. For a while, I slept in too late to catch the moon's phases; it was a period of time when insomnia was causing me to have early morning sluggishness. On the day when I finally returned to my ritual, I peeked out my kitchen window to the place where the moon had appeared every other time; it was not there. Clouds were blocking it, I assumed. Then, something lured me to another window, and there a half moon shone a dusty silvery hue. I sucked in my breath, stunned by this drastic change of direction.

How had I lived my life in such oblivion? I had just barely become aware of my bearings when I lost track again. Later, I stepped outside to listen for the geese. The migrating ones had passed long ago; I had not heard them since February but I so desperately wanted to watch them fly by again. A few crows squawked and landed in my trees but no geese appeared. Time had passed too quickly for me to witness change yet again.

It is nearly May now, the trees have bloomed green and my practice continues to evolve. When I listen, maybe I can sometimes hear those resident geese honking at the lake. I do miss the greetings of the new arrivals. Yet, perhaps the geese that linger throughout the seasons belong embedded more deeply in my soul. Maybe they are more like me, after all.

Originally from Virginia, *Stephanie Kriner* lives in Greensboro where she enjoys hiking with her husband, her two sons and dog. She loves being a mother and joined the Inner Life program in hopes of forming a stronger connection to the natural world for both herself and her children. She currently is searching for ways to contribute to positive change in the world.

Silence Heartfulness Sacred Healing

by

Susan Licher



Silence

Our journey started with silence. I am thankful for the silence and those that joined me on this journey. I have come to feel the goldenness in silence and to smell the blooming of silence. Silence is my starting place and I come around and around again to it. In silence I find these other words, I find myself, I find connection.

Heartfulness

Silence can open me to heartfulness. This term is new to me and I am just beginning to learn and have a bit of understanding. But I trust its importance and its place here and in my life. I am allowing space for it and its newness and its messiness here and in my life.

Sacred

I was scared of the sacred. It had been tainted, it had been stolen from me. But here, on this journey, I am beginning to learn to embrace it. Nature was always soul soothing but giving it sacred status made me too vulnerable. So I'm learning to be vulnerable, to be open, to be imperfect, to be a communion of subjects, to be part of instead of apart from Nature.

Healing

Nature has always been my safe haven but this journey has shifted my healing deeper. For the first time, through this journey, at this Earth Sanctuary, I thought "I am glad to be alive!" This learning to be a communion of subjects, to be present to silence and to the sacred has allowed me to heal in a way I never thought possible.

The journey continues and I will learn these things over and in new ways and I will learn new things too. Right now, I'm learning to be content, to be open, to allow rather than try to force, to be imperfect, to express myself in new ways, to believe in and be present to the sacred, to be a participant in the "dream of the earth," to meet the world's deep needs with my deepest gladness.

The Mandala – My Creation Story

Because my original intention was to express myself creatively and share it, I decided that I did want to incorporate that somehow in this final piece. So I created my personal mandala, my personal creation story and journey. I chose a mandala because of the summer programs using them with the youth and that time was so special to me. I chose four words

to symbolize the seasons, the rhythm of life, and the four directions. The Silence is golden and blooming. The Heartfulness is a new experience (pinks are not “my colors” but here I’m allowing it space) and non-linear, messy, emotional (again new to me). Sacredness I find in trees, in forests. Healing is blue and watery because I find it in water and because healing continues to roll in like waves. Each one connects closely to the two pieces it touches and all come together at the center and are part of my formation and center/core. The braided yarn encircling it touches on the interwovenness of my life, gives texture and depth. The unbraided pieces hanging from the bottom, represent the part of my formation and journey that is not yet completed.

Susan Licher is finding her way in life. Currently in a temporary position at the Walden Woods Project in Concord, Massachusetts, she has moved from the scientific and logical side of environmentalism to understanding that without changing our heart and soul, her environmental work was just forcing temporary solutions onto unwilling participants and the deeper issues were never addressed by these logical solutions. This led her to seeking environmental education but this too felt too small. Finally, at Inner Life, she’s beginning to see change and an education that addresses these deep issues.

I Stop to Smell the Roses

by

Stephanie Nixon

I stop to smell the roses.
I pull over and listen to the Spring Peepers.
I hold up traffic to watch a rainbow.
I wander from the path to feel the moss
and taste the Violets...

But it is not enough...

I want a world where our senses are drenched in the earth's beauty without pause.
A world where the forest is not an escape but our home.
Where children are born, welcomed by the scent of local flora,
raised under the stars,
and grow with the waxing moon.

I sense it is coming.

We are remembering...
we are not here to keep doing;
the human race is not a race.

We are awakening...
listening to the wisdom of the trees.
Lying our weary hearts upon the Earth.

Magic is returning to this place.

Stephanie Nixon has been a teacher for twelve years, working with children from 6 weeks old to 12 years old. She is presently a kindergarten teacher at The Learning Village in Candler, NC where she gets to frolic in the forests, fields, and streams with the children. Next year, Stephanie will be assisting in the kindergarten at Rainbow Community School while beginning to work on her dream of creating a community early childhood support center for families in the Asheville, NC, area. Her hobbies include reading, learning plant medicine, and hiking and camping with her 3 children.

Children, Ecology and Spirituality

by

Betsy Thigpen

Beginning

I will celebrate my 80th birthday in October of this year. So what possible rationale could I have devised for enrolling in the program, *The Inner Life of the Child in Nature*, with not only a two-year commitment of time, but high expectations for new learning and even personal transformation? How could I, at my age, possibly expect to meaningfully contribute to a shared experience with a group of otherwise young, highly intelligent, creative, and visionary professionals committed to resurrecting the natural world as a critical necessity in the lives of children?

I continue to experience delightful amusement with my decision to participate in the Inner Life program at my age. I chuckle and even laugh outright at the thought of enrolling in a two-year program at age 78. Surely this must be one of the most humorously, *optimistic* ventures one could embark on at this time of life. But here I am near the completion of the program and, indeed, so grateful for the experiences, learning, and growth that have focused, changed and inspired me in so many ways.

Throughout these two years and participation in *The Inner Life of the Child in Nature*, my focus has been consistent with my professional life and work to enhance the lives of young children. During the last ten years of my professional career, I specifically worked out of a wonderful “ah ha” moment of inspiration that occurred in 2003: ***We need to reconnect children with the natural world.*** The ah ha moment led to a one-year stint as a Visiting Scholar at The Natural Learning Initiative in the School of Design at NC State University and a resulting briefing paper, *Head Start Growth and Readiness in the Outdoor World (HS-GROW): Linking Research to Practice*.¹ The briefing paper proposed “to set in motion in the national Head Start community adoption of a new **HS-GROW** child development paradigm that would enhance the development of young children in all developmental domains as set forth in *The Head Start Leaders Guide to Positive Child Outcomes*”² by moving learning and

¹Nilda Cosco, Betsy Thigpen, Robin Moore, Marce O'Brien, and Colleen Mendel, *Head Start Growth and Readiness in the Outdoor World (HS-GROW): Linking Research to Practice* (Washington, DC: Head Start Bureau, 2004), 1.

²*The Head Start Leaders Guide to Positive Child Outcomes* (Washington, DC: Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, Head Start Bureau 2003).

development outdoors in well-designed, natural learning environments. Following the personal *awakening* to the need to reconnect children to nature, I spent the final 10 years of my professional career providing training and technical assistance to Head Start and other early childhood teachers and child care providers with the goal of shifting their paradigms of classroom learning and development from indoors to outdoors.

My two-year involvement in the Inner Life program has been concurrent with an opportunity to serve as Chair of the Children's Ministry Committee at my church, Umstead Park United Church of Christ (UPUCC), thereby providing me with 60+ easily available "subjects" to learn with and several acres of beautiful, wooded, natural land adjoining the church property that provided an ideal "lab" setting for experimentation. In addition, the church sits next to Umstead State Park, which provides even greater potential for children and parents to interact and commune with the natural world.

So as our 2015-17 class began to articulate individual, specific practices for our two-year period, I, not surprisingly, chose a practice focused on the learning and development of young children. I articulated my specific goal and practice as follows:

To identify ways to communicate and share with children the joy, awe, beauty, and surprises of the natural world and concretely conceptualize practices for children to experience Earth as Sacred Community in a church or religious learning environment.

As I worked over the months to ponder and eventually began to operationalize my goal and practice, I was significantly influenced by the wisdom of the Inner Life faculty, their recommended readings, discussions, direct experiences with the 2015-17 participants, as well as my own personal reflections during this time.

I continue to reflect on the rich experience at The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World and acknowledge my indebtedness to the *Inner Life of the Child in Nature* program for key, thought-provoking ideas and concepts that have now settled and become a natural part of my own thinking, being and seeing related to children's development and learning. Following are some of these expanded thoughts as well as a bit of new and extended learning. In my conclusion, I will share how this enhanced learning has been used to provide specific opportunities for children at UPUCC to reconnect with nature and experience *Earth as Sacred Community*.

Thomas Berry

Thomas Berry, who assumed numerous life roles as monk, scholar, priest, mystic, cultural historian, shaman, and storyteller, was one of the key visionaries for The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World. The Center holds programs at Timberlake Earth Sanctuary, a beautiful wooded and primarily undeveloped expanse of land that offers its visitors unlimited opportunities for direct contact and interaction with the natural world. Exploring that land has brought fresh and deep meaning to Berry's writings, especially as I focus on religious education for children and children's spiritual development in general.

Berry's inspiration and involvement in the creation of The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World is reflected in the Center's mission, "to bring into vision a new relationship between the inner life of the child and the beauty, wonder and intimacy of the universe."³ Berry recognized and confessed that "my generation has been an autistic generation in its inability to establish any intimate rapport with the natural world." He proposes that "our present need is to know just how to move out of this alienation of the human into a more viable mode of presence to the natural world."⁴

We learn through multiple sources that Berry's strong commitment and encouragement to love, care for, and preserve natural environments was influenced by his deep and abiding sense of the sacred as it relates to the natural world. Wayne Teasdale in his book, *The Mystic Heart*, reflects on Berry's observations of "how much our understanding of God is based on our experience of the natural world."⁵ Teasdale who knew Berry well, writes that "Tom Berry calls the aesthetic and spiritual values of the natural world modes of divine presence."⁶ Berry says that "the natural world is not simply a usable thing, not an inert mode of being awaiting its destiny to be manipulated by the divine or exploited by the human."⁷ And he emphatically states that "we should be clear about what happens when we destroy modes of divine presence."⁸

In his book, *The Sacred Universe*, Berry explores divine presence and ecology not only in traditional western religion, but using his extensive study and knowledge of major world religions, religion in the global human community as well. Berry lays out a bold and clear vision for all 21st century religions, which he calls "an ecologically sensitive spirituality."

*We need to move from a spirituality of alienation from the natural world to a spirituality of intimacy with the natural world, from a spirituality of the divine as revealed in written scriptures to a spirituality of the divine as revealed in the visible world about us, from a spirituality concerned with justice only for humans to a spirituality of justice for the devastated Earth community, from the spirituality of the prophet to the spirituality of the shaman.*⁹

This new spirituality, Berry believes, "will need the guidance of the prophet, the priest, the saint, the yogi, the Buddhist monk, the Chinese sage, the Greek philosopher, and the modern scientist."¹⁰

³ Carolyn W. Toben, *Recovering a Sense of the Sacred: Conversations with Thomas Berry* (Whitsett, NC: Timberlake Earth Sanctuary Press, 2012), 94.

⁴ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York, NY: Three Rivers Press, 1999), 79.

⁵ Wayne Teasdale, *The Mystic Heart, Discovering A Universal Spirituality in the World's Religions* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 1999), 195.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 195.

⁷ Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1998), 132.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁹ Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe: Earth, Spirituality, and Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2009), 133.

¹⁰ Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe: Earth*, 135.

He says, “We now have a new understanding of the universe, how it came into being and the sequence of transformations through which it has passed. This new story of the universe is now needed as our sacred story.”¹¹

In addition to Berry’s recognition of the divine in the natural world, the need for a new sacred story of the universe, a new spirituality that will result in a strong commitment to the care and preservation of the earth, he had strong opinions and recommendations regarding the education of young children and its role in creating “*an ecologically sensitive spirituality*” for society. In addressing these issues in his book, *The Great Work*, Berry concurs with Montessori that “only when the child is able to identify its own center with the center of the universe does education really begin.”¹² In discussions with Carolyn Toben, Berry further reiterated that, “the long-term survival of our children will actually depend on a new relationship between the natural and the human worlds.”¹³

Berry’s deep love and hope for 21st century children, all children, human and otherwise, is reflected in the dedication of his book, *The Great Work*.

To the children
To all the children
To the children who swim beneath
The waves of the sea, to those who live in
The soils of the Earth, to the children of the flowers
In the meadows and the trees in the forest, to
All those children who roam over the land
And the winged ones who fly with the winds,
To the human children too, that all the children
May go together into the future in the full
Diversity of their regional communities.¹⁴

Carolyn Toben

Carolyn Toben, founder of The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World, reflects on personal conversations with Thomas Berry regarding his ideas on children, ecology, and spirituality in her book, *Recovering A Sense of the Sacred: Conversations with Thomas Berry*. She shares that on one occasion after giving Berry an update on the Center’s mission and progress, he said, “Children need this deep personal connection with the natural world, first in their early years. If we observe them closely, we can see how they are instinctively attracted to profound experiences of the natural world... Out of these experiences they come to know something of the world which becomes the basis for their

¹¹ Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe*, 135.

¹² Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*, 16.

¹³ Carolyn W. Toben, *Recovering a Sense of the Sacred*, 94.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 93.

thinking... Their minds begin to make relationships. They need both the physical and the psychic-spiritual; the earth gives them both.”¹⁵

Carolyn shared with Berry her observations and concerns that today’s children are not typically experiencing or developing close and intimate relationships with the natural world. She says Berry’s response was, “Children need to develop within a whole cosmology of the sun, moon, stars; they need to experience mystical moments of dawn and sunset. They need to awaken to a world to *relate* to as a communion of subjects, not to *use* as a collection of objects.”¹⁶

Since 2012, The Center has been “guided by a Council of Educators as the working embodiment of its mission to recover the inner vision of a society in harmony with nature through its publications, educator retreats, consulting, and programs for children and schools.”¹⁷

Additional Thoughts and Inner Life Influences on Children’s Spiritual Development

Continuing to identify and reflect on specific influences of my two-year experience at the Center, and as I envision practices for children that will enhance their experiences of Earth as Sacred Community, I want to call attention to the following additional thought-provoking ideas and concepts now embedded as a natural part of my own thinking, being and seeing related to children’s development and learning.

Clay Lerner’s, *Opening Forgotten Sanctuaries: Recognizing Education as Sacred Encounter*, has probably elicited more audible *amens* from me than any book I have ever read! I so agree with his statement that “generations ago, we accepted certain assumptions about knowledge and learning that artificially contextualized the relationship between educators and children, and those assumptions have continued governing pedagogy ever since.”¹⁸ Unfortunately, religious education has followed suit with the larger education community.

Lerner clearly examines and shines a bold light on so many issues and concepts, it is impossible to do justice to even the naming of them here, much less their meaning. They include institutional blindness, systemic malfunctioning, teacher-child relationships, inappropriate standardized testing, our lack of sacred connection to the Natural World, and a continuing failure to recognize children as “baskets of treasures” before and during their educational journey. He clearly questions our definitions of educational success and calls attention to the unhealthy, “discordant, highly competitive, ego-stroking, psychologically and socially dysfunctional commodification of the learning process.”¹⁹

¹⁵ Carolyn W. Toben, *Recovering a Sense of the Sacred*, 96.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹⁷ <http://www.beholdnature.org/mission.php>

¹⁸ Clay Lerner, *Opening Forgotten Sanctuaries: Recognizing Education As Sacred Encounter* (Greensboro, NC: The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World, 2015), ii.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

Truly Learner opened many of my own forgotten sanctuaries, as well as providing a vision that we might do the same for children and future educators. He offers appropriate and promising pedagogical recommendations that we can only hope will influence and inform 21st century education for our children.

Two additional influences on my thinking and practices during this two year period are Colette Segalla's research described in her book, *I Am You, You Are Me: The Interrelatedness of Self, Spirituality, and the Natural World in Childhood* and Robert Sardello's writings on *Silence: The Mystery of Wholeness*. While Segalla's writings inform my understanding of children's spirituality, Sardello has strengthened my personal "currents of Silence" and spiritual growth.²⁰

Segalla expanded my understanding, shifted my perspectives, and raised my consciousness regarding the early development of self and spirituality. In her book, she explores "ways in which spirituality contributes to the development of a sense of self in children"²¹ and through her unique research explores how "connection to the earth nurtures the spiritual life of the child."²²

Sardello introduces Silence as an ancient "ever-faithful companion-presence."²³ He encourages us to personally invite and cultivate an inward Silence of solitude that "meets up with the great Silence of Cosmic Wisdom."²⁴ He reminds us that we "experience Silence in the midst of the natural world."²⁵

And so, I near the end of my Inner Life experience. I am a different person, a more grounded person, certainly a more informed person. And the inspiration of the 2003 ah ha moment that children need to be reconnected with the natural world remains and is even stronger as it enlarges my vision for a future that will significantly improve the lives of children.

Breathing Life Into My Practice

To identify ways to communicate and share with children the joy, awe, beauty, and surprises of the natural world and concretely conceptualize practices for children to experience Earth as Sacred Community in a church or religious learning environment.

My church, Umstead Park United Church of Christ, and most especially the church's minister, Doug Long, has not only been supportive of my efforts to provide opportunities

²⁰ Ibid., 37.

²¹ Colette Segalla, *I Am You, You Are Me: The Interrelatedness of Self, Spirituality, and the Natural World in Childhood* (Greensboro, NC: The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World, 2015), xii.

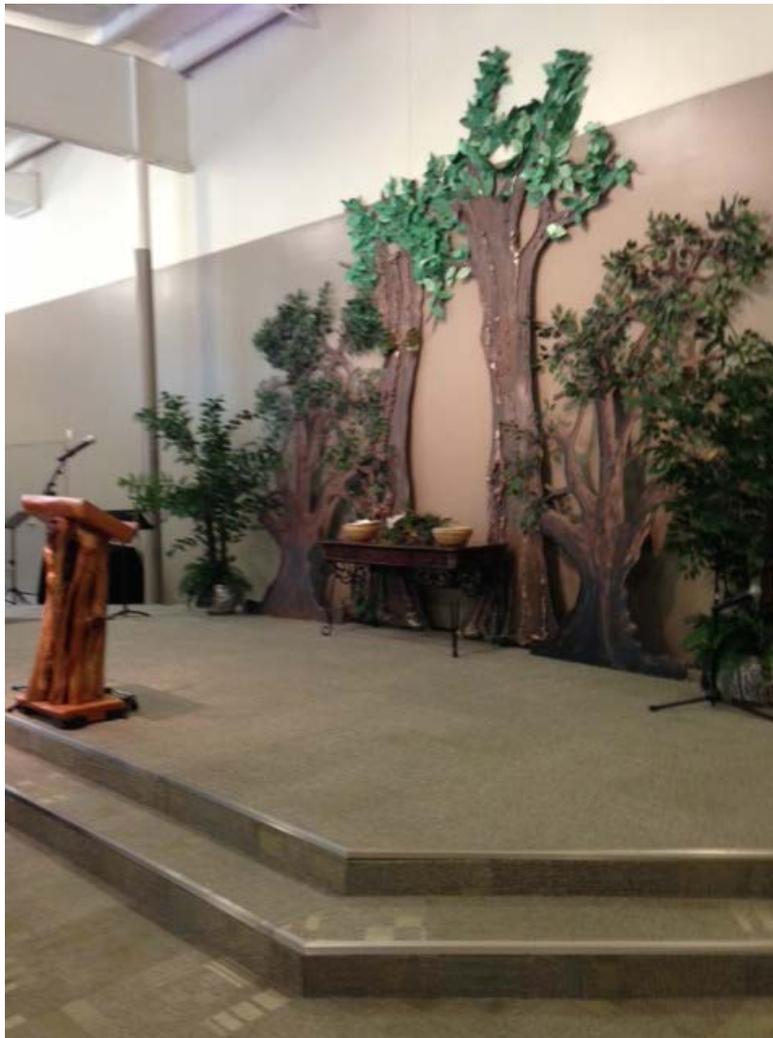
²² Ibid., 168.

²³ Robert Sardello, *Silence: The Mystery of Wholeness* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Press, 2008), 7.

²⁴ Ibid., 8.

²⁵ Ibid., 31.

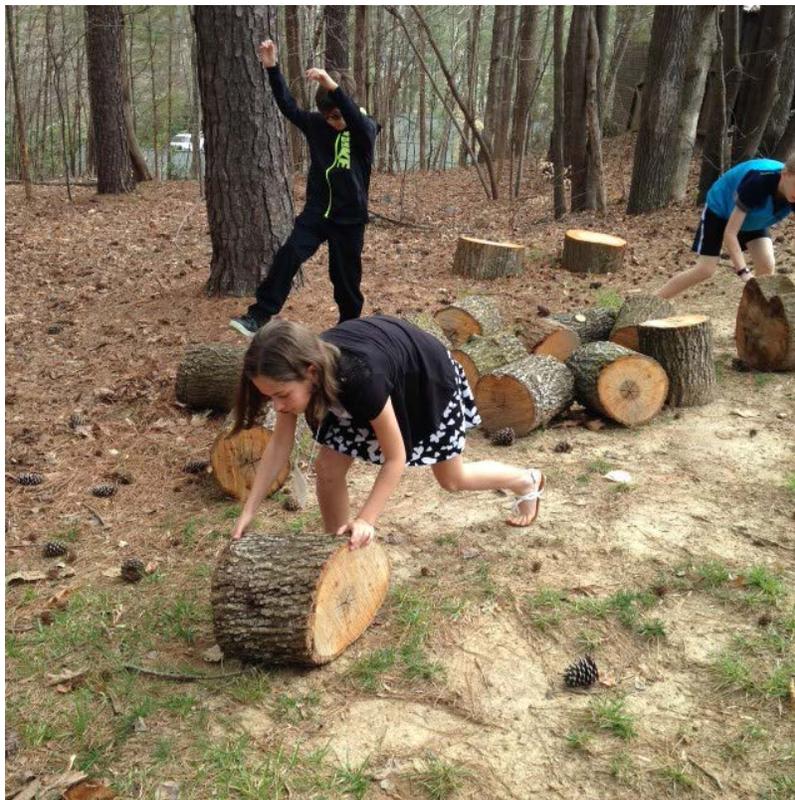
for UPUCC children to experience Earth as Sacred Community, but has collectively embraced and lived out that vision these past two years. In 2015, our minister and the Children's Ministry Committee focused three Sunday morning worship services on children and nature. Children were not only highly visible in the services, but assumed leadership in providing bulletins as congregants entered, reading liturgy and scripture, and passing offering baskets. Sitting on the floor surrounded by the children, our minister delivered sermons for those three Sundays on *God Made a World of Wonder*, *The Miracle of Water*, and *The Truth of Trees*. Following each of the Sunday worship services, children and their parents enjoyed lunch and *earth walk* adventures at Umstead State Park.



Last Fall children planted daffodil bulbs around a serviceberry tree planted earlier in memory of a well-loved member of the church. Children have regularly monitored the area for signs of growth, green, and flowering. Each child insists that he/she knows just which daffodil is a result of *their* planted bulb.



Several months ago, a request was made to congregants for a large number of *tree cookies* to create an outdoor classroom for children in the wooded area adjacent to the church. The request was quickly filled and children helped plan and organize the tree cookies to create a special meeting space for weekly children's church activities.



Needless to say, the future promises even more exciting opportunities for children at UPUCC to experience *Earth as Sacred Community*. An example was the beautiful celebration of Earth Day at the worship service this past Sunday. It began with a meditation written by a UPUCC member, Eleanor Smith. Thanks to Eleanor for allowing me to share it here.

Sanctuary

*Moss-soft paths lead
to a place of rest,
wooden seat, fallen tree.
Sit, be silent, be still.*

*Sweet notes soar, singer-birdsong,
music falls in cascading harmonies.*

*Golden light, sun-flames, flickers;
Green fire glows through transparent leaves.*

*Turning leaf-pages rustle,
wind-psalms-sound rise
as a wave, then still,
rise, and
still.*

*Many-layered murmurs,
breath-prayer-spirit braided,
merge and fade to a hush...
a sigh*

Amen

What a great contribution Umstead Park United Church of Christ is making to provide children opportunities to experience *Earth as Sacred Community* and how promising that this church community echoes Thomas Berry's words:

It takes a universe to make a child
Both in outer form and inner spirit
It takes a universe to fulfill a child
And the first obligation of each generation
Is to bring the two together.²⁶

Betsy Thigpen has directed both Head Start and Smart Start programs. She has provided training for early education programs across the country, and during the last 10 years of her career focused primarily on training to transition traditional playgrounds to natural learning environments and to move learning and development from indoors to outdoors.

²⁶ Carolyn W. Toben, *Recovering a Sense of the Sacred*, 102.