

# Learning from Life and the Earth

Kelli Nigh

E-mail: kell.nigh@utoronto.ca

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## Abstract

In an attempt to calm the chaotic effects of the current pandemic, I returned once again to wander and attend to nature. The reflections in this article constitute a meditation on deep regenerative attentiveness in the classroom and in nature. Nature nurtures the soul, which is the abiding depth of the whole person. Miller (2000) refers to the soul as an animating energy. Thomas Moore's (2019) approach to depth, myth and the care of the soul in education opens the discussion. Descriptions of mind-body exercises, originally featured in *Learning in Nature* (2021), offer diverse ways to attend to nature as well as provide pedagogical grounding. Unexpected encounters with like-minded humans and the more than human world affirm nature as the source of being and learning. The discussion focuses on the personal and collective implications behind allowing the magnetism of nature to care for the soul. Phenomenological inquiry methods, Whole child and Indigenous education provide perspectives for a more inclusive future in education.

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*I want to unfold.*

*I don't want to stay folded anywhere,*

*because where I am folded, there I am a lie.* Rilke

The soul, the deepest part of our being finds its home in nature. There are so many activities that align us with the soul's tendencies, like beautiful music, delicious food and fellowship. Stories and myths also evoke the tendencies of the soul. Despite an appreciation for Joseph Campbell's (2008) work, mythology was always a subject of study that remained mysterious to me. Its archetypes and scenarios seemed far too ancient to be directly relatable to teachers and students today. But you see these archetypes are abiding tendencies that reside deep within us. Thomas Moore (2019) wrote a chapter titled *Care of the Soul in Education* for the *International Handbook of Holistic Education* (2019). Moore (2019) explains: "When things go awry the first question we ask, with the Greek polytheistic imagination in mind, is which god

are we neglecting?" (p. 51). Moore asks his students to explore the university campus to consider which god appears dominant. Of course, many cultures possess a polytheistic imagination, like Hinduism for example.

An unusual sight caught my attention as I walked along the shoreline of Lake Ontario with Jack Miller, just before the editorial team and authors began working on the handbook. I do not always walk along the beach with colleagues, but remembered that the Shakespearean director Tyrone Guthrie discussed projects with his creative team while gardening. As I gazed over the water that day, I saw a group of swans rise, each spread their wings, one at a time in exquisite synchrony. The experience was examined poetically and then in connection to the tension between opposites, like being and doing, and the masculine and feminine (see Nigh, 2021, pp. 107-108). The swan encounter marked a continuation of several unexpected occurrences in nature that initiated few words but a strong feeling sense, or energy. Through writing this article, I began to see how each

unexpected encounter with nature over the years initiated a certain type of phenomenological attentiveness and sensory feeling.

What had nature said to me through these encounters? As I tossed and turned one sleepless night, I recalled that rhythmic pulsing sensation that began in primal therapy while expressing deep grief and anger. The vital energy that flowed through my body, after the session, was also felt in a gentler form in my drama class meditation circle. The energy would pass through the students' hands, it seemed to rise and fall in a wave around the meditation circle. The awareness of pulsing energy happened again, just before my doctoral research began, *Holistic Education: The Flow and Pulse of Learning* (2011). I was holding the gaze of an owl in a nearby park and a flowing, pulsing sensation emerged along with an imaginal way of seeing that I had never experienced before. Put simply, these experiences did not arise through thought processes, or the intellect. The experiences could not be easily analysed or interpreted. Nothing from the primal regions of our existence can be.

When I worked on the handbook, I took breaks to walk down by the lake. I laid down at the shore, (even in frigid February), and opened to the sound of the waves rising and falling in my body. The myth of Eros and Psyche tells a story of magnetic attraction, betrayal, difficult tasks and an unusual return to mercy, forgiveness and love. Similar rhythmic and magnetic themes are witnessed in the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. In *The Wounded Researcher: Research with Soul in Mind*, Robert Romanyshyn (2007) explains that Orpheus sang and played so beautifully that he could awaken the soul and make all the beings of the earth dance around him. Eurydice, his beloved wife, was bitten by a snake and suddenly died. Engulfed in grief, Orpheus did what many gods and goddesses do, he descended into the underworld, into Hades to search for his love. *The Wounded Researcher: Research with Soul in Mind*, is a resource for poetic inquiry that guides the soulful selection of research methods. It can also act as a healing guide for deep personal transformation in nature. Rooted in Carl Jung's (2012) practice of the creative imagination (which was first developed in the Red Book), Romanyshyn's book offers

holistic researchers an opportunity to draw from the soul's imaginal wisdom while intimately pursuing a question (Romanyshyn, 2007; Nigh, 2021).

Nature's harmony is interconnected with the harmony inherent in our own nature. Andrew Jackson Davis (1850) referred to harmony as a substance. He named it *The Great Harmonia*. Davis believed that nature and the cosmos hold a type of magnetism that transmits healing processes. Although I do not comprehend all of Davis' theories, after attending to nature for years I believe that harmony does in fact grow in us as we watch nature softly, without expectation. The magnetic power of harmony is contingent on attentiveness to the state of harmony itself. Unusual and beautiful occurrences can then be encountered, like seeing thousands of butterflies in the sky, clouds of dragonflies, murmurations, prancing deer, playful squirrel and skunk antics, jumping rabbits and foxes in spring, regal coyotes and mysterious ravens. Nature, in other words, and the regenerative life it holds, already resides in us. Our lives therefore are genetically geared to awaken and sustain this primal relationship. Nature shows us life while it shows us death. It is the home of life on earth, the source of energy, mood or feeling, it is intelligent, and it moves in patterns. Nature is the soil, wind, the sun and moon, fire and rain. As I was weeping for the death of a family member, I watched the sun rise and the light pour through the branches of the willow tree.

Romanyshyn (2007) explains that the poet Brendan Kennelly shares the challenge he underwent when he wrote about "a man made of rain" in his memoir. He attempted to use: "...the language of the day to that of the night, the language of explanation to the dreamenergised language of being". And with emotion, I read another Kennelly phrase: "I am more an absence, longing to be a presence" (p. 30). There is a longing in our depths and most surely, we need to come to know the rhythms and vibratory sense that locates the opening of this longing. I wonder though, under the light of many months, my years of solitude in nature, if Kennelly's statement can also be considered in this way: "I am a presence, longing to be an absence". Maybe Orpheus would agree that he began his own search as a presence, to reunite with his

love, and ended it as an absence. For our relationship to the natural world may not always be a question of a material or fixed presence, rather it may depend on a form of disappearing/reappearing attentiveness (Darroch-Lozowski, 1999). The feeling of flow and pulse, which behaves like the quantum photon that is at one moment a wave, and another a particle may become a metaphor that informs our relationship with nature (see Romanyshyn, 2007, pp. 31-32).

Mourning is a theme that runs throughout myths; death, loss and longing points to the life of the soul. There has been suffering during the pandemic, losing family members and jobs, feeling isolated and stressed, these have all been topics I have talked about with others during this period. As Romanyshyn (2007) points out, during feelings of loss, the soul tends to gaze downward. Towards the earth. The soul mourns for what is missing and opens to the future because this enduring part of us knows how to let go and surrender to a healing process. Soul sadness is not a generic self-interested mood that stays for a while, and leaves after a good meal with friends, this is an abiding heaviness in the heart, not only for the self only, but for the sacred other.

The weight of this sadness keeps us in the underworld until our work there is done. A visit to the unconscious releases mercy, even though it does not seem like love or compassion is available at the time. For the goddess Psyche, (meaning soul or life), the truth that led her to the underworld was the realisation that she had betrayed her husband, Eros (love), by shining the light directly at him. Regretting the moment she held a candle over his sleeping face, Psyche went down to Hades to complete the tasks that she was assigned, so that the work of reconciliation with Eros might be fulfilled. To complete the tasks, Psyche was offered nature's help. When the final task was almost too great for her to bear, she received a gift of mercy from the gods.

My work with the flow and pulse of nature was shaped by a contemplative question that was originally posed by Vivian Darroch-Lozowski (2006): "what happens when we attend to nature feelingly?" Darroch-Lozowski's question is open-ended. Implicitly

"feelingly" assumes that the inquiry is rooted in the body's awareness of attending to nature. Shining a light on anything, a face or an object is a direct way to understand it. Going down into the unconscious is an indirect way that introduces shadows, sensation, instinct, intuition, imagination, dreams, symbols and metaphors. We need to honour the different ways that consciousness grows as each way tends towards holistic ways of knowing.

Over the past two weeks, trucks have been barricading bridges and roads throughout Canada. Words of violence from that uprising still ring through my memory. Just as the trucker protest started to die down, Vladimir Putin's army invaded Ukraine. Violence felt relentless. Hearts once again grieve for suffering. I am not focusing in this writing on getting in touch with emotions as a method to return to fix the past or make the present align with personal expectations. But please do not think that I condone ignoring emotions. Our collective atmosphere, especially now, is veritably charged with a storm of repressed emotion. I am trying to highlight, somewhat clumsily, that even though emotions do run high, our regenerative connections should not be contingent on whatever emotion we are expressing, as analysis does not authentically connect with harmony. Feeling is the sense of the underworld, of the deep unconscious: "Emotion is an expression of our self. Feeling leads to resonance, often an unwitting one, with the resonance of an 'other' before us. Emotions can lead to action for the sake of conserving self or 'other'. Feeling always leads to harmony and balance (Darroch-Lozowski, 2006, p. 198). Feeling allows for a flow of emotion, if it is anger we feel, let it be guided through the stream of sensory aliveness. As Ann Lamott (2017) writes with words we rarely like to hear: "Carl Jung said that the most painful issues can't be solved-they can only be outgrown and that takes time and work" (p. 82). The holistic aspect of ourselves, the more rounded, expansive part, you might name it, depth, Psyche or soul, this part of us seeks renewal and love, more so than the oft times goals of the over rationalised ego.

With more time spent on the internet, however important Google and Zoom have been for online learning during Covid, in many respects, it is not only

emotions that are slipping out of control, thinking has become untethered and ungrounded. Jung (2012) encouraged his readers to avoid believing everything their thoughts had to say. Depth psychologists encouraged people to go deeper into their body, below the line of consciousness. Signs that people are not close to their core, are, fast judgements, made too quickly without seeking context. Thought processes seem now forced through one political lens or another. Strong negative emotions have nowhere to go but to rush to hatred and deepen the division between Us and Them. I heard the phrase: "Taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:8 NIV). Perhaps that was a nudge in part to Lamott's (2017) book *Hallelujah Anyway: Rediscovering Mercy*. The biblical phrase carried a reminder to return to the body's senses; "taste and see" connects us to the deepest form of love, Eros and to the sacredness of the material world. The events of this world cannot be easily grasped, nor controlled. However grievous, helplessness releases an admission that there are greater forces that we are free to long for. Maria Rainer Rilke, in his poem titled "Herbsttag" or Autumn Day, pleads: "Lord...lay your shadows onto the sundials And let loose the winds upon the field" (Gendler, 2022).

Romanyshyn (2007) points out that Gaston Bachelard (1969), a psychologist, philosopher and scientist, claims that the soul has two ways of knowing; the anima and animus:

I am not the same man when I am reading a book of ideas where the animus is obliged to be vigilant, quite ready to criticize, quite ready to retort, as when I am reading a poet's book where images must be received in a transcendental acceptance of gifts. Ah! To return to the absolute gift which is a poet's image, our anima would have to be able to write a hymn of thanksgiving. (Bachelard, 1969, p. 69)

Romanyshyn aligns the development of his thought too, with the emergence of images as he writes that the poetic approach to inquiry, welcomes the soul. I suggest tempering the depressive feeling of the soul's downward motion. Parker Palmer (2000) compares the deep sadness to "the hand of a friend trying to press

me down to ground on which it was safe to stand -the ground of my own truth, my own nature, with its complex mix of limits and gifts, liabilities and assets, darkness and light" (p. 67).

The willow tree, itself a gentle friend, absorbs the light of the day and releases it around 4:00 p.m. in a red glow. I noticed this while singing a hymn of thanksgiving, having never read about yellow fronds that absorb sunlight and give it back later in the day. Symbols are not only found in dreams but in nature. When I glanced outside, a squirrel dragged a piece of cardboard out of the compost heap. She disappeared behind the cardboard in her attempt to carry it across the yard. The scene turned comical as the cardboard danced to the fence. Who is really powering this performance? Lamott (2017) remembers Jung again: "Oh honey" she claims he might say, "we are just silly fools. We can laugh at ourselves. We have to. We have to harvest humility" (p. 87). Now there is laughter and levity that leads to gratitude. In the most challenging of times, it is possible to converse with nature as a loyal friend. Remain open to how a dialogue with nature provides wisdom to heal the wounded heart. When I closed my eyes to wait for an image to come to my imagination, I saw many sticks, layered into a crude makeshift shelter. The soul is a wanderer and seeks temporary shelter. Although this home is crude and quite simple, it allows the heart to live on the breath of life.

### **Consciousness, Rhythm and Healing: Drama and Nature**

When I began the formal research inquiry, (*Holistic Education: The Flow and Pulse of Learning*), in 2008, my intention was to descend as deeply as possible into the body and nature with six former drama students. I viewed this research period as a collective inquiry yet each participant held a unique question of their own. These students had been doing mind-body inquiry, as the principal experimental method of learning since their participation in the drama class as small children. In drama we explored primal movement, the imagination, felt sense, meditation and stillness, even deep laughter. In the beginning, these explorations were preparation for improvisation and rehearsals. In a

classroom, sitting in a circle is one way to develop mind-body awareness as a collective sensibility with students. Not only is there humility in sitting together in a circle, but the deeper students descend into the body together, through breathing, the more they learn to feel resonance, which is a gentle vibration felt between themselves and others. Each of the six participants from my community arts drama class, began as children, continued with the drama class until the age of sixteen and eighteen. These students agreed to participate in my doctoral research inquiry as young adults.

The phenomenological pre-reflective body fosters an awareness that feels before it imagines, thinks, reflects or analyses. This particular presence in the body requires regular practice, much like meditation. The critical outcome is that presence in the body helps to sustain a connection to the whole picture (McGilchrist, 2009). Full body presence allows an individual to clear out old ideas, worries, prejudices and wounds that do not relate to the here and now. After practising this attentive awareness, students are opened to experiencing the lived reality of interconnectedness, the living field of awareness broadens. To practise expanded awareness, students need to learn how to communicate without words, instead through silence, sound and gesture.

All the birds are flying up from the south now, the ones who have stayed during the winter are waking up, as it is spring. Robins have returned. I walked through a flock of robins, they are critiqued as being antisocial in the late spring and summer. This group of robins were flying about, landing two to three in a thicket of sumac trees. There have been at least twenty of them in those trees for some weeks now. While writing this section I am able to sit out at the back, at the edge of the cliff. A crow sits in a maple tree in the ravine, although about twenty feet away, the crow is at eye level. People around me are trying to take pictures of the crow. I am wanting to be with the crow's presence, to watch it softly. It fixes its gaze in my direction. I wait in stillness for the large camera to leave. After, the crow starts to talk quietly and I am still watching her in awe.

Perhaps the more than human world (Abram 1997) knows more than we, communication is more than the transmission of thought or the development of referential language. McGilchrist (2009) writes that most of our thought processes occur without language: "We carry out many of our mental processes that would normally constitute what we mean by thinking without doing anything consciously, or in language at all. We make sense of the world, form categories and concepts, weigh and evaluate evidence, make decisions and solve problems, all without language, and without even being consciously aware of the process" (p. 107). Last night I heard of the death of Jim MacNamara (MacNamara & Mardon, 2017) the man who sparked my interest in the spiritual and psychological process-oriented way to holism. Often, we would spend most of our spiritual counselling sessions in silence. He was patient and knew that what passed between us was not nothing.

Wild movement, and playfulness are as integral to being in nature as is stillness and slow movement. Students' bodies do not foster regenerative instinct if they are not engaged within an experimental relationship to space. Space is the ground of consciousness. The space between the crow and me is shared, it is not one that I can own, yet I imagine that I can sense it. I believe that felt sense (Hart, 2017), imagination, and energetic awareness, nurture the intuition, a more immediate form of knowing.

Indigenous leaders advise that we need to slow down and get physically closer to the earth. This means we should actually sit on the ground, touch the soil, and watch the plants and animals. This morning I looked up to see a fox sniffing along the path. I allowed my heart to open to its presence, even when the fox disappeared, I was breathing in its movements. Darroch-Lozowski (2006) describes how she slows her breath to attune with the presence of a pigeon after an injury:

"Last winter, I had suffered a small skating accident. My concussion hurt and I was sitting, tensed from pain, by my window when I noticed a pigeon on its ledge. The temperature was below freezing and the wind roughed the bird's feathers. I watched the pigeon without my

usual sympathy. I seemed 'neutral' in my acknowledging its wintry plight and even vaguely wondered about my dispassion. But I found myself watching it carefully. Then I found my pain easing and closed my eyes, only occasionally opening them and noticing the pigeon again. The pigeon, whose eyes also were closing and opening, always seemed to gaze back. About ten minutes later I realized that the pigeon and I were breathing in absolute unison" (p. 198).

To calm the waves of anxiety this morning over the chaos of world politics, I breathe with snow. I breathe with the chaos of the falling snow, it is light snow that gives over to the gentle gusts of wind which then carries the tiny flakes in random circular patterns. The desk is cold; the wall needs more insulation. Yet I breathe with that too. Watching chaotic life, without judgement, calms anxiety. The fox paused on the path to look, to complete the work of hunting, to watch a little, and to sit for a moment. Its white and red tail was full and healthy.

Concepts such as consciousness are difficult to define. McGilchrist (2009) explains that consciousness grows from how we attend to life. Its most appropriate metaphor is the tree. While the tree is a fitting symbol for individual consciousness, depth psychologists needed a metaphor for the collective field of consciousness. The ocean is often conceptualized as the deep unconscious. You might also refer to consciousness as a living field, as in the example of quantum physics. I wanted my drama students to learn how to navigate this ocean, realizing that to become a creature that knows how to swim in the deep, we need to explore as many ways to experience the unconscious as possible, so that the strange, uncertain effect from the descent into the unknown, can be met in the body, without suspicion or fear.

The mind-body approaches that were aimed to awaken deep, unified awareness were made possible through primal movement (as it is followed instinctively), during reveries (letting the mind and body float where they may), stillness (through meditation) and surrendering to the imaginal world (Dylan called this dreaming). In *The Right to Dream* Bachelard (1971)

wrote about Monet's painting, titled the Water Lily Pond:

-the young flower disappears to spend the night beneath the water. They say it is the stem, retracting, that draws the flower down the dark, muddy bed. And every dawn after the sound sleep of a summer's night, the nymphaea bloom, Mimosa, pudica of the water, is reborn with the light (cited in Nigh, 2021, p. 19)

Implicit in Bachelard's view of Monet's painting, is the rhythm between the light and dark. This rhythm is cosmic, it is not generated by us. The authentic imagination is also always in motion, it does not stay with the sleeping darkness of a static black night, it surrenders to the rhythm of life and awakens in the morning with the light. Poets write according to natural rhythms, like waxing and waning, expanding and contracting, rising and falling. They refer to ontological vibration as the soul. Ron Silvers (1988) conveys the story of an elderly woman, struggling to walk a mile and a half up a steep incline to a monastery in Ladakh. She said: "I am Hindi and for us the world is a dream..." (p. 117).

To live the world as a dream the methods for cultivating these deeper modes of awareness in the drama class were practiced as sacred, almost always with bare feet. The method of discovery in my personal inquiries in nature were largely the same, involving a ritualized sense of the holy. Personal contemplative hours were spent in solitude in nature, both painful longing and transcendence were felt. In the drama class we were exploring how to inhabit the lifeworld of a character by experimenting with the body's energy, rhythms and imagery. Yes, we were trying to become the character, to be one with the image and understanding of that character. In nature however, it seemed clearer that we were being with the mystery of whatever we encountered. In this way, nature could speak through us, it could sound out the movement of a tree, the heat of the horizon and the eyes of an owl.

Do not just write about nature, write from and through an experience of nature, of feeling, touching, seeing, inhaling and smelling. To return to the senses, I reflect on the beautiful photos and text of Ron Silvers (1988)

who relays a story of getting to know the Ladhaki lamas at their monastery: "On the second day a Lama left the service and offered me some saffron and water that they used in the ceremony. He cupped his hands and gestured for me to rub the liquid over my face". Silvers did so. "As I spread the saffron over my face spontaneously, without a sound from my lips tears streamed from my eyes". Silvers claims he felt "a surge at the base of his spine" like electricity. Each time he partook in the ceremony this experience repeated itself (p. 146). Students in the drama class described an electric experience too, as they stood outside under the moon, under the cover of darkness. There was a powerful rhythmic sensation that travelled around the circle that night (see Nigh, 2021, p. 119-124). It is important to remember that our experiences in nature, deemed to bring us healing, should not be viewed as personal, our experiences need to be imagined whenever possible within a collective field of learning that is guided by the cosmos. These experiences can teach us how to transcend the closed ego and desire the type of learning that emerges from something far greater than ourselves.

When we attended to nature, from the soil to the rain, the leaves of trees, embers in a fire or the driving wind, we were reminded that it is possible to expand how the body witnesses, as if our eyes gazed from our limbs. Your bodily energy changes as it senses the aliveness of a rainbow or bird, your mind then understands the improbability of separateness. Silvers' example reveals another perspective, the sensory aspect of the body can release emotions that are not a part of our rational evaluations and this can exist in relation to shared intentions and in the healing presence of nature. Silvers does not analyse the reasons for his tears, he lets his tears flow.

There are symbols that are encountered during altered states of consciousness that can be woven into a tapestry of understanding, these elements of consciousness perform like self-seeding wildflowers in a meadow (not the mass-produced flowers you do not know how to grow from seed or to propagate). To clarify, I gathered the symbols from the visions, meditations and dreams, into a grid (see Nigh, 2021, p. 107) so that the connections between our visionary

and contemplative experiences could be noted. During our meditations and sleep these symbols were transmitted through the group members' experiences. The source of consciousness involves a process of surrendering to many things; including one's identification with a role in society. But the most profound of experiences, from specifically answering the question, *what happens when we attend to nature feelingly* (Darroch-Lozowski, 2006), was seeing how deeply connected our consciousness was. If this is so, can we not accept that all that we are doing while attending to nature is learning to become a tree among trees, or as Jung (2009) wrote, a "frog among frogs".

At your low point you are no longer distinct from your fellow beings. You are not ashamed and do not regret it, since insofar as you live life with your fellow beings and descend to their lowliness, you also climb into the holy stream of common life, where you are no longer an individual on a high mountain, but a fish among fish, a frog among frogs. (p. 237)

And when I had become nothing, with little income or status, life was felt authentically. Perhaps I identified with a farmer that could say, with a wheat stock stuck in my teeth: "Yes it will rain", even when the weather person said it would not:

Recognizing that, besides the influence of our own minds and desires, there is a source of consciousness affecting us and what we think and feel and do can help us to understand that it is at the cellular level of things where the spiritual world affects most profoundly. It is in shared bodies, our collective lives (both human and non-human), where the future becomes known first. It is through our resonant cellular awareness of to what and how we are attending that we can be open to more possibilities and that we can influence more probabilities than our minds and instincts alone could ever imagine. (Darroch-Lozowski, 2006, p. 198)

Holistic education draws from the perennial philosophy, this field of educational inquiry -or search for truth- seeks connection with the great sacred fabric

of our universe. The philosophical context of holistic education is the perennial philosophy. In *Transcendental Learning: The Educational Legacy of Alcott, Emerson, Fuller, Peabody and Thoreau*, Miller (2011) explains: "The search for the perennial philosophy which can be traced by Agostino Steco in referring to the work of Marsilio Ficino. Leibniz picked up this thread in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century" (p. 89). Miller later acknowledges the philosopher and writer, Aldous Huxley (1970) who wrote the *Perennial Philosophy*. Miller (2011) writes that Ralph Waldo Emerson (2000) wrote about the relationship between unity and diversity in his renowned essay, *Nature* (2003): "Every universal truth which we express in words implies or supposes other truths...It is like a great circle or sphere..." (cited in Miller, 2011, p. 90).

### The Language of Nature: The Imagination and the Senses

When I was a child, my family lived in an old country schoolhouse, the date of its opening was 1901. Wooden desks sat on the main floor when we moved in. So curious and wondrous for us children, we cared not that the space was unrenovated. We played for hours inside and outside. And I recall how childhood unfolded in this time. The rhythm was slower, there was time enough for boredom. We grew into a family of six and lived by fields and a river. The school house was also cold and draughty in the winter. Yet we were sweaty in the hot summer garden, cool in the rushing stream across the road and thrilled to watch maple syrup bubble to delicious sweetness. Surrounded by apple trees and farmer's fields we were left to entertain ourselves. Wandering wonder, looking up, staring down, plunging our hands into the dirty earth, tripping, scraped knees and black eyes from wayward baseballs. I cherish these memories and know that this wild period, however short it was, plunged the seed of longing for nature, deep within my heart. Children will need nature more than ever now, they will need lazy days reading a book, marvelling at insects, and staring into the sunset. They will need fewer days on their tablets. Even though in these times there is more supervision required, we need to provide opportunities for children to spend time in nature as

they rest, play and learn. As you watch them, and as they watch nature, set aside all distraction.

Tobin Hart (2021), in the forward to *Learning in Nature*, describes the sheer magnitude of information now coming at our students:

We search among all sorts of things to understand the world and make sense of life as part of it. And of course, the sheer volume, availability, and constancy of data coming to us is like never before. For all its value, we seem buffeted and, in a way buffered by this. The buffeting is pretty obvious-too much, too fast, too often...Though the pace might be normative for young people, it seems addictive and periodically overwhelming (Hart, 2021, p. ix).

The pedagogical inspiration for *Learning in Nature* (2021), began in a community arts centre drama class. Many students were so excited that they caused a raucous when they barreled into class. Perhaps the meditation and breathing were evidence of my desire to get the students to start the class by exercising control. But meditation grew into so much more.

Sitting in a circle, cross legged and in stillness, the students reached out their hands to one another and as they shut their eyes and watched their imaginations, they felt heat and prickly energy gathering between their palms (Nigh, 2014). In many respects, we were unwittingly entering into a collective field that we could sense but could not see. The students even felt energy moving up and down their spines as well as around the drama circle. At the same time, the class would listen to music during these sessions, mostly Indigenous music and drumming, and sometimes Hildegard Von Bingen chants.

Through these meditation circles, nature began speaking through the students' imaginations. The students were children then and reported seeing images of natural landscapes, animals, colours and geometric shapes. The imaginal capacity of most children is natural if they are healthy, loved and well cared for in the classroom. When the students entered their teenage years, the experience of the imagination and the corresponding sensations became even more



intense and vital to their mental health. They called these experiences “grounding”. Even in their teenage years, the students craved stillness after a week of cognitive learning. Together, within an atmosphere of love they were learning about themselves in ways I cannot describe to you. Suffice to say our experiments nurtured faith in the quiet language of wholeness. After finishing some meditations, we gasped with surprise, collectively. Students shared thoughts and images and found that their experiences were somehow, inexplicably interconnected:

I remember being absolutely amazed at how different they were (the meditations). Then, sometimes I really clearly remember-“I can’t believe you saw that too...you know what I mean? That was always really shocking to me. I always wondered if it came from me or it came from them? Did I catch a piece of me or did I catch a piece of you? Is that possible?” (Gwendolyn, Interview) (Nigh, 2021, p. 59)

When you catch a piece of someone else the experience shows that there are connections in our collective consciousness that are not immediately available to everyday perception. In fact, Bachelard (1943/1988) believed that the true imagination deforms perception. So, the images that arise when we explore the imagination may not just be visual mirrors of past perceptions.

Many of the plays we explored in the drama class had nature or the cosmos as their central theme. This was very important, that the topics and plays we explored in the classroom focused on nature. Nature is inside and outside of us, we can converse with nature anywhere, especially if we are together harmoniously. Nature is but a glance out the window, or in the lifeworld of a plant. The reason drama can be so effective in fostering ecological learning is that students primarily explore with their bodies; students can experiment, make bee sounds, and whirl with the wind. I knew that as a singer and actor, the body’s presence rendered unexpected and emergent discoveries. Perhaps these understandings would not be surprising to the Lamas at Ladakh. Silvers (1988) ruminates:

Movement and vibration are also found in daily prayer: In prayers there is a swaying of the body and a deep almost guttural sound from a Lama as that sound resonates in his chest and then as that sound is followed by a vibration of bells: Drums and cymbals: The vibration is present in the saying of mantras: The repetitive saying of prayers: Often I would hear a farmer in a village voicing not words but sounds: A rising and falling humming at the back of the throat. (p. 148)

Students sit so much when they learn in school. Imagine if education returned learning to the moving body. Schools try to cultivate students like indoor plants, except that the source of natural movement and vibration is outside; to learn how to absorb this world, beyond societal norms, learning has to take place outside.

#### **Guided by Synchronicities in Nature**

Before setting off to the park by the lake, I prayed for depth, and a gentle openness with nature. However, it was not the rare bird that flew overhead that caused me to stop looking down at the ground. It was the slow, methodical steps of the human species that drew my gaze upwards. “M”, another woman walking along the icy paths, shared how she started to come to the park every day since the beginning of the pandemic. She said that her walks were like meditations. M. looked out over the water and showed me how she observed the light that beams downward through the clouds to the water’s surface. Even her name meant light. M also practised Metta (loving kindness meditation) when she visited the park. While walking, we marvelled at what we had in common. I told her I had been going to the park for some years and showed her the two trees that I leaned against. I never said they held me as I wept and tamed so many chaotic emotions. M said she wanted to write a book about her spiritual encounters in nature, but apologetically said that it was not a serious book. It was just about experiences. Experiences in nature are important for the development of our health and cognition. Nature connects the awareness of life experience to learning.

Often with my students in higher education I emphasise the awareness of lived experience,

especially the capacity to be present in the here and now and observe a moment with nuance. Observing experiences through the anima's perspective is different than through the animus, if you recall Bachelard's quote. After leaving M at the park, I felt that familiar resonant synchronous feeling, like I had been with a kindred spirit. My faith in humanity and harmony began to return. I reflected back on 2004 when I started to walk and wander in nature at the parks surrounding this neighbourhood. Although all manner of bodily experimentation was explored during the first two hours of the morning, I never met anyone at the time who was wandering and then stopping and gazing at the landscape, contemplatively. During the pandemic, I am sure there are many who have discovered nature as a place to rest and notice. Almost twenty years after I started this rather unusual practice, I was grateful to meet M. while considering what to write about. A deep orientation in lived experience opens us to synchronicity. Synchronicity can show us how all regions of our consciousness are connected.

Veronica Goodchild (2012) explains the concept of synchronicity: "In a true synchronicity, Jung writes, an inner psychic event (the golden scarab dream) is linked with an event in the outside world (the beetle at the window) with no intervening cause. This acausal parallelism can occur simultaneously (during the telling of the scarab dream) or at a distant time (Richard Wilhelm sending Jung The Secret of the Golden Flower)" (p. 107). Jung referred to the spiritual significance that arose out of meaningful coincidences, as The Tao. The Tao opens us to the possibility of nothingness, a term Goodchild compares to empty space. Paradoxically, I would call synchronicity an encounter with a substantial nothingness. Synchronicities place us in relationship with experience through sensing "another world while in this one". Meaningful coincidences foster "openness to thoughts we did not know we had" (p. 111). Like the dream world, the experience of a synchronicity is a source for "transformation and creativity" (p. 112).

In attunement with the group members' commitment to dream, Angela, one of the inquiry participants encountered a long journey during a nighttime dream.

I read her account over and over again, trying to understand its meaning. Now I also see Angela's dream in the encounter with M., the recent pandemic hardship and the dangerous events of the past week:

For part of the dream, I remember walking through a vast field, covered in a couple centimetres of snow. And we walked part of this field that was full of train tracks, within a fairly small area, going in all different directions. I was walking with my dad, a little way (just a few metres off) away from the rest of the group. At one point as we all walked through the snowy, train track filled field, trains started to come along some of the train tracks, and for a while my dad and I tried not to get hit by the trains. This wasn't too frantic, but it was a little hard to move quickly in the snow.

There was another part of the icy dream that followed that, and it was more dangerous and more tense. ...we all had to get across this narrow and really slippery area. Eventually we came to a lake or something. It was not winter anymore. This part of the dream involved Isabelle's family...and I went wading. I didn't go very deep in the water. But the ground was strange. It had a kind of a clayish bottom and there were plants growing out of it. But the plants were strange. They were thick stemmed (maybe a centimetre in diameter) very hard stocks that seemed to have been all mowed. So they were all about 3 inches apart. ...this water area had nice soft trees around it, and despite the spiky ground, that area had a peaceful, tranquil, relaxed mystical vibe. In fact, it was the same vibe that Kelli's dining room had on the first group meeting in the summer (before the autumn meeting). Also, it was the same sort of vibe that I felt after my yoga meditation with my two friends. It was a strange feeling dream, and one that is hard to describe because it wasn't so much based on what was happening as it was on the setting and the feeling vibe. (Nigh, 2021, p. 147)

Through the heaviness that was felt in the beginning of the 2022 year, I yearned to return to the warmth of human connection as is described here in Angela's dream. Nature provides a safe haven for the soul, not

only in friendship but through the changing seasons. Notice how the mud connects us to Monet's rising and falling water lily.

### Being Well in Nature: Attention

One month ago, I talked to a colleague about research inquiries and watched a hawk blazing back and forth between my two neighbours' bird feeders as we spoke. The hawk was hunting and in target mode. Again, it torpedoed the other way across the yard. For the adventure of the day, I walked the 10 kilometres to and from the beach, below my house. That day, I opted to pass through a small forest, even though the path can be treacherous. An older man launched into an explanation of his efforts to build a swale in the small forest. He gestured to the place where snowdrops would bloom in a month or so, and told me of the many berry bushes, linden trees and sumacs that bloomed in the wild park close by. He told of his lobbying the city government to build more rooftop gardens. He gave me 5 tiny garlic seeds and told me to taste one. We exchanged contact information. Anyone who mentions bees, gardens, and protecting trees seems a kindred spirit as well. Immediately when I stepped into the small forested area, my happiness was restored, communication was easy and the regenerative power of nature returned to the centre of my being.

Depth psychologist William James (1842-1910) wondered why office workers became so mentally exhausted while working: "He noted a distinction between two major forms of attention: that which required sustained effort to focus (voluntary attention) and an effortless process (involuntary attention) wherein there was a degree of interest or excitement" (Selhub & Logan, 2012, p. 61). Involuntary attention occurs without the prevalence of personal beliefs, or goals. There is very little mental energy expended. However, prolonged voluntary attention drains us as we expend energy to maintain focus and to ensure that irrelevant information does not inhibit the goal of getting the job done. When we give over to the body or nature, involuntary attention arises. Thought processes are not as predominant, we are instead open to fascination, a more natural form of attention,

and a wellspring for curiosity. This form of attention in my view allows feeling, emotion, the senses and the imagination to be present. James referred to involuntary attention, ironically as "primitive".

As I was struggling to ruminate about how to efficiently explain the involuntary form of attention, three deer visited the yard. I went outside to speak with them and they just watched me. I continued to watch them throughout the morning as they appeared, ran off and disappeared. There was a moment where one deer, standing straight and motionless, held its attention on the lake. This attentiveness was not like foraging, it was still and gentle. I could not tell what he was looking at, but believed that it was beautiful. My own attention calmed for a while.

Soulful interactions with nature can also transform sadness and depression. This is why soul inquiries or soulful learning should be rooted in nature to ensure wellbeing. To relieve a depressive feeling, in early February, I began to wander and surrender to moments where I would follow feeling. This means I would just stop to look up at the sky, a tree or the sunlight on the snow. Small joys in the natural landscape were noticed for as long as I wished to attend to them. Chickadees practised their singing, just a note here and a note there, as they flit from branch to branch. Marvelling again at the snow-covered hills, the afternoon winter shadows, and the dull red sumac berries, I remembered the more one looks, the more nuance one sees. A squirrel sat at the top of a maple tree raining spent keys down on the drifts below.

Research by Rachel and Steve Kaplan provides support for students and teachers, looking to introduce cognitive refreshment in nature. Eva Selhub and Alan Logan (2012) write that Rachel and Steve Kaplan developed the Attention Restorative Theory (ART) which is renowned in the field of nature restoration. Mental exhaustion from voluntary attention:

- Diminishes the capacity to plan ahead.
- Amplifies the irrelevant.
- Makes us more vulnerable to losing concentration.
- Fosters inflexible thinking.

Eradicates an eye for detail.

Produces physical fatigue. (p. 68)

William James believed that an uncomfortable feeling or mood arises when we experience fatigue due to an overuse of direct attention. Even two days of sustained fatigue can affect memory. Unless we are in a treacherous situation in nature, natural environments support cognition by not draining it, in other words, nature promotes mental vitality and clarity. There are four components to Kaplan's ART theory: 1) *Being Away*, which means that the individual feels that they are away from the demands that cause fatigue. 2) *Fascination*: Relaxing in nature promotes "soft fascination", and moments of wonder. 3) *Extent*: Involves to what degree the person is immersed in nature. There should be a sense of being surrounded by natural elements. *Compatibility*: The experience is naturally fulfilling for the person.

### Whole Children and The Future

This morning I awoke hoping to conclude with a few clear sentences and a list of references that might be helpful, but a rather dark uncertain mood overtook my thoughts. For today is the sixth day of the invasion of Ukraine, there are more children displaced from their homes. After coming to the window and looking out to the sky I recalled the horizon vision that was received and recorded in the final pages of *Learning in Nature* (2021, pp.195-197). Where do visions fit in holistic education's literature? Gregory Cajete's (2019) chapter titled *Transformation through Art and Vision: An Indigenous Perspective* provides a rich description of how to create through visions and dreams: "Visions always mirror what we deem as sacred and intimately important to us" (p.141). I am listening to the softest music now, to return to my heart when I write. A soft humming can be heard with the sound of the wind outside. Our hearts must be at peace now to have a vision. Children need a way to centre themselves in nature and to learn, peacefully. It is up to adults and teachers, to transmit abiding feelings, like peace and harmony so that these children, our future, know how to serve the earth.

On the day of the final vision, I felt beside myself having written so many conclusions that did not ring true with the research itself. Attempting to set aside the voice of my ego, I began to look at the horizon as was my practice. Out of the clouds was formed the clear image of a child, holding a bowl up to the sky. The child is both giving and receiving. She appears humble and grateful. A child who sees nature as a source, and life as a sacred gift, is equipped to make beautiful cities and beloved communities. Miller's writing provides concrete curriculum guidance for a child's education (Miller, 2010). The final image of that vision was a mountain range. Cajete's (1994) book, *Look to the Mountain* explains how we need to ensure that education, as Tobin Hart (2021) also confirmed, remains "for life's sake":

Understanding the depth of relationships and the significance of participation in all aspects of life are the keys to traditional American Indian education. Mitakuye Oyasin (we are all related) is a Lakota phrase that captures an essence of Tribal education because it reflects the understanding that our lives are truly and profoundly connected to other people and the physical world. In Tribal education, knowledge gained from first-hand experience in the world is transmitted or explored through ritual, ceremony, art, and appropriate technology. Knowledge gained through these vehicles is then used in everyday living. Education, in this context, becomes education for life's sake. Education is, at its essence, learning about life through participation and relationship in community, including not only people, but plants, animals, and the whole of Nature. (Cajete, 1994, p. 25)

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Kelli Nigh is Sessional Faculty at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, Canada.