

The Wilderness Within: The Enki approach to education

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Abstract

In Enki we believe that this focus on the breaking of the barriers between ourselves and all of life (not just the natural world) is and must be the ground of all ecosystemic education – by definition, an ecosystem is a description of connections.

Keywords: nature, pedagogy, ecosystematic education

Malidoma Some, a world renowned spiritual teacher, was kidnapped at four years old. One minute he was playing in his father's home in a Dagara village, in Burkino Faso, West Africa, and the next, he was grabbed and forced into a roaring "lion-machine" filled with other terrified boys of the village. They were ordered, in French – a language he had not heard before – never to speak their native Dagaare again. Terrified, he shivered as the truck carried him quickly from his home.

The external events of his story are all too familiar to us today as we learn more and more about the residential schools here in North America: food withheld, beatings, and worst of all, children stripped of family, language, and culture, and force-fed the ways of a supposed "god" who knew no compassion and had no place in their world.

The missionaries tried to strip him of all things Dagara, but for little Malidoma, the smell of the red boubou his grandfather wore day and night never left him. The sound of Grandfather's laughter and of Mother singing to the rhythms of the grinding stone filled his dreams. As the years in the missionary "school" rolled on, the memory of his own language and the ways of his people fell away, replaced by the ways of the French missionaries. This became his reality. But for the next dozen years, Malidoma held tight to the memory of

the red boubou and the rhythms of the grinding stone, and he never gave up looking for a way to escape this school-prison and find his way back to his village.

Finally, the way came and Malidoma, now a young man, escaped the school and raced away from the compound, running as fast as he could into the dense jungle.

Knowing nothing of the way home, for many days he ran guided only by the pull of his heart. He had little food, and moment to moment had to be mindful of the missionary men who, he was sure, now hunted him. Finally, the mission school was far behind and the only sounds to be heard were the birds and the monkeys spreading news of his escape. Still on he ran. At last, he arrived on the shore of the river that flowed by his village. He knew it immediately. He sat, waiting, wondering: who would still be there? Would they know him? Would they welcome him back – him, a grown stranger? Then, suddenly, all in one moment, he heard a bundle of wood drop to the ground and a voice that lived deep in his heart call out, "Malidoma! My Malidoma!" In an instant he knew the old woman weeping before him. He was home in his weeping mother's arms.

Everyone in the village rejoiced, and Malidoma was flooded with words he no longer knew but whose meaning still rang brightly inside him. Grandfather had

died long ago, but brothers and sisters and aunts and uncles and cousins all welcomed him back home. Malidoma let the food and the laughter and the great welcome fill him; still, he could not help but notice the cautious look on the faces of the elders.

After many days Malidoma's father came to explain that caution. "You have been many days and weeks and years with the others. You speak their language, you know their ways, you understand what their eyes see – you have received their *baor*, their teachings." Malidoma's heart grew heavy and he wanted to argue that none of this was his fault, but Father went on. "It is of no blame to you, but their *baor* is now within you and no man has ever survived in our village carrying that *baor*. The strangers tore your soul in half and filled half with their blindness, but you fought hard to come back for your sight and the ways of our people, so the elders will try to help you find the *baor* of your other half." Malidoma's heart lifted, but Father looked down. Malidoma waited in silence. "My son, it is not known if you can survive this initiation; the elders have great doubt."

Malidoma's father went on to describe the poison the strangers had put in him: the reading and writing and analyzing that pulled him away from truly *knowing*. The piles of facts and formulae that built a wall between him and the real world, that stole the wilderness from within. Malidoma sat silently feeling the bitter taste of all that the missionaries had put in him.

Then Father described the *Dagara Baor*, the initiation that would strip him of all this poison and open a door to the real world, to Grandfather's world. Yes, it would open a door, but only Malidoma could walk through it. *If* he could survive this journey – and the elders did not think he could - he would be cleansed of the poisons and could stay in the village. Otherwise, he must leave. Malidoma knew he might not survive this initiation, but he also knew better than anyone here that he could no longer survive a life with the missionaries for even a day.

To receive the *baor*, Malidoma would have to walk through a door to the true knowing. He must begin by sitting before a great *yila* tree until he truly saw it. So Malidoma went to sit before a *yila* tree. For many days

and nights he sat, waiting to *know* it. He studied its leaves and its trunk. He pondered how the winds and the rain had shaped it. He looked at the patterns of growth on each limb and at the many places small creatures had found a home in it. He thought of all the things that could be made of bark and limb and leaf and seed. But with each mental exploration and each reflection he felt the bitter taste of the stranger's poison running through him more strongly. For many days the words and ideas of the others moved through him like blocks of ice, building a hard wall around his heart. He could tell the elders many things about the tree, even things from the science of the strangers, things they did not know, but Malidoma knew that these things had not helped him *know* the tree, only know *about* it. And so he just sat.

Day after day, he sat. Soon all hope faded and Malidoma was sure he would never know the world of his ancestors, the world of his grandfather, the world of the trees and the animals and the rivers and the wind – the world of his own heart. And finally, Malidoma gave up and he began to weep. As he wept he told the *yila* tree the story of the little boy who had played happily at Grandfather's feet, of the little boy who had learned Mother's grinding songs, of the little boy who had been stolen and trapped in the roaring lion-machine. He told of the little boy who had had his spirit torn and shredded. And Malidoma sobbed. The sun rose and fell and still he sobbed.

And then, all the information he had learned about the *yila* tree and photosynthesis and root systems flowed away with his tears, like rivulets seeping into the soil. His sobs quieted and he saw the morning sun light all the world and set it aglow. Malidoma lifted his head and looked at the *yila* tree. Finally, he saw before him a great green lady, dancing with the breeze, beaming in the morning sun, beckoning him to join her. Wordlessly he felt her bark in his hands and his heart quickened. He ran his fingers over her leaves and his heart warmed. He watched her move with the breeze and his heart filled. No words, no understanding, no ideas, just the music of these wild lands and the pulse of the dancing tree moving through him. The bitter taste gave way to a sweet nectar. At last, he was home.

We of the modern west have all been trapped in that roaring lion-machine; it is our cultural heritage no matter how we try to escape it. We have learned to seek our worth and defend our security with information and analysis and theory. We have learned that it is *distance*, and not connection, that makes us safe. But underneath it all, every one of us longs to reconnect with the “green lady,” to let ourselves be filled with her radiance and dance with her to the music of the wild lands. Every one of us.

How can I say we ALL long for this? How can I know that; I am not everyone?! Because it is the literal nature of our DNA – and *that* we can’t escape. Our DNA is made of two separate strands of code, joined again and again, ladder style, by connecting bars. That is how we are made and deep inside we know that life depends on connection. We are not talking here of enmeshment, but of two poles, each with its own integrity, making a direct connection with the other. That is what it is to be alive. So I know that underneath our ingrained fear and distrust of our own aliveness, we all seek connection, connection to one another, to land to sea, to air, to our own hearts. Connection. Just as I know we all seek food, I know we seek connection – it is just how we are made.

David Sobel (2008), one of the developers of Place-Based Education, speaks of “*the places of initiation, where the borders between ourselves and other creatures break down . . .*” (Pyle, 1993, as cited in Sobel, 2008, p. 12). Sobel (2008) proposes that “*What gets lost when we focus on facts are the initiation experiences, the moments of transcendence when the barriers between ourselves and the natural world break down.*” (p.12)

In Enki we believe that this focus on the breaking of the barriers between ourselves and all of life (not just the natural world) is and must be the ground of all ecosystemic education – by definition, an ecosystem is a description of connections. “Connection, not collection,” that’s the heart of ecosystemic education – and also the Enki bumper sticker! However, just as was true for Malidoma, we cannot get there treading the same paths that brought us the disconnection – paths that put information, understanding, analysis, theory, and reflection where connection should be.

It is no easier for us to shift our perception than it was for Malidoma. We have been trained to use our analytic skills and our hoarded facts and our clever theories as shields to keep us “safe,” or at least untouchable. Putting down this shield and taking a chance on meeting the “dancing green lady” requires stepping into a vast vulnerability where our only safety net is the inner knowing that there *is* a world worth knowing within all life, and that it is within our nature to do so.

To have an ecosystemic education, we need to cultivate moments when the barriers that thwart real connection break down within ourselves revealing authentic presence. This then becomes the ground for ourselves and the children. This cultivation is an ongoing, moment to moment process and we will fall out of connection over and over and over – such is being human! What we are really striving for is a shift in our internal compass setting: can we hold this “barrier breaking” as the true north on our internal compasses? Can it become the place we return to each time we realize we have, once again, fallen into that roaring lion-machine of our own fear and doubt and distrust?

According to Sobel, connection is at the heart of Place-Based learning, “*One transcendent experience is worth a thousand nature facts*” (Sobel, 2008, p.13). In Enki we call this transcendent experience “accessing inherent vitality.” As is true for most contemplative traditions, we believe that within all life, all existence, is this inherent vitality, life force, vibrance; it is always there like the sun. Vitality is not something we generate or create, any more than we generate the sun! It is not something we win and it is not something we can lose. Therefore, the issue is not whether or not we have it, but whether or not we *access it* in ourselves and in all life forms around us – animate and inanimate. Like the sun on a cloudy day, this vitality does get obscured, and we do lose our access to it, sometimes for a long, long time. But that vitality, that inner sun, remains unchanged.

Given the fact that this vitality is inherent, unconditional, and cannot be generated, won, or lost, the question becomes, “*How do we cultivate access to*

this, and make it the fulcrum of all learning?" This is the question that lies at the heart of Enki Education and the only part of Enki that is unyielding.

In Enki, there is one guide we use to explore possible ways to make accessing vitality the fulcrum of our living and learning from moment to moment. It was summed up perfectly by the ancient Roman poet Juvenal: Never does nature say one thing and wisdom another (Claussen, 1999).

Perfect! We have nothing to add to that, so let's explore what that means.

The wild lands are one of the easiest places for many of us – including most children – to feel the barriers drop and to experience inherent vitality pulsing through. Many experiential programs, including Forest Schools, Nature Programs, Wilderness Programs and many others, feel that unstructured time outdoors is the key. We certainly support direct engagement with nature as an important element for all, but we have to ask: can vitality really be unconditional if it is dependent on being in the outdoors, and the outdoors alone?

In Enki, we believe not.

What we have come to see is that making this shift to holding inherent vitality as the fulcrum of our living and learning depends on ***aligning ourselves with the processes of nature.***

From this vantage point, place is not the controlling factor. One could be aligned with the laws of growth and learning in New York City, or out of alignment in rural Canada. One could be fully in alignment in a structured brick-and-mortar school, and completely out of alignment in an open-ended forest or wilderness one.

I live and work in rural Canada – and I mean rural! We live in a hand-built straw bale house off the grid and are part of a cooperative community committed to the land. We are a good half hour drive from the nearest store and an hour and a half from the nearest tiny airport. You have to want to find us to even know we exist! We have a small school here specifically to give the children an experience of the power of connecting

to the land. I say all this to illustrate that our focus is on the land and on living in harmony with it. And yet . . .

A few years back, I was sitting in the schoolyard watching the children play on a glorious spring day. Nearby was a pear tree in full bloom. Bees were buzzing and the fresh, subtle fragrance of the blossoms floated around us. Sitting on the cool, bare earth, I was simply enjoying the sensations of early spring.

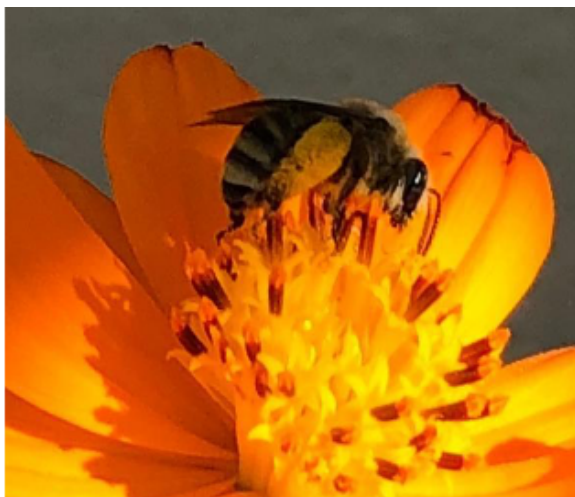
Then one of our older students (10 years old) came over and took an interest in the pear blossoms. She was immediately excited about the prospects of lots of pears! She asked me, "Will all these flowers become pears?" My attention went right to the learning opportunities her question offered. The earth beneath me and the scent of the blossoms, even the buzzing of the bees, faded away and the "learning" became my focus. I knew that pear flowers were not self-fertile and needed another variety's pollen to actually get pollinated and make fruit. I jumped in with my answer to her question, explaining pollination in pear trees. She listened intently and nodded her head seeming to understand, but I could feel that initial excitement and wonder slip away; where she had come to me buzzing like the bees, now her energy had become flat.

What would have happened if I had just said something like, "I wonder about that too. Let's keep an eye on this tree this summer and see!" Even as I pose the question to myself I can feel a different energy, a different connection to life, fill me. I know all the facts about pear blossom fertilization, but have I stopped to really notice and be present with the amazing process?

I learned a lot in that moment, and fortunately I have carried it forward into many situations since then. No matter how much information I may have, when I enter the children's wonder with them; the difference in the experience is palpable. In that moment of pause and joining in the wonder, all senses heighten and the child – and I – shift to connection with the blossoms or the tadpoles or the wind. And the child inevitably comes back to the questions or observations at another time and with more experience. From there, answers can stir ever more wonder and connection.

-TeganWong-Daugherty, 14 year Enki
Homeschool and Class Teacher, 12 year prior,
alternative outdoor teacher

Tegan's commitment to the land and to bringing the children into connection with the land is clear and her opportunities abound, but still, she was initially seized by the "roaring lion-machine" and pulled out of alignment with nature.



On the other hand, a teacher in Manhattan might have a window box in her room and notice a bee landing on a blossom. She says nothing. No one notices, and she allows that. She recites a verse from the "Bee Story" they heard recently, and she allows more silence. Suddenly, the sound of cars below and the thumps and hoots from other classrooms fade away and the buzzing seems to fill the room. The children look for the source of the buzzing and tiptoe to the window box. They just watch. They can see the bee filling his leg sacks with pollen, each sack getting more yellow and much fatter by the second. Yes, the teacher knows about the pollination process and the use of pollen as protein for the larvae. She knows about the difference between pollen and nectar. She knows about the making of honey and about the dance bees do to map out good flower sources for one another. But she remains silent. For as long as the children stay, she remains silently engaged.

In the days ahead, there will likely be stories of bees and drawings and maybe making wax bees, and when it feels to the teacher that more information will deepen the children's connection, that will come too.

But it is the *process of connection* that matters and not the information.

Certainly, spending time in nature matters for us all, and we don't want to diminish the importance of that. However, as Tegan illustrates, *just* being outdoors does not guarantee an alignment with the underlying laws of nature, and just being in a city does not prevent that alignment. Malidoma's story illustrates this so clearly: fighting his way home through unknown wilderness, arriving in a world that was living in deep harmony with nature, but still, the poisons of all his training to think objectively blocked his connection. It wasn't until he was again free from labels and theories and pre-conceptions, 'til he was living in his own *inner* wilderness, that real connection to the outer wilderness was possible. That is the sacred connection, the experience of transcendence. If we are to center our education around supporting this experience, it will take commitment to coming back, again and again, to the *processes* of nature.

What are the processes of nature? If nature is speaking wisdom, what *is* it saying? How do we align ourselves with it? These are the key questions to us in Enki, ones we have been, are, and will forever be exploring and understanding more deeply. What *is* clear are the two overriding laws: the law of ecosystems (interdependence) and the law of microcosms within macrocosms.

The Ecosystem Principle

The foundational law of nature is the law of ecosystems: all aspects of our world are interdependent and are constantly impacting one another. An ecosystem is a web, a literal web. The phrase "*web of life*" is a wisdom teaching, not a metaphor, i.e. ALL aspects of life form a literal web.

What does a web teach us? Think of a spider's web. Each has radial or warp threads that move between the center and the periphery. These provide the scaffolding for all else. The same is true in all ecosystems. For plants, these radial threads are sun, water, soil, nutrients, and energetic forces like the pull of the moon. All plants *must* work with these

elements; they can't wish away the need for sunlight and they can't scheme away the need for water.

Each element has its unique, stable, and vital contribution to make; for example, water brings hydration, not heat and sun brings heat and activates photosynthesis, but it doesn't bring hydration or nutrients, and so on. Each radial thread is different, but these base principles are always impacting the plants' life, whether we like it or not, whether we believe it or not, this is true.

Not all plants use these elements in the same way. A desert cactus works differently with them than does a New England maple. There is variety and flexibility. But because of the radial threads, we have the coherence of a self-sustaining, law-abiding ecosystem, yet because each type of plant uses them differently, we do not lose dynamic variety.

The radial threads are the principles through which all else weaves, whether we like it or not, and whether we align ourselves with them or not. Such is the nature of an ecosystem.

Microcosms within Macrocosms

Most people reading this are more than aware of the importance of respecting the interconnectedness of nature, our macro-ecosystem. However, we are often less conscious of the fact that every single aspect of life operates in its own micro-ecosystem. This applies to everything, from the cellular groupings in our bodies, to the organs, to family, community, and country, including growth and learning, i.e. education.

These micro-ecosystems work like a series of Nesting Dolls. From the smallest of these out, each ecosystem must fit within and be in alignment or harmony with the next, and the next and the next, right up to the largest, which is that of the natural world. It is the harmony with the microsystems and between them that allows the largest, the natural world, to exist in balance.

How does this harmony happen? *Each micro-ecosystem follows the same natural laws or processes as the overriding ecosystem of nature, but each has its own expression of these.* That expression

determines the health of all beings in that system, and, in turn, the health of all that surround it.

These are the two primary laws in a nutshell and aligning ourselves with these is, we believe, what it is to align ourselves with the laws of nature. *Enki Education is founded on the understanding that alignment with these principles is what opens access to our inherent vitality.*

How do we find this magical alignment? The good news is that this alignment is experienced by everyone, throughout life. If we didn't experience it at all, two things would happen: firstly, there would be no seeking – we only seek what we have glimpsed; and second, we would be dead because that inner vitality is what keeps us going. Think of little Malidoma carrying in his heart and his dream memory the sensations of a life of connection: the smell of his grandfather's boubou, the rhythms of his mother's grinding. He held on to these, literally, for dear life.

The connection happens whenever we fall in love, and it happens spontaneously and sporadically other times. It happens because in our own ways we cultivate it: exercise, meditation, hiking, gardening, making pottery, and so on. We all experience it; our focus here is on how to make this alignment be *the ground* of our work with the children, wherever we are.

To make alignment our ground in education, we must first accept the reality of these principles, and then must clarify the radial threads, which are like the sun and water and soil of the ecosystem of education.

If we are to have an ecosystemic education, we must learn to "weave" each approach or issue through the radial threads of the web, just like the spider weaving the orbital or circular threads through the radial threads of his web. "Like" and "dislike," "efficient" or "slow," "established" or "cleverly new" cannot be our criteria; rather, asking oneself how the specific method, material, location, or activity aligns with the principles of each radial thread of the educational ecosystem is the criteria. It will require a willingness to, again and again, see anew and to drop what we believe we know. It requires an ongoing adjustment of any and

all methods and materials in service of the health of the ecosystem (child).

The Radial Web Threads

In Enki we return again and again to the one unyielding principle, one core from which the radial web threads emanate: there is an inherent vitality or life force within all existence, and our human job is to connect with it again and again. It is from this connection that wisdom and compassion naturally flow, and with them our unique gifts unfold freely. Unyielding, self-existing, and indestructible - and yet easily obscured. So we must uncover ways to actively access this experience; these ways are the radial threads of our web.



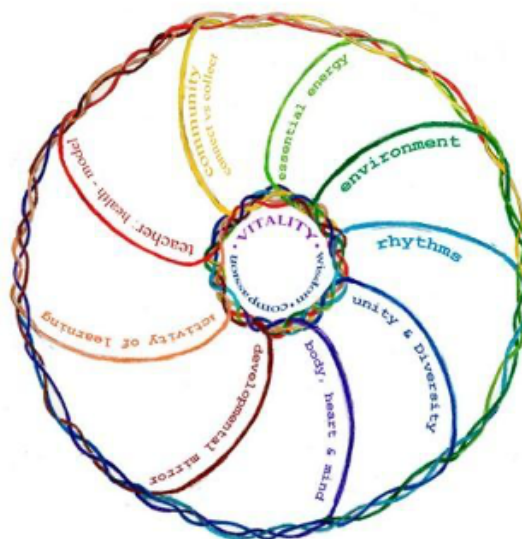
In Enki we have identified nine radial threads that are the “sun and water” of growth and learning, i.e. the principles that support accessing inherent vitality. These principles underlie growth and learning for everyone, whether we attend to them or not, and no matter how we might name or describe them.

Let’s start by listing them:

- 1) Rhythms;
- 2) Integration of Body, Heart, and Mind;
- 3) Mirroring Child Development;
- 4) The Activity of Learning;
- 5) Unity and Diversity;
- 6) Environment;
- 7) Community – connection vs collection;
- 8) Essential Energy.

9) The Teacher as a model, and in her own health;

All of these are constantly interacting with and impacting one another, and, as in any ecosystem, they never exist separately. Still, much as we can’t understand the plant’s ecosystem if we don’t look at water and sun separately, in this case we have to simultaneously look deeply at each radial thread of the educational ecosystem, and also hold that the separateness is a mirage.



We introduce the issues in some depth in our *Foundation Guides*, then understanding is taken further in a 15 session live-online [Ecosystems of Education](#) course Next, the three year [Enki Teacher Training](#) takes on the deep dive into each and all, and finally we continue to work with these issues as our guide forever. As the core developer of Enki, I have been working with them as my structural backdrop for 30+ years and, each time I feel stuck or something in Enki feels off, I look anew through the web. Each time I look at anything, from inside Enki or from the world at large, I am amazed at what a new look through the lens of the Enki web reveals.

To give you a sense of how this works, here we will offer a small “appetizer plate” of some of the radial threads, those that most readily highlight the differences in this educational model. We will focus on four:

- 1) Community,
- 2) The Activity of Learning,
- 3) Unity and Diversity, and,

4) The Teacher as Model.

1) Community

Malidoma sat before the yila tree, despairing. He knew there was something being asked of him, some world being offered to him. But much as opening this door was all he wanted, he could not do it. He knew all about the yila tree – even the old stories – but nothing within him moved. And then, when despair overwhelmed him, the tears began to flow, and stories of a little boy, stolen and held captive, began to run out in rivers. And finally, the door opened and the world began to glow.

Malidoma gave his all, and more, to return to a world he knew as his community, yet with the changes imposed on him, he could not rejoin that community. As we saw, he had to trade-in, or release, the learned habit of “collection” in order to reclaim the deeper truth of “connection.” Then, and only then, could he truly enter his community.

Tegan saw the disconnection caused by premature loading up of facts and was eventually able to tame the “roaring lion-machine” and bring other groups of children into deep connection with the community of the natural world.

At its core, community is about living in active connection, and not about collection and amassing “proofs of value” or the “right to a place in life, the right to belong.” For so long modern scientists focused on the competition, survival of the fittest as the core law of life. But indigenous scientist have always seen the wisdom of connection at the center. Now modern science is seeing it too. For example, we now know that the epigenetic footprint lasts seven generations – the exact number of years indigenous peoples of the Americas have always emphasized: “We must think about seven generations into the future for every decision we make.” And science is learning more and more about the root communities of the forests, and the smallest of the beings, the fungi, keeping them connected. Again, as described by indigenous scientist Robin Wall Kimmerer, in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 19), an understanding of the fungi as a “weaving a web of reciprocity” has always been part of indigenous understanding.

So in the Enki Web or educational ecosystem, the principle of focusing on “connection, not collection,” is as vital as is sun for a plant. In every undertaking, from wilderness exploration to practice of mathematical algorithms, from class size to intra-school adventures and chores, in *everything*, we are always asking first and last, “How does this undertaking or method or structure support connection, not collection.”

2) The Activity of Learning

I had been watching my first graders play happily in the snow and freezing rain for weeks now, but this day I sensed something had shifted for them. I listened more closely to the chatter. “Watch!” one said excitedly holding an icicle to the sun and watching water slowly drip from the tip. Another watched the frozen pond silently as the small drop of water hit it and almost instantly froze again; only when it was solid ice did she jump up in excitement. I watched this pair for a while and then turned to see what the others were up to. For some it was play as usual, but many were hard at work melting the snow into slush with a combination of sun, and rapid stirring. They plastered the slush into a long pile where they were “making a wall from slush that will become our wall of ice after the cold tonight!” Others seemed to be absorbed in watching how quickly the falling flakes on their jackets melted. I smiled, knowing it was time; they were ready to bring their active experience to understanding.

With this in mind, I started watching the projected forecast looking for the right time to share the story of Little One with my first graders. I was looking for that typical mid-winter thaw in the Rockies that would deliver an alternating mix of snow, freezing rain, ice and snowmelt within a small window of time. I was in luck: a predicted stretch of mixed precipitation with temperatures first dipping low, and then rising would occur throughout the following week. It was just the mix I wanted.

On Monday the children arrived at school to find a snowy yard and an ice-covered path and deck. Without any explanation, at story time I told the Enki nature story called “Little One.” I shared it with the children in true storytelling style, as taught in Enki Education Teachers’ Training, with subtle hand gestures, but

without any acting or explanation. Most of the children followed the story with wide eyes and relaxed bodies as Little One woke from her sleep beside siblings and cousins in a cold, white blanket. The warm East Wind was calling. She rolled out into a bubbling stream, rushed along beside sticks and stones, then rose on the heat of South Wind, right up into the arms of Grandmother Raincloud.

I could see on the children's faces that, as the words washed over them, the story was coming to life within them. When West Wind shook Little One loose into raindrops falling fast, some of the boys tapped their fingers on their desks as she "pitter-pattered onto the ground below." I said nothing, but left the story to percolate in each child as she or he was ready.

The next day we returned to school in temperatures below 20 degrees. The children had experienced a sleep cycle in which the story was left alone to filter through them, and now it was time to reawaken the story of Little One. I helped them re-enter the world that had begun to live within the day before, retelling the opening of the story, then gesturing to the children to invite their contributions. They picked up the thread, retelling parts of Little One's adventures in their own words. "No, no, no," announced Toby part way through the class's retelling – something he often does. "We forgot the part where he was the little trickle before the stream!" Others nodded their heads in agreement and I gestured to Ruby to continue. We retold the story until the end, where Little One was back once again in the cold white blanket with siblings and cousins.

Outside, the day again offered snow play and ice exploration during free play. Knowing that we had another night of freezing temperatures before the warming came, for our project time I led the children in making ice sun-catchers. To make these, they took small nature treasures they had found, such as leaves, twigs, and pine needles. The treasures were placed in a pie tin and the tin was filled with water. I told the class that the two tins we filled would have a "winter campout" overnight on the deck. The children made comments like, "It's gonna freeze," "It's going to freeze-in my leaf," and "It'll freeze but that pine needle will still stick out!" I said nothing, but left them to stir on their ideas.

The next morning the children found the tin filled with frozen ice. "I knew it!" some of the children shouted. "Look! This part is frozen halfway in and part out," another said, pointing to the thick pine twig. The ice held their nature treasures tight and when we popped the ice out of the tin, they could be seen from either side of the frozen disc. The ice-sun-catchers were hung in the tree branch that reached over the deck.

Indoors, we prepared to create an artistic rendering of the story. I laid out several whites and brown and green softened pieces of beeswax. Again I began the story, setting the mood. I was ready to add, "Let's make a scene of Little One's story using our beeswax," but I waited to see what they would do. Without thought, they reached for the wax and started in recreating the story world, and the world they had spent months exploring outside.

Hands were pinching, twisting, and rolling. Shapes were being formed into a river, snowflakes, blue trickles, and raindrops, and a pond. Then one little girl said, "I think I want to add a rainbow. Would there be a rainbow?" I waited and let them stir on the question. But before anyone could answer the child herself said, "I think Little One could be the rain that helps make a rainbow."

While we were working, Paul said, "I am confused. Who was Little One? We're making all these things. Was he all of them?" Alice and Susan answered together. "She's the raindrop but then turns into all those different things. She's all of them."

"Yep, if it's cold, she is the snowflake," another added, "and when it gets warmer she is something else."

As we put their creations onto the board to build the whole scene. Harry, one of the children, placed a gray sheet of wax with white dots on it behind the others, setting it upright. Another child asked what it was. Harry answered, "That's the mist above the pond. You know, the water going up into the sky when Old Mother Raincloud calls it back."

"Oh," replied the questioner. We finished the scene and they decided its title was "Little One's Adventures."

When we headed outside the sun was shining and the air felt warmer. As we walked across the deck I pondered aloud, almost dreamily, "I wonder where Little One is today?" The children all called out different things: the melting ice . . . the snow . . . the water. Harry stopped walking and pointed to the distant foothills shrouded by low clouds and fog. "Even in the mist over there!" Then off they went to work on their ice wall, sled down the little hill, chop ice, and dig their snow holes ever deeper.

- Perekin Hubner, 10 year Enki Teacher, 10 years prior in Alternative Education

One of the key tools we work with to foster connection is what we call the three-fold learning process, or the Activity of Learning. As described in Perekin's story, this process brings children from their open-ended and/or internal experience, to a more formed or conceptual understanding. For first graders, labeling this "The Water Cycle" would create distance and disconnection. But working with the story artistically, until they discover the flow of the cycle and that Little One could be found all over in different forms, gave them a connected experience of the cycle. These little ones will hear other stories and do other projects highlighting other aspects of the water cycle, but it will be left as experience to be explored.

For older children, just leaving it here would cause disconnection and distance. But on the base of the body and heart connection from earlier, the older ones can draw what they know and be asked how they would describe it. Together with the teacher, they would come to see that this is the water cycle, one that is constantly giving and taking to keep the planet alive. Depending on age, they might go on to do experiments with steam and condensation, freezing and melting, but what they do and how far they take it is always based on how it serves the connection that lives deep in them.

Open Intake	Digest/Assimilate	Output
EAT	Digest/Assimilate	Energy/Waste
Story, Movement, Activities/Experiences	SLEEP <u>AND</u> Artistic exploration, Manipulatives, projects	Skills and/or Concepts
Experience	Make Your Own	Understand & Apply

This three-fold cycle is how nourishment happens throughout nature, and learning is primary nourishment for humans. If we look at our own digestion – and that of all animals - we see this same cycle: first we take in the food openly, without concept or analysis. Then we allow time for digestion. And finally we can make use of the food as energy. If we try to make use of the food before it is digested, our bodies rebel and cramp up.

"Never does nature say one thing and wisdom another." Following this principle as it applies to nourishment we align ourselves with nature's ecosystem and our inherent vitality is accessed.

In Enki, all standard school subjects are brought in, as well as many non-standard ones, BUT how they are brought is always through this three-fold process so connection is fostered; this changes everything.

Another example from the older children may help shed more light on this process.

My first experience with the Enki 3-fold approach to learning came not in an Enki program, but in a charter school committed to experiential learning. "Experiential," when applied to our nature activities and field studies, was easy to take hold of – or at least I thought it was. But in social studies and language arts classes, which I also taught, I thought that having opinions made the study experiential. Then I began studying Enki.

Now here I was having completed the three year Enki training program, ready to explore another kind of experiential learning. I jumped in with both feet, afraid, but resonating with the ideas and willing to jump in. We began with an Enki historical fiction story of the

European Renaissance, brought through the three fold process.

Assigning them the first reading was easy – that I had done 100 times. But from there, all was different: we did not analyze any part of the story, we just reawakened it with some reminders, and left room for the students to bring forward whatever spoke to them. No commentary, no bringing to understanding, no theory. Just sharing impressions and engaging with whatever spoke to the students. Then, without explanation we jumped into related art work. To my surprise, overall, the students jumped in readily. There were certainly some who felt a bit panicked by the new approach and were sure they could not “do art,” but with support they came around.

Finally, together we made an outline of the chapters we had read and chose parts the children wanted to write about and what perspectives they wanted to take. Never having done this before, I assumed the children would need a lot of help to picture the experience from different perspectives, but in no time at all, some were seeing the world from the “eyes” of a gondola racing down the rio, others from the long view of the bell tower on the basilica de San Marcos, and on and on.

In no time at all, the 7th Grade students were immersed in the European Renaissance. They quickly identified with Mateo, one of the main characters in the historical fiction text who was their age and facing some of the challenges they knew, such as struggling with math at school, missing an absent parent and gathering the courage to face the school bully. They got to know his sister Bianca, limited by Venetian society to the narrow confines of life for a proper young lady, despite her yearning to attend school and have gondola races with the neighborhood boys.

When Bianca secretly spent the night reading her brother’s book about Marco Polo’s adventures crossing Asia and serving in the court of Kublai Khan, we all went, too. For several weeks, these mainstream-educated seventh graders, used to collecting facts and proving their smarts, instead paddled the canals of Venezia, rode the Adriatic seas in the merchant ships of the fourteenth century, and traveled on camels across Arabia. They met bandits

and pirates who struck at the worst times, encountered the warrior women of the Silk Road, and sat before the great Khan himself and his pet tiger. And they were totally captivated.

Then when Marco returned to Venezia, we endured the ravages of the Black Death upon Mateo and Bianca’s family. First, we heard the bells of Venezia ring out with funeral after funeral, and then heard nothing from them: there were too many casualties for funerals. A doctor with a strange mask over his face made appearances in Matteo and Bianca’s household and gave us all a chill. In gripping detail we followed the course of Matteo’s illness and his recovery and more than one student had tears in their eyes when his mother didn’t survive her own illness. The students found a way to process the horror alongside Bianca as she and they wrote poetry of loss. During our morning exercises they wanted to play tag, in which “it” had the Bubonic Plague. They ran with looks of wild terror on their faces to avoid “it” until the game was over and they could collapse onto the ground laughing and slapping each other on the back.

Little did we know that soon enough, we would be online, “accommodating” the plague of 2020. Covid had come to our state, and, like much of the world, we were now in on-line school. As we heard about merchant ships locked out of port in Venice or fear of contagion, and drew maps of the routes followed by both Marco Polo and the Bubonic plague, the children noticed the parallels to the pandemic.

Following their time with Marco Polo and Matteo and Bianca, the students spent several months with exciting trail blazers of the Renaissance, such as Copernicus and Leonardo da Vinci. Then they extended their understanding of the European Renaissance with research and group projects.

I could see that the students were deeply engaged, but I had no idea how fully they were processing this strange and frightening challenge of our lives through our school work. Then in our first week online, a usually quiet child spoke up, “I’ve been thinking. In Matteo and Bianca’s time, after the Black Death came the Renaissance.” He stopped for a moment. The whole class sat almost suspended. Then he went on, “So, does that mean when this is over there will be another

renaissance?” Other students’ eyes lit up. “Yeah! That’s what I’ve been thinking!” Nods and hopeful looks flowed through the group. The recognition of the power and beauty of the human imagination set the children on fire and [offered hope in this scary time](#).

*- EmilyAversa
Enki Teacher 3 years
19 years prior Alternative School and
Special Education Teacher*

In Emily’s situation, life presented an extra element for the children to process – a plague in their own time – and they took hold of that opportunity fully. But with or without a worldwide challenge, we find that working with the three-fold process, whatever is stirring within them comes forward, in as much depth as they are ready to share. Then, depending on what they raise, it is taken further according to where they need to go. The challenges of life have themes that are stable through culture and time so there is always something for the children to identify with. Whether learning of the life and enslavement of Tisquantum or Harriet Tubman, or the freedom seeking of Siddhartha or Muhammad, we have had students take the opportunity to talk about their own experience of death and divorce, racism, rejection, hopes and dreams, all from a deeply connected place.

“Education is not the filling of a vessel, but the turning of the eye of the soul towards the light.”^[1] This ancient quote is rephrased and re-quoted all the time because we know its truth. This turning towards the inner light is connection and opens understanding to the world, human, animal, and plant, that is compassionate and empowering.

The power of the three-fold process is easy to see in work with history and biography, but it is just as powerful in the world of mathematics, science, music, movement – everything. In Enki it is the underlying method in all subject areas and with all ages, working differently at 4 than 14 or even than 44, but relevant at all ages. Because it works according to the underlying natural wisdom of processing nourishment, it offers us a road to connection to ourselves and our world, no matter the content or age.

3) Honoring Unity, Celebrating Diversity

Joseph, 10 years old, had completed a four month unit on East India, replete with song and dance and crafts and stories – all led by me, his white, American mother. At the end of the unit we went to a local Hindu Temple to join in the Diwali celebration. I gave Joseph no specific preparation for the celebration, nor any warnings on behavior – preparation was just his immersion in the stories, arts, math, science, music and dance of the culture, throughout the whole unit.

No preparation, but Joseph entered the Temple and immediately went into reverent silence and sat on one of the meditation cushions. He looked around. No words, no chatter; it was clear to me that he was both at home here, and also busily absorbing this “living India.” He was very settled, no agitation, or uneasiness, no pressure for something to entertain him.

Then, just as the ceremony began, a small group of college students entered with their note books in hand. Joseph made note of them and then turned to watch the ceremony in silent rapture. The college students whispered to one another, took notes, and left after about 20 minutes. Joseph sat in silence, fully enraptured for the full hour and a half. He barely moved. When it ended, he said his first words: “Mom, can we come back every year?”

*- Amy Wallace, Associate Director Enki
Education, Inc., Enki Homeschooler 19 years*

Another child, 9 year old Ibrahim, having spent months hearing of Wampanoag life, including stories of the twin brothers who bring forward opposing forces, was quick to see them himself in nature. The notion that there can be opposing forces without a “good and bad,” without the need to reject, is not an easy one to hold in the modern west, and the Enki story works to bring this core perspective of so many indigenous peoples to the children’s direct, imaginative experience – no concept is ever stated. Then we went to explore the geography of the local extended area. After spending a couple of hours playing with the gentle waves and running on the soft sands of the New Hampshire beaches, we drove up to Maine. The waves crashing on the giant boulders filled Ibra with delight.

After about 30 minutes of climbing among the massive boulders and ducking the cold, crashing, ocean spray, he looked up at me where I stood on the top boulders 30 feet above. Even that far away I could see the sparkle in his eyes. In the loudest voice he could muster, he shouted, "Do you see?! This is why I love the troublemaker twin – this is HIS world!"

- Beth Sutton, Core Developer Enki Education,
Class teacher and homeschooler 50 years.

We have seen versions of this same phenomenon over and over and over, from little ones, having spent two month in stories center on Japan, watching a demonstration of Japanese archery so silently you could hear the arrow fly, to third graders freely joining in dance at pow wows, to middle schoolers so deeply engaged in the world of the Yahi People, that after two and a half hours of high concentration at a Native American museum, the curator told us the tour is usually 45 minutes and commented that she had never seen such well-informed, curious, or focused children.
[2]

Why does this happen again and again in an Enki program? What is happening here and what does it have to do with supporting the children's access to inherent vitality?

Let's begin with the second question as it actually answers the first as well.

Our ground and our focus in all we do is on vitality as our birthright, our internal sun. Basically, this is the lynchpin of Enki Education, the one immovable. The only one! And we cannot have an *unconditional* vitality unless there are different ways to access and express it – otherwise the ways become a condition. And so a Global Cultures Curriculum is our ground.



How does this express the wisdom of nature? The examples are endless, as the principles of life run through plant and animal and all formation alike, and from one species to the next. But one of the most awe inspiring expressions of this principle lies in the Fibonacci sequence and the golden ratio. This mathematical/ geometric relationship shows itself in so many life forms, from the spiral of our DNA to many of the proportions of our bodies, from the leaf and seed patterns in many plants, to the spiraling of the galaxy. Unity expressed in endless diversity – and inspiration to all.

For us, to bring the children, all children, the experience of vitality as inherent and unconditional requires that they experience this vitality, and the very human journey to access it, and that they do so in a wide range of cultures, customs, and belief systems (religious and non-religious). It is not about building a sense of tolerance or acceptance, or even about developing a sense of fairness and justice. Rather, it is about fostering a sense of identification; from there, deep appreciation of differences is a given and, because of the identification that is fostered, the need for justice is also a given, not a choice.

This cannot happen quickly, and it cannot happen through "understanding" and "ideas." It must be a "lived" experience; fortunately for us, the open imagination allows for direct experience for things not in our immediate world. Story, art, music, activity are all the fuel for this experience. So, working with the 3-fold learning system, we spend three to four **months** in each culture we enter. The children hear a long story

that spans these months, and brings them an experience of culture and history in a living form. All other studies are brought from that base. They might study botany and photosynthesis through the eyes of Siddhartha as he comes to recognize the interconnectedness of all life – and becomes the Buddha, or study anatomy or government through the eyes of K’ung Fuzi (Confucius) as he recognizes the yin/yang balance as the source of health in the individual and balance in society. Or they might learn geometry and mechanics through the discoveries of ancient Sumer as Muhammad struggles with the prejudices around him and learns of the roots of his society.

As Sobel (2008) describes, “*Too often in schools, we’re trying to inject knowledge without providing the experiences that allow love to slowly take root and then flourish*” (p.13). This takes real time, and for us it is worth spending 3 – 4 months for each undertaking as it is that “love” or connection that opens access to experiencing inherent vitality in ourselves, others, and all life.

There are several other threads in the Educational Ecosystem, all critical to making deep connection to our inherent vitality, and all impacting one another. For example, unless we work in harmony with child development, no connections will be made with or without the three-fold process. Without a rhythmic flow to our days, the children will be sent into fight or flight, and, at best, minimal connection is possible no matter the cultural experience offered. And all these elements are needed to integrate body, heart, and mind, without which an internal connection is not possible. And so on. While none is more important than any other, none can come into reality without the teacher standing as a model of ongoing learning, ongoing striving to uncover connection.

The Teacher

I came to Enki as part of pursuing my Master’s Degree through Lesley University in Boston. I had read the Enki Foundation Guides and felt very inspired. An education that aligns with the true nature of the child versus learning based on external standards, this resonated with me as a mother and a teacher. I had worked in standard classrooms and in alternative ones, but I

could feel something missing – I thought I saw that something here and I thought that with my experience and study, the path would be exciting and smooth. Wrong!

Thinking, feeling, and daydreaming into this holistic, experiential way of being with children did not reveal the paradigm shift required to actually walk the Enki Path. Initially I connected with the parts of the approach that extended and supported what I already knew. But taking bits and pieces to enhance what I already knew did not help me experience a living, breathing ecosystem – it was more like trying on someone else’s clothing and boy did it fall flat!

My first group, an Enki Kindergarten, taught me that much! In all we did for a good half of the year, I tried to take on Enki from the outside. I was “trying” so hard to make this new world support the old one I already knew and felt skilled in, and it left me outside, holding on very tightly.

To me, teaching through story and the arts felt aligned with child development, yet I held so tight to the children discovering the intended concept that I squeezed the liveliness from the experience. And I surely missed deeper insights that may have arisen had I left room for their discoveries. As for projects, I held so tight to planning everything under the sun that connects to the seasons, the land, and the children’s specific interests that there was no time for the level of absorption and the creativity that is home base for children. In nature walks and outside adventures I was lost in finding the teachable moment, and I missed natural curiosity and connection. And movement. Oiyee. Movement circle is an energetic way to start the day, but I was holding so tight to assessing the children’s engagement and to them getting it “right” that the energy of the circle became either strangling for us all or unbearably crazy.

I was dying inside and they were going nuts!

Though my approaches and curriculum design had changed, I had not changed inside. My energy and engagement were still driven by that “roaring lion-machine,” i.e. fear of getting it right, hitting the concept, doing the great integrated project, seizing the juicy learning moment.

I was lucky – I had two Enki mentors: the associate director, Amy, who was right there in Colorado and worked with me in person, and Beth, the developer and director who was with us on zoom and in occasional visits to my school. I needed the two of them, like the walls of a canyon, and no matter how I bounced, there was no way out. What were those walls? My mentors relentlessly held up the mirror to my fear – actually to both my fear and my unique expression of vitality. They had tremendous faith in and respect for my natural teaching talent and for all I had learned before, but they saw my tight holding for what it was: fear.

We worked with many method-specific approaches to find curricular techniques to support me through that fear, but the most important support was meditation – simply sitting still with the fear and letting it roll through. As we worked with movement activities, or storytelling, or exploring integrated academics, my fear of the unknown and fear of not having proofs that I had accomplished something, would come roaring forward. We would stop and take the time to allow that experience, that “meditation in action” – just waiting and allowing the fear of the unknown and the fear of failure to have their say. A little at a time, my world opened. I started relaxing into curiosity and focusing on the children’s connection to vitality, not their understanding or accomplishments.

One of the hardest places for me – and many teachers – was morning movement circle. Theoretically, movement circle offers a time for the class to reconnect energetically each day and become a “group being.” It moves the body in intentional ways that get the blood flowing, get the children’s neuro-sensory systems awake and in balance, engage the group with seasonally-connected images, and provides kinesthetic work with concepts. And through all this, circle invites play with the different energies of gathering together and the more expansive scattering about. Within that, we work non-conceptually with the many emotions flowing through the group. The rhythm moves from one activity to the next through spacious transitions. This I believed whole-heartedly. But my circle alternated between that of a tornado out of control or a flat river where no life moved about.

As I led the movements my mouth would be saying the words and my body would show the prescribed

movements, but mind was shouting things like, “Why is Sam staying in the corner and not joining in?” and “Was Johnny too rough when pulling on Abby’s arm?” and “Leo is making cat noises again instead of singing!” I was not energetically present with the circle, the movements, with the songs, or the children! And I certainly was not having much fun. I’d rely on gestures or verbal redirection of children, then find myself even less connected to the flow of the verses or movements – or the children.

My mentors and I worked with this struggle in sessions outside the classroom, and I worked with it in meditation. Little progress. Then Beth came to visit. She told me, in a nutshell, to forget about the children and let my own body be nourished through the engagement. She told me to trust the power of that. She and I practiced first with simple movements, even just stomping about, with full body engagement versus more half-hearted presence was challenging. It is amazing how hard it is for us civilized adults just to openly stomp! Then I brought that full presence into a complete movement sequence and practiced that. Finally, I worked with integrating the movements with the verse or song. I had to let go of my prior teacher training in every corner of my body, heart, and mind; again and again I had had to walk into the unknown to find my way fully into the experience. And it was hard!

I assumed that all of this practice with my mentor and on my own would get me there, but as soon as I had the group of children around me, it was so easy for me to get pulled back into worrying about them. The roaring lion-machine was loud.

Finally, a key turned and the door opened when I worked with a verse where all those stomps ended in a full out fall to the floor. My mentor reminded me, repeatedly, to “forget the children” and just stomp with all my might and fall with such a thunk that the noise would be deafening. And then, as if that wasn’t enough, to lie there a moment appreciating the release of energy.

That next week during circle, we moved from a spinning in the wind activity, into the deep stomping of the gnomes and earth-guardians marching down into the earth below. Finally, the energy took hold of me; I forgot the children and was just IN the movement. My

full body was engaged in each movement and my arms pumped and legs pushed into the floor; I was that gnome stomping deep into the earth. The children followed with as much downward energy as mine. The power of their core muscles and leg strength resonated with mine. We stomped and stomped round the circle, feeling as if we were indeed a posse of gnomes connected by a collective ramming energy, thrusting into the ground beneath. Then, in time with the verse's end, I flopped onto the ground with a full release of my arms, trunk, and legs. And "thunk!" the children followed. Suddenly a crash echoed through the room, coming from around the corner in the kitchen area – I didn't react, but I did notice.

We all lay on the ground in splayed positions - no rolling about or wrestling with one another, no loud extra noises, just a full release. And I was fully present in my own release, no need to worry about others or redirect, or be pulled from my own experience. "That's it!" I thought. "Truly absorbed, a collective movement! Oh, what fun!"

Still there was that crash from the kitchen. I peeked around the corner to check. There on the floor were bowls and cups, the culprits of the crash – and evidence that I had finally entered fully into the experience, so much so that we shook the dishes down! I called my mentor later to celebrate this "falling dishes proof" of the change in me, of my ability to finally let go of the children and step fully into my own experience, and we had a good laugh about dishes everywhere.

"Forget the children." That is a seemingly strange directive from a teaching mentor! But it points to a key principle in Enki: we can only awaken in the children what we awaken in ourselves. In this case, the children could not inhabit their own bodies and their own movement until the teacher inhabited hers. So yes, in Enki, in all cases, we start with the teacher focusing on her own connection to whatever she and the children are undertaking – focus on that and suspend all else. The funny thing is that, from this place of deep personal connection, a strange and fortunate thing happens: our perception opens wide and we actually

see farther into what the children are experiencing and needing.

So what stops us from releasing our expectations and desires and our intense focus on fixing the children; what stops us from dropping fully into our own experience? Simple answer that presents a difficult challenge: fear and self-doubt. If we fully believed, heart and soul, that vitality is inherent and cannot be earned or lost, then fear and self-doubt would melt away. But that is not how being human works. Whatever our individual childhood story, we all struggle with these issues. Therefore, in Enki, first and throughout, we focus on supporting the teachers' inner growth.

The foundation for this process is mindfulness meditation. In this we simply sit still and observe the ebb and flow our thoughts, our storylines, our emotions, and our sensations. Sounds simple; it is simple and yet it is remarkably challenging. Again and again, we come back to "allowing," allowing ourselves to be fully who we are with all the messiness that is us. The simple willingness to sit still with ourselves without acting on whatever may arise, changes the ground on which we walk forward. It is almost miraculous that *something* that is *nothing*, nothing but awareness, changes everything. *Authors' clarification: for developmental reasons, short of extreme circumstances, in Enki we do NOT recommend sitting meditation for children under 12 years old. Rather we strive to have our entire day foster the experience of meditation in action for all.*

In Enki we also work very directly with what it is to have that fear and self-doubt triggered. As teachers and parents, in large part because we care so much, we often fall short of our own goals and those of others, and we find ourselves caught in fear and self-doubt – caught and blinded. So our training includes an in-person intensive on "Triggers and Monsters" where we take real time to get to know our own reactions and learn how to come back to our own connectedness when the fears and doubts take hold.



This direct work with our triggers and monsters also includes a practice we call the S.A.G.E. practice; it draws from the Buddhist practice of Tonglen, Tara Brock's R.A.I.N., and Peter Levine's pendulation (Somatic Experiencing). In our practice, we invite the challenges, recognize the auto-reactions, and take the time to explore the sensations and emotions they rouse. Just this willingness to meet the trigger, and to meet ourselves, causes the tight lock of fear to lose its grip.

These practices provide a ground to which we can return again and again, and they help us unhook from our reactivity in the moment. Then we automatically connect with our inherent vitality, and draw wisely from the large palette of materials and methods and activities in the Enki collections or in the world at large. As stated at the start of this article, when we connect to our inherent vitality, wisdom and compassion naturally flow out.

Our training includes a lot of learning of techniques and methods, and our program includes extensive materials, but all of this is intended only to support the teacher making deep connections and leading the children to do the same. Without the teacher's efforts to step into her own inherent vitality, the rest becomes merely the baggage of collection.

Although that is just a taste of the educational ecosystem, we hope it gives you some idea of how we hold the web threads of the educational ecosystem as our keel. We introduce the issues in some depth in our [Foundation Guides](#), then understanding is taken further in a 15 session live-online [Ecosystems of Education](#) course Next, the three year [Enki Teacher Training](#) takes on the deep dive into each and all, and we work to bring these concepts to an experiential reality that each participant can apply to his or her vision of education. But even with all that emphasis on the depth and breadth of each web thread, unless we come back to experiencing them as a breathing whole, it is not an ecosystem.

By way of closing this article, we would like to return to focus on that whole.

Whole, holistic, ecosystemic. They all sound great, but as was the case for Malidoma, shifting to that kind of thinking is not easy when one has been enculturated in the modern west. We are used to seeing the parts in a cause-and-effect relationship, a linear one, rather than as a breathing whole. To bring the parts back to the whole, we have to stand back and enter "juggler's mind." Juggler's mind: to properly juggle, the juggler must stay completely aware of each ball, and also must follow none, all while holding the whole – give it a try! Or [watch this link starting at minute 7:21](#). That is the thinking needed to make this shift to ecosystemic thinking.

We recently had a great example of this shift arise in one of the last classes in the 3-year teacher training program.

The teachers had spent the last three years focusing, in great depth, on the separate radial threads of the Enki Web, and on beginning to see how they work together. But the sense of it all working as a breathing organism hadn't quite settled in. Tess, a particularly tenacious trainee unwilling to skip along with partial understanding, kept questioning what it meant to perceive as a whole, as she struggled to get it. As the instructor, I pondered how to find a living way to explain.

By good fortune, it happened that the room we were in had a set of harmonic bells, each with a different tone and of a different color. I saw my opportunity and gave

each teacher a bell and an assignment: “Walk in and out of the circle at any pace you wish, facing any direction you wish, ringing your bell in any rhythm you wish.” They did – they had been studying Enki for three years and were used to this kind of learning! At first it was cacophony, and a little painful on the ears. Then, a bit at a time, with no conscious intent, it settled into a beautiful harmony. The room resounded with this unified song and it seemed to carry itself – and us – without effort; so much so that the students did not want to stop. The parts had become a whole, not by all coming to do the same thing, not by relating to one another directly, but by finding the place where the individual tones and rhythms naturally settled into a whole. And each student was radiant.

There we were, inside, working with a difficult intellectual concept – not directly connecting with nature. And yet, as we aligned ourselves with the primary law of nature, i.e. the ecosystem made of the connection of separate parts, we did enter a transcendent state. We felt the vibrating sound and the wind of our movement carry us to non-conceptual understanding of a difficult principle, and that set the room aglow. We felt the green lady dance in our circle.

This sensation is what we carry with us in working to manifest Enki. We know that in every situation, in every study, in every relationship, in every location, that transcendence is possible and we hold it as “true north” on our compasses. We all fall a lot, likely more often than not, but shifting the true north on our compass to making this connection, changes everything. From there, we return again and again to knowing that it is the “wilderness within” that allows connection to the wilderness everywhere, and that is the bridge to our inherent vitality, to the experience of transcendence.

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[1] This has been attributed to WB Yeats who definitely paraphrased it, but it is originally attributed to Plato, Socrates, and Plutarch – clearly many see its importance!

[2] This approach often, rightly, rouses the issues of cultural appropriation. This topic, and the differences between cultural appropriation, cultural education, and cultural identification are very important and are tackled in depth in Enki. Though we can't explore that here, it is important to note that we actively seek out and work with authenticators from each culture we work with so that cultural accuracy is honored and appropriate material shared – and not!

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