

# Chapter 9: Summer: Fire and The Golden Flower, from *Learning In Nature*

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## Abstract

There is love on these pages, love for nature, the cosmos, the body's deep knowing and students. *Learning in Nature* focuses on the lives of 6 drama students who gathered weekly at a community arts center during their childhood and adolescence. Before each play rehearsal the students explored contemplative practices such as meditation, yoga, breathing and visualization. After these warm-up sessions the rehearsals were dynamic and highly creative. So, what might happen if these students went out into nature and experimented with the same practices? What would happen, over a year long period, if they stopped the noise of life and just listened, deeply, just looked and inhaled, phenomenologically? Returning the experience of learning to nature, the book tells the story of this group, it tells of their lives and their growing understanding of consciousness, and does so through the complex and rich perspectives of holistic teaching and learning.

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I read recently a sentence in a book that said something about a rainbow drinking from a river. For some reason that sentence brought me overwhelming happiness and thoughts of rainbows that I have seen dash through my mind. One day this past summer I was walking along the beach with a friend. Now I must mention that this friend, Ariel, is one of those people that are frequently awestruck with the beauty of things, especially in nature. As we walked down the boardwalk, quite suddenly, it began to rain. It immediately began to pour so we ducked under the children's playground, hoping that it would soon, like most sun showers, subside.

The rain finally stopped and when we stepped out from under our shelter Ariel suddenly gasped loudly, giving me a bit of a start. I looked up and saw an enormous rainbow. Stretching the length of what seemed to be the entire sky over the lake. The sky was quite vibrant; glowing a pink yellow and every colour of the rainbow: red, yellow, orange, blue, green, violet. The surrounding landscape seemed to be almost

glowing as well; the trees were a florescent green and our faces seemed to be lit by some other light. As soon as we had taken in this breathtaking view, Ariel and I looked at each other and without saying a word instantly started giggling like little school girls. We ran, almost frolicking towards the water, into the sand. We really could not contain ourselves for a few minutes, and it wasn't until after a few minutes of laughing that we were able to speak to each other and we started taking pictures. It was one of those moments you want to remember forever.

This moment almost seemed to escape a level of reality. We were just two friends chatting on a beach and were suddenly rendered speechless by simply, a rainbow. It was a very memorable and surreal moment. Ariel is a lucky-have-experiences-in nature charm. I've actually had two separate rainbow experiences with her and because of her awareness, I have often noticed beautiful sunsets that I would have otherwise missed. She is definitely more in tune with nature than I am. (Dylan, Journal)

Time passed and summer's beauty guided us once again to the unexpected in nature. The more attuned the group became, the more we were inspired by the beauty of the landscape. Perhaps we were deepening into the silence that guides us nowhere but the present and always to life as it is lived within the cosmos. A turkey hawk now glides on the thermals above, the wingspan of these birds is between 5 and 6 feet. Graceful, his brown speckled feathered body, circles. In the story about the rainbow over the lake, Dylan surrendered to wonder and childlike spontaneity.

In the winter of 2018, I was reflecting on the summer of 2009. To warm the dark morning a doe sauntered up to the crab apple tree just outside the window. The doe was so close that it was possible to see the softness of her coat, her breast was gently rising and falling. She nibbled on any green plant she could find. In winter deer consume the ivy, exposing the face of the laughing Buddha, a statue that sits on a sawed-off apple tree limb. I watched with anticipation to once again see the Buddha's laugh and belly. The doe keeps nibbling gingerly and she stops to notice me; we hold each other's gaze. Deer sleep with their head tucked into their tale. In the *Hui Ming Ching, or, Book of Consciousness and Life* Jung (Wilhelm & Jung, 1931/1962) comments on the breathing habits of deer:

When these two paths (the functioning and the controlling) can be brought into unbroken connection, then all energy paths are joined. The deer sleeps with his nose on his tail in order to close his controlling energy path. The crane and the tortoise close their energy paths. (p. 74)

At times I regret the many gazing moments I spent with the deer, my experiences with loud or machine sounds are almost intolerable. Wohlleben (2017) claims that deer are highly sensitive to sounds and will react immediately to them. Deer quickly learn to identify which vehicle, whether it be the park ranger or the service vehicle, is approaching. They will gallop out of sight when the park ranger approaches. When the service vehicles arrive, the deer stick around because they know there is no impending danger. Even natural sounds will rattle them. They will seek respite from the second rain in a forest clearing even when the lack of

foliage exposes them to predators. When deer first began to visit our yard, they appeared on celebration days, like Father's Day. Five deer also appeared on Valentine's day. Did they hear the sound of our family's love? While feeling bathed in the morning mist I was trying to heal after a rare but vivid nightmare. It was the beginning of Covid lockdowns and in the dream, a menacing figure was holding a gun to my left brain. I was to remain, in the face of this danger, very still. In the morning three deer came to offer their love, at least it was love that was felt while standing in their midst.

### Walking Together

This chapter focuses on the final group inquiries in the summer of 2009. The first meeting took place on a sweltering hot day on the July summer solstice. Dylan did not attend the solstice meeting as she was celebrating Father's Day with her family. However, she gave the inquiry the story of the rainbow and a poem. The very final gathering was during an early evening at the end of August. The solstice day was buggy, humid and very uncomfortable. Despite the swarms of no-see-ums, Digby came with the group even though he had to wear a long-sleeved hoody to protect his arms and neck. An image of him walking down the hill is forever etched in my mind and body. I felt an unusual wave of compassion, he was so erstwhile, loyal and free as he strode down the hill to the lake.

Harkening back to the drama days, we were aware of the simple principles behind mindful walking. Not a cell phone was ever viewed throughout all of our meetings and nature inquiries, the group was comfortable with the silence. We were simply together in nature, just walking down steep paths, beside forested land and close to the water's edge. We scrambled over large rocks and continued to walk silently. In chapter 3 I introduced Thoreau's (2017) habit of walking in nature. Thoreau did not walk for the fitness of his body, he walked for the "adventure of the day" his forays freed him from the day's concerns and responsibilities. He walked four hours at a time and would set off, not entirely certain as to which direction he would go: "I believe there is a subtle magnetism in nature, which if we unconsciously yield to it, will direct us aright. It is indifferent to us which way we walk" (p. 50). Like Isabelle said, the curriculum in the drama class felt like

a journey, each student traveling their own path. Yet she felt there was a collective path as well, there was a significant task that we were participating together. It was impossible to know in which direction the group would go exactly but as time progressed it felt as if we were learning to yield to nature's curriculum. Crowell and Reid-Marr (2013) write about emergence in teaching and learning: "Linearity is rooted in technical thinking; it is rarely evidenced in nature... Living organisms are not linear or deterministic. Nor do our brains think in linear patterns; our neural networks don't operate that way (Zull, 2011)" (p. 42).

If I tried to plan my drama classes in the way in which curriculum is usually set forth, with objectives linked to outcomes, the class lost its emergent insights, originality and deep transformative moments. The same was true for this research inquiry process. A researcher or arts teacher will still prepare for the class, perhaps informed by past experience and an intuition of what may be needed for that particular student group. He or she will gather readings, and appropriate materials and will identify various activities appropriate to the exploration. But eventually, the teacher needs to let go and allow curiosity to emerge from the whole class.

By letting go and allowing nature to gather in us in simple ways, we remain open. Walking, as exercise and contemplative practice has a growing body of research that supports its benefits for cognition and the prevention of mental decline (Selhub & Logan, 2012). Extolling the habit of walking, Williams (2017) quotes Frederic Gros (2015) who wrote *A Philosophy of Walking*: "It's simply the best way to go more slowly than any other method that has ever been found" (p. 8). Gwendolyn wrote of how she and a friend felt better after taking walks together:

I have been walking with my friend Sophia and we have been taking long walks every day. We trek around the city for hours, enjoying the good weather. Walking with Sophia is great because we are both big and tall with a high tolerance for walking, so if we decided to walk for five hours, we know that neither of us will complain. It is good because it is so uncomplicated and all we have to do is walk. We look out at the waves, or the trees or rich people's houses and are just glad to be out and about. It's annoying how much

better you feel after a few simple hours outside.  
(Gwendolyn, Personal Journal)

I remember the sound of the breeze on that summer day, the heat, the swish of legs, the rushing stream, these memories rang through my body. The group slipped down the scabble path to the rocks at the shore. However, all was not the great idyll of poetic and pristine landscapes. The acrid smell of paint thinner slid through my nostrils as we crossed over the water running from the storm drain. There were footprints left in the mud by Gwen's bare feet and at the shore, we all sank down further, each of us deeper into the grainy sand, wave on wave.

### **Together on the Shore: Writing and Toning the Landscape**

When the walk was finished the group perched on the rocks for a silent meditation. I used to take teacher candidates and psychotherapy students to this very place. There is nothing more beautiful than seeing a class of students, sitting together on the rocks of a shoreline, still, feeling the breeze against their face. The stress falls from them and they awaken from deep attentiveness with marvellous things to say, almost as if they, in their silence were celebrating some remarkable event and the transmission of thought and feeling occurred without language. Each person in the drama group wrote and remained still except to intermittently lift their head from the page and gaze at either the sky, water or cliffs. While Gwendolyn journaled, she described her appreciation for the web of life:

When I am here I cannot help but be mindful of nature. After climbing over rocks and mud, wading through the water, I feel alive, awake and healthy. This is an amazing place to come to think about nature because it holds so many different ecosystems, the water, the beach, the cliffs the marshes all have their own habitats. From the rock spiders who hurry around on the beach to the tiny swallows who dive and dance through the air above.

Sitting here I feel alive and healthy, it is so easy to realise that I was made to be a part of it all, I am a part of this cycle as I fill my lungs with new air and the breeze from the lake gently lifts my hair. Life

becomes a thousand times simpler. (Gwendolyn, Group Inquiry 4)

Attending to nature is about flow- flowing with the clouds, the movement of the water and wind, it is about inhaling and expanding out of the cognitive mindspace and into the energy of the elements. There is humility in Gwen's phrase as she affirms her place in the web of existence: "I was made to be a part of it all". During the first group inquiry meeting we were inside at the dining room table when a spider lowered itself over Angela's head. Spiders also appeared when Dylan and I talked by the lake. Digby wrote a poem about water spiders that reflected Gwendolyn's feeling of interconnectedness. The participants were not prompted by me to offer a poem on this day, but it seemed natural for them to do so, the poetic sense was organically available to them. The poems were short, descriptive and composed with childlike simplicity:

Spiders, crawling across the beach  
Darting from the cover of one rock  
They quickly make their way to another  
One stands on a rock basking in the sun  
But it quickly rejoins its subterranean kin. (Digby, Group Inquiry)

Digby's spider poem animates the rhythm of inward outward knowing. Anticipating the pressure of writing about her experience, Angela describes the struggle to let go of her intention to attend to the water:

This is so calm. It feels like an escape from life. I thought I'd attend to the lake, because I love water, and I am not around it that often. But since my mind was focused on attending to nature, it was hard to let go and just attend without thinking about what I was about to write. I feel better now though. I looked at the clouds and sky and noticed how beautiful they are. It made me think that when I pay attention to nature's beauty, it seems so perfect and amazing that it can't be real. Like life is one thing and the beauty of nature is another. It is an escape from that. But nature is real. It's right here. (Angela, Group Inquiry)

Angela gazes into the beauty of the sky and sees perfection. On this sweltering summer day, it was beauty that provided the bridge that Angela needed to

express herself through writing. In "Beauty and Learning" Hart (2019) sees "beauty as a catalyst for learning" (p. 28). Contemplating wisdom from the *Secret of the Golden Flower* and *The Book of Consciousness and Life* (Wilhelm & Jung, 1931/1962), perhaps beauty has guided Angela's reflection on nature and life. One of the aims of these ancient meditation practices is to breathe in accordance with cosmic law, namely to follow a circular pattern drawn by the breath; upwards towards heaven and downwards towards the earth. This continuous process reunites human life with nature.

### Facing the Horizon Together

We stood at the edge of the water while the waves lapped up against our feet. We revelled in the cool water, toned softly and watched the horizon. We held hands. Nature may not provide a preordained method for holism, but this gesture of friendship oriented our softened bodies and minds to rest in the moment and to face the future as we stood together. How does nature answer being's desire? The Inuit and the Sami people throat sing, which is a type of singing that is improvisational. The group did not know how to throat sing – but we did tone simple soft notes together while we gazed and made sound with the blue sky and water. We continued to tone single notes for each colour-red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple and white. In hindsight I wished we had also made sounds to the waves, the air and trees and just listened to see if they would answer back. After toning together, we were quiet and simply looked into the horizon:

When you first mentioned that we were to picture our future, before we stood in a line at the edge of the water, I pictured myself as a successful musician and singer. Then, when I first looked out at the horizon, I pictured a clown coming over the horizon towards me. Just for a second, then he disappeared. When I looked at the horizon and thought of my future, I immediately saw myself meditating on a mountain, draped in beautiful scarves and fabrics. This image resonated with me more than the musician one. I also looked into the horizon and saw a thin line of horses galloping towards me from a long way off. (Angela, Group Inquiry 4)

The image of Angela, draped in beautiful fabric, sitting on a mountain is an image of the receptive Self or soul (Angela believes in the soul), it is an image that she did not expect to see while looking into the horizon.

Charging horses resonates with Black Elk's (Neihardt, 2014) childhood visions. Black Elk was an Oglala Sioux and a child of nine when he received visions about the future of his people:

Then I saw ahead the rainbow door, there were cheering voices from all over the universe, and I saw the Six Grandfathers sitting in a row, with their arms held toward me and their palms out; and behind them in the cloud were faces thronging, without number, of the people yet to be. "He has triumphed!" cried the six together, making thunder. And as I passed before them there, each gave again the gift that he had given me before—the cup of water and the bow and arrows, the power to make live and to destroy; the white wing of cleansing and the healing herb; the sacred pipe; the flowering stick. And each one spoke in turn from west to south, explaining what he gave as he had done before, and as each spoke he melted down into the earth and rose again; and as each did this I felt nearer to the earth. (p. 37)

Black Elk shared his visionary experiences with John G. Neihardt (2014) and believed his visions prepared him to become a leader. He called himself a *heyoka* which means sacred clown. There are six grandfathers who offer their wisdom in Black Elk's visions. When Black Elk watched the grandfathers appear to impart their message, he felt "nearer the earth". To be nearer the earth is to be immersed in a rare humility. This vision symbolically relates to Isabelle's vision of the marriage between the opposites. Wisdom is also not fixed, it emerges in its time and in relationship to life circumstances. While wisdom can propose divine insight, I believe the embodiment of wisdom is *nearer the earth*. Miller (2006) quotes Abraham Heschel (1972): "It is evoked not in moments of calculation but in moments of being in rapport with the mystery of reality" (p.72).

Addressing vision and the arts in the field of Indigenous Education, Cajete (2019) writes: "Visions are essential: they are integral to individual and

communal success and they are the foundation of conscious evolution and human development" (p. 141). While opening to the dreamtime, as shamans name the visionary state, it is possible to penetrate beneath the surface of the physical world to the essential source of consciousness. Cajete presents the words of a Lakota teacher: "One is more than mere physical being, the possibility for interaction, transaction, and intercourse within other dimensions of time, space and being is what the dream space is to the Lakota: an alternative avenue of knowing" (p. 140). And that alternative avenue of knowing accesses the source for creative expression.

Witnessing the natural world begins with being centred and this unique form of witness flourishes within a gentled mind, body and imagination. Over and over again, beauty emerged in the group reflections as a force that fosters health and belonging:

Who cares about the trivial things that concerned me day to day. The world is beautiful and I am healthy and strong and I am a part of it. I am happy enough with the wind and the waves and the smell of trees. I am exuberant, alive and content. Happy. Filled with love for everything and everyone. (Gwendolyn, Group Inquiry)

Relating love with beauty in the "Practice of Beauty", Hillman (1998) writes:

We want the world because it is beautiful, its sounds and smells and textures, the sensate presence of the world as body. In short, below the ecological crises lies the deeper crisis of love, that our love has left the world. That the world is loveless results directly from the repression of beauty, its beauty and its sensitivity to beauty. For love to return to the world, beauty must first return, else we love the world only as a moral duty. (p. 264)

Gwendolyn reflects on her future and declares that she wants to hold onto the feeling of wholeness and connection:

For my future, I looked for balance and joy. I looked for secluded beaches and good friends and solitude. I concentrate on feelings instead of plans. For my future, I want to keep this feeling of wholeness and connection because after all, if I

can find this feeling in myself, I know my life will be good (Gwendolyn, Group Inquiry).

We often plan for the future, believing professional goals comprise a responsible relationship to life. What if students planned to feel happiness, balance and joy? Now it seems that the best laid career plans are easily foiled by fluctuations in the marketplace, climate change, and more recently, pandemics. So that students may graduate with resilience, Miller (2006) outlines the characteristics of timeless learning: holistic/integrative, embodied, connected, soulful, transformative, flow, participatory, nondualistic, mysterious and unexplainable (p.5-6). Should we not return our learning to the awareness of wholeness as Gwendolyn writes. A whole connection with life is what endures through the years.

Earlier in the fall and in response to her frustration with a boss, Gwendolyn visualized a cabin in the woods. Her imagination devised a safe haven, as opposed to fostering hatred and vengeance in her heart. McGilchrist (2009) proposes that it is the imagination that forms the bridge between the left and the right hemispheres. To hold firm while moving into the future we will need resilience, the imagination and Rose says, calmness. Implicit in this reflection is a general feeling of contentment and a sense of home:

Looking out to my future: Not really sure what I saw. Calm (that word keeps coming up), happiness, pure happiness. Soft, delicate, nature makes everything soft and smooth-perfect-natural. When I am in nature, really sunk into nature, I don't feel bad about myself ever, I feel smooth, delicate and natural. Anyway, in terms of my future-all, I could think of is contentment. No details, unfortunately. (Rose, Group Inquiry 4)

Rose's reflection is also one of happiness and self-acceptance. It is not necessary that we see a multitude of "details", images and symbols, contentment provides a safe bridge to the sacred other. Rose theorizes that nature and humans exist together through a degree of harmony:

The only thing that exists free of human beings is nature. So, I think it only makes sense that when

the two are together-they are able to feed off one another and focus on themselves as well. We are free to exist side by side without forming relationships and we are always connected. I guess I want to say that we need one another and affect one another, but we don't control one another. We can't control one another? Every man-made thing we can control, but nature runs its course. So, the basic two, humans and nature exist within a certain degree of harmony.

When we attend to nature we feel that comforting calmness on the exterior so we are less overwhelmed with what's going on inside. This connects the calming effect of nature in me. When it is stormy outside I feel safe inside and calm. When there's an emotional storm inside, if nature is calm, I'm comforted that the world is not ending. Taking time out of a hectic life to attend to nature for long enough, calms me. We need one another, and nothing else, to keep us going. (Rose, Group Inquiry)

Rose may not choose the word "occult" to describe the relationship between nature (the nature that Oscar Wilde says runs around uncooked) and humans. Emerson names the relationship between human and nature, a "harmony of both":

In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature. The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister, is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and vegetable. I am not alone and unacknowledged. They nod to me, and I to them... Yet it is certain that the power to produce this delight does not reside in nature, but in man, or in a harmony of both. (cited in Miller, 2011 p. 18)

Transcendent calmness becomes a home to come back to, it is rooted within and when you experience this sense of home, it is easier to face the future. The day that Miller spoke at an AREA conference on his recently published book, *Transcendental Learning: The Educational Legacy of Alcott, Emerson, Fuller, Peabody and Thoreau* (2011) his voice trembled with emotion. The Transcendentalists did not follow the herd, they questioned the status quo. They developed principles

for non-violent protest and meaningful discourse. At the center of their philosophy stands nature and spirituality.

### Transformation: A Primal Dance

Returning to the summer of 2009, the group met again to attend to nature one last time before the end of the data gathering period. Anticipating their departure, I was a ball of bitter sweet emotion. I asked everyone to wander in nature. And then the group would explore the *Transformations* exercise. We were trying too hard to hold the line of inquiry; thinking too much, and being careful about pleasing one another. What would happen if we just let go, emptied out thoughts and followed the body's way of knowing, just one more time?

Remember the mentors of interconnectedness? Water spiders dart from cover to cover, they bask in the sun and return to their subterranean home. Imagine many crevices and streams that reside in the underworld of the unconscious. Hundreds of cormorants are now travelling in interconnected circles across the lake right now. They light on the water for a few seconds and then resume their circling. Usually they fly from east to west or west to east in straight lines joined in the shape of an arrow head. Collectively, the birds now rise and fall over the water. Alcott was considered a conversationalist but not an adept lecturer: "Debate is angular, conversation circular and radiant of the underlying unity" (cited in Miller, 2011, p. 34). Teachers need to provide opportunities for students to practice circular learning, at times the conversation will go south to north, east to west and at others it will circle around, rising and falling as murmurations do. Let us not lose the art of beautiful conversation.

Before the transformations exercise I asked the group to attend to the horizon. Angela shared her experience:

Lately I have been more interested in trees and less interested in water but I wasn't drawn to the trees. I decided to walk over to the cliff area and sat on the wooden chair thing and I couldn't stop staring at the water. The relationship between the water and the sky seemed more connected than usual, probably because my vision is blurry (laugh). At

first the clouds were really beautiful and then I kept staring at the horizon and into the distance.

I felt these two lines from behind me like across towards the horizon like a path and I just felt like I was on the path. I was physically drawn but then it felt like I was zooming towards the horizon and it was really neat and it was just there and then everybody was congregating round you and I had to stop it. It was really neat like I was really feeling differently from all the change in my life. And I feel excited about the vastness and the mystery and the change and I could trust in it -and what I wanted and just flow with it. It was free and cool-like lines going towards the horizon and I saw it. It was really neat. (Angela, Final Group Inquiry Discussion)

A delicate, shimmering hummingbird flew past to draw from a flower's nectar. Angela has come to terms with her future. She is excited to move forward even though she does not know where she is going- she is "intrigued about the unknown":

I focused on the horizon. I couldn't stop looking out at the water but towards the horizon. I was noticing the relationship between the sky and the water. It seemed like all one. I noticed the clouds too. They were really beautiful. Everything seemed a bit hazy. It was exciting and big and mysterious. I kept wanting to look into the distance. Like I wanted to go to it. I think I am ready for something new. I am excited and intrigued about the unknown. I want to go to it and find something. After a little while looking into the horizon I pictured two lines going from either side of my head, toward a place on the horizon. I was being pulled toward that place, along the path of those two lines coming from either side of my head. (Angela, Final Summer Inquiry)

Her gaze is "drawn", she feels pulled towards the horizon. During the transformations exercise, Gwendolyn, Digby, Rose, Angela, Isabelle and Dylan became the children and teenagers they once were:

The flimsy wispy willow whispers "let your hearts go free".

I had completely forgotten what it was like to dance in a way where it feels like no one is watching. Sometimes I sing when I walk down streets that aren't busy when no one is around. I felt a bit like that. It's like for a moment you are the only one in the world and you're not actually making any sounds; *something else is doing it for you* and you get to watch. (Dylan Group Inquiry Journal)

Imagine hearing Dylan's inner voice as she writes "*something else is doing it for you*". Spontaneity resonates with the Japanese name for nature, an adverb, *shizen* means "of itself" (McGilchrist, 2009, p. 453). Dylan admitted that it was hard for her to empty her mind to meditate even when she was a young drama student. Nothingness is natural, it is part of an integral, organic process:

I looked at the water and for once I felt nothing, I saw nothing, I thought of nothing and no one and it was nice. I've never really been able to turn off the volume in my mind but the lake's ripples pressed the mute button. I didn't even try to think or not to think. (Dylan, Summer, Inquiry)

Psychiatrist Gerald May (2006) insists that nature "does not come in words or thoughts. It's kind of like an "energy and lack of energy" (p. 45). We are mistaken when we think the source of life is our thoughts. Nature draws us closer to understanding that the source of thought is stillness, movement, sound and current:

My mind still wants to figure things out, still feels it has been up to something, but it just can't do it. *Settle down, mind. My sweet, good working, diligent mind, rest awhile. It's okay, really.* The stream sounds are very loud now, suddenly a cacophony.... *Settle down little stream, you're deafening me. Settle down, mind.* Mind stream, building ice thoughts, flowing relentlessly, the nature of water, the nature of mind. (p. 41)

Then I wrote, "*settle down*, I have to "*let these students go*". We began in 1997 and explored a unique approach to mind-body gentleness and from the sensitivities that emerged through the years we

encountered a form of deep intuition, a collective magnetic knowing, patterned by attending to nature.

Gwen offers her wisdom about how friendship nurtures openness to nature:

I am more open to nature and I think life in general when I am with the right people. I have noticed a decided difference in myself when surrounded by this group. I suppose it makes sense because over the years these people have been like a second family to me. I do not feel shamed or self-conscious in their presence because they have already seen me at my stressed and harassed. I am able to drop most of my day to day pretense and explore both things.

David Hunt (2010) developed exercises for letting go so participants in his workshops and classes can nurture openness in friendship. A classroom is a learning space where friendship should grow without shame, self-consciousness or defensiveness. Classrooms that follow the fundamental realities of nature are spaces where lived experiences are shared. This means any equity issue will be welcomed in student discourse. At present we are not listening to one another. The classroom needs to be a space where deep listening and learning are welcomed and sustained. As I write I can hear the sound of the cicada. I enjoy this rising chorus as it passes through my body; the vibration is pleasing to open up into. Listening is a skill that requires practice and nature teaches rich and nuanced listening. Darroch (1984) writes of the voice of hearing which begins with deep listening through the body; the listener hears voices that are founded on, or simply resonant with other voices. Sound is an interconnected phenomenon that grows within our attentiveness to being: "I do not want surpluses of meaning. I want opulences of being" (p. 22).

It is an opulence of being that streams through Gwen's experience as she drops her day to day pretense and hears the subtle noise of the plants and willow:

Today I noticed the wind. It makes different noises in different plants, the willow, old and wise, wrinkled makes a subtle noise while the plant in the garden raps like an old woman. In sharp contrast to the reserved plant noises-the cricket sings a jaunty tune, sharp and clear, recalling



memories of many a summer night. (Gwendolyn, Summer Inquiry)

One thing is also for certain. When collective belonging is heard on a deep level the earth's wisdom is also heard. Circling back to Isabelle's desert vision, a feminine crone appears in Gwendolyn's reflection. This confirms the power of the feminine; she *is* poetically rapping. If the feminine voice is suppressed, we will not experience the balance of the opposites. The archetypal feminine lives in both men and women; the archetypal masculine lives in both women and men.

Jung (2012) wrote that there is a holy stream in common life and the essence of our shared existence is in this stream:

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)

To listen and truly be present with others, we need to come down from our high mountain and share the life of a simple cicada who spends 17 years underground to finally emerge and hum the song of the earth.

Being curious about what it means to absorb experience, Rose writes of the relationship between her inner and outer worlds:

I found it difficult to truly attend to nature because I was not feeling *in* myself. I feel like I need to be in tune with myself really to be attentive to nature around me. When I am tired, and sometimes I am not sure what brings it on, I feel out of my body. I'm so introverted that I cannot pay attention to the outer world. Or it feels not fully real. It feels sort of dream like. I'm less inhibited because I don't connect myself to reality. In terms of attention to nature I can see it and appreciate it, but I cannot enjoy it as much as I can when I reach out and make connections with it, really feel it. The lines are so thickly drawn between the inner and the outer, that they cannot fully mingle. I can see and feel nature but it's almost as if it cannot go through me. It does not have the calming

power-but for some reason I'm still drawn to it, it has such an association with relaxation. I guess I have this strong separation and it makes me feel so lost within myself because I can't be calmed and affected by nature's forces. It leaves me alone by myself. It can be helpful, but sometimes frightening, or disconcerting. I rely on that mingling of inner and outer (or myself with nature) to settle life. (Rose, Group Inquiry 5)

Rose relies on the mingling between her inner self and the world around her to "settle life". Gwendolyn accepts the aches and pains of life and affirms life even though the "bugs are biting":

I have in me many physical discomforts  
Tonight, my neck and back ache and all my bones  
feel old and heavy.  
The bugs are bighting  
But the grass is soft beneath my bare feet and the  
summer breeze is gentle on my face.  
I feel happy and content and calm.  
I am reassured by the company and familiarity of  
this idyllic place. (Gwendolyn, Final Summer  
Inquiry)

Red fire ants are remarkably resilient and have no known predator in this region. When they bite, they sting and the pain lingers for several minutes. Gwendolyn is reassured through the softness under her feet. That evening we were on the edge of the bluffs, close to my home and the city parks. A poetic presence in nature again, develops acoustic openness. Digby described a soundscape of nature and culture:

Dog barking, children playing, mosquitos by my ear.  
Child crying, barking lessens, more mosquitos.  
Crickets chirping, child is comforted, plane flies over head.  
Barking starts again, more mosquitoes,  
Child resumes crying-crickets still chirping.  
Another plane flies by.  
A voice (Kelli) instructs me to cease.  
Eyes open. (Digby)

The "child is comforted" and "resumes crying" alludes to an authentic description of lived experience in the moment. Angela anticipates her future:

Zooming towards it. Going really fast.  
Excited. Open. Big and Vast. Mysterious.

Possibility. Trusting myself and my interests.  
(Angela)

The following poem is reminiscent of Hamlet's soliloquy, "To be or not to be"; "To see or not to see". Perhaps this existential rumination will always be with us, the questions about the life hereafter and momentary irritations are also inherent in the dance of life:

To blink or not to blink.  
But the fire ants were nipping at my feet  
And again, I began a little dance and that too, truly  
felt good.  
We're all just like kids again (Dylan, Inquiry Journal)

Dylan notices the archetypal child in the movements of her friends. Isabelle reconciles two worlds, she is aware of how these two worlds communicate and she has been "opened to it":

I don't know if I really feel like writing at the moment. A part of me is bursting to say something and the other part is still closed. Nonetheless, the worlds...haha...I meant to say words...the words seem to be flowing. Maybe there is something to be said about worlds. The world of visions, colour and feelings seem to be crossing into my earthly world...It was the laughter. That laughter on the wind makes me realize that everything will be alright...more than all right, that everything will be wonderful. The laughter came from inside me...a wind from an unearthly source. Laughing inside me...the most healing laughter of all. The laughter I only just became acquainted with. At first, I thought it was a gift that someone gave me but then I was wrong...the laughter came from within me. Where it will take me, I do not know but I do know that I have been opened to it. I know it will come again. I will forever remember the sounds of the group...their dear voices laughing with me, at first in fun, then in surprise and then in the joy of the moment. WIND LAUGHTER. (Isabelle, Email, 2009)

The wind is refreshing and let it be that Isabelle's laughing wind lives at the heart of desire. The deeper world of visions, colour and feeling were crossing over to Isabelle's "earthly world". The deeper world for Isabelle, is the spiritual world. Proposing that we accept uncertainty, as opposed to rushing to the

illusion of certainty, McGilchrist (2009) highlights the enduring concept of two worlds: "Goethe's Faust, famously declared that two souls, alas dwell in my breast'!... Schopenhauer described two completely different forms of experience! Bergson referred to two different orders of reality...Scheler described the human being as a citizen of two worlds" (p. 462). We can foster balance between the worlds that hold meaning for us; the everyday and the transcendent, the skeptical and the trusting, the divine and the earthly.

### A Sense of the Essence: Consciousness is Elemental

The trip to Algonquin Park [a wild forest] was amazing. It was so nice to see Gwen happy...truly in her element. We sat on the beautiful rock type cliff overlooking the lake and gorgeous trees thinking about how we feel so proud to live in such a glorious country. We both want to spend time in nature. It is truly a healing place. It's as if I look into the trees and water after having had exercise and feel an exhilarating calm ...like the freedom from the resistance that I felt over the last few weeks.

Things are going well. I feel as though I am floating through the abyss between the comfort of the water and the freedom of the air. The air is representing the extremes. The water the everlasting comfort. Both are in view but now is my time for the extremes of the air. I do not know how this came to mind but I am thinking about David and his kiteboarding but I can only imagine the exhilarating feeling of being so close to the air. WOW. It's as if I can feel the power of the wind racing through my body, pushing me into the unknown. The excitement is bursting forth. The middle road is vanishing into the past. (Isabelle, Email, 2009)

Gwendolyn, Angela and Isabelle took the trip to Algonquin Park on their own volition. These three friends' experience in wild nature resonated with the group inquiries, namely with respect to encounters with awe, beauty and healing. In my view, Isabelle shifted into a somewhat deeper dimension as she described her experience, elementally. There is

freedom in Isabelle’s writing, coupled with intense joy, perhaps this is in fact was sweet ecstasy:

...The wind is tossing us around in a dance of light no matter how dark the ocean floor becomes, the wood burns, lighting the way through the wind of the ocean.

The seeds of time are sprouting up. Let go, let go... it's OKAY to GO... GO ... GO! The answers are right in front of me. Within everything that I have been given. Search no more, look no more... question no more. Let the wind laugh inside you, for THAT is your answer! (Isabelle, Email, 2009)

The visionary aspect of Isabelle’s message gained in sensory aliveness. I still marvel at the energy of these reflections, they are joyful and hopeful. She continues to free herself of her own expectations:

Perhaps I have been searching too much for the answer. Perhaps I have been wandering through the desert searching for meaning, for truth and for life, thinking that the harder I look, the better the prize I will discover. Perhaps I have been wrong, all this time. The teachings I have learned, the wise people and powers who have passed through my life have all been pointing to the very thing which I seek... the very thing I have ignored. (Isabelle, Email, 2009)

Harmonizing with her desire to search, Isabelle decides to trust wisdom, inner guidance and time. As she writes, the blending of the elemental opposites presents the concept of the garden, the soul and the acceptance of the opposites:

The seeds are buried beneath my feet, they, like the wind and the water, the fire and the light have been here all along. Rather than journey for ages through mountains of books, emotional roller-coasters, tense moments or any sort of journey that takes you away from home, the answers all lie in the seeds beneath my feet, soil and seed so fertile and full of life by no doing of my own. The answer lies in the fire that burns from within the water, life-the cross rising up from the water burning in the sky. It is in the opposites, the contrast of elements through which we must learn to live. The middle road must vanish for us to live in peace. We must accept the opposites, celebrate the impossibility of fire and water existing perfectly

together in one image, in one way of life. (Isabelle, Email)

The fire that burns within the water is alchemy’s symbol for soul. Jung’s (2012) proposal to marry the opposites is implicit in the following statement: “Eros is desire, longing, force, exuberance, pleasure, suffering. Where Logos is ordering and insistence, Eros is resolution and movement. They are two fundamental psychic powers that form a pair of opposites, each one requiring the other” (p. 563). The idea that feeling and logic can form opposites also aligns with Taoist and ancient alchemical traditions.

In Waldorf education, Rudolph Steiner developed a curriculum that nurtures the whole student. Steiner’s art pedagogy, through the simple act of drawing a free hand circle is introduced to children, so they that learn “the cultivation of grace and the delicate but disciplined control which must be developed in order to do form drawing beautifully, which carries deeper learnings for the child” (Cohen & Bresnihan, 2017, p. 68). It was the consistent embodiment of harmony and balance that Steiner sought in Waldorf schooling. Although he explored esoteric ideas he believed that “A real education takes care to put people into life” (cited in Cohen & Bresnihan, 2019, p. 153).

In the *Holistic Curriculum* Miller (2019) suggests that education overemphasizes the Yang, the ordering, rational approach to learning. The following depiction of the opposites as they may be considered through Taoism, supports teachers in their effort to balance the yin and the yang in the classroom:

<b>Yang</b>	<b>Yin</b>
Individual	Group
Content	Process
Knowledge	Imagination
Rational	Intuitive
Quantitative Assessment	Qualitative Assessment
Assessment/Evaluation	Instruction/Learning
Technology	Program
Techniques/Strategies	Vision

(pp.10-12)

Through a primary focus on standardized testing education forces teachers to teach to curriculum content which often calls for the memorization of

information and facts. Students do not as often encounter opportunities to grow from process-oriented learning as it is harder to track and measure. When I sought to balance the needs of the student as a living human being with classroom learning as a whole, my students became self-regulated and empathetic. When we balance techniques and strategies in relation to vision and the imagination, we might come to know more fundamentally, the very nature of learning and diversity.

### Reflections on Love: Ancient Secrets and Flowers

We need the joy that Isabelle describes. We need laughter on this hard road forward. Milosz proclaims the presence of the universe in the secret regions of being.:

My heart burst into singing with the song of grace for the universe. All these constellations are yours, they exist in you; outside your love they have no reality! How terrible the worlds seem to those who do not know themselves! When you felt so alone and abandoned in the presence of the sea, imagine what the waters must have felt in the night, or the night's solitude in a universe without end! And the poet continues this love duet between lover and world, making man and the world into wedded creatures that are paradoxically united in the dialogue of their solitude (cited in Bachelard, 1958/1994, p. 189)

A rare visitation appeared on the writing table in the late fall of last year. A bumble bee landed inches away from the computer. I watched in fascination as she quietly washed her face and hind legs over and over again. Months later, by March 2020, we too have washed our hands repeatedly, vigilant about the cleanliness of the home. Bumblebees go to great lengths to ensure their hives are not infected. We are losing these important pollinators due to pesticide use, there are substances that bees cannot wash off their bodies. In the early summer of 2020, as I wondered if this chapter will communicate a clear message to teachers and students, a bee sinks into a pink rose.

In *The Secret of the Golden Flower* (Wilhelm & Jung, 1931/1962) there is a chapter titled "Circulation of the Light and Protection of the Centre": "When the light is

made to move in a circle, all the energies of heaven and earth, of the light and the dark are crystallized" (p. 31). Imagine this process for a moment, a circle moving to encompass and crystallize experience, turning and transforming. This ancient text claims that the circulation of the light produces "seed thinking". The meditator stops the outflow of energy as they breathe a circle around the body, thus building an energetic container for growth. As I wrote, there needs to be 100 meditation sessions until there is enough containment for the seed, or "germ" to awaken. The *Secret of the Golden Flower* is not the only meditation practice that activates deep growth through the image of a flower in bloom.

The *Ancient Flower of Life* is a mystical philosophy that draws from sacred geometry. Its symbol has been found in Egyptian, Buddhist, Islamic and Hindu temples around the world. Contemplated in mystery schools, adepts believed that the image of the Flower of Life is a pattern that functions as "the grid of creation". Melchizedek suggests that we can imagine the flower, "as the creation pattern for the entire universe, including all living creatures" (cited in Goodchild, 2012, p. 192).

To understand deep learning, we need to be intimately connected to natural life. I believe that the grid of creation is speaking to us now. We can listen through chaos and disaster or we can listen every day through harmony and openness. This kind of attentiveness may not allay environmental disaster but it will make us more responsive to the environmental changes we need to make for future generations. Everything we have learned from attending to nature deeply, feelingly, lovingly, will naturally flow to environmental stewardship. Our stewardship actions may be as simple as participating in a backyard or balcony revolution of flowers and vegetables that attract insects, or a campaign to reduce plastic and household garbage, perhaps we will trade seeds with neighbors so that every day we are practically reminded of the sentient presence of natural life and the wealth this knowledge can produce.

### The Healing Garden

The fire is burning strong, perhaps stronger than I am aware of right now but I know it is burning. The

earth is rising up from underneath my feet. I can smell rich soil rising up from under my feet. I can smell rich soil squish beneath my bare toes. It smells like heaven, sweet and moist on a summer's day ready to provide nourishment to freshly planted seeds. Seeds that we did not plant but have been here since the beginning of time. It is impossible to know what those seeds are right now. Perhaps even in seeking to discern their power, we lose some of their magic. However, the seeds are there planted deep in the beautiful soil that is squishing between my toes.

Love Isabelle. (Email, 2009)

After the completion of the nature inquiry I changed my contemplative practice from wandering and still meditation to working in the garden. Again, I was fighting a deep dark depression. It felt like the original inquiry did not work, there was no lingering joy or sense of fulfillment after it was all over. However, physical labour in nature felt soothing. Hauling leaves, making compost, digging new gardens, even weeding. Identifying the smells and appearance of health in the soil fulfilled a primal need; I craved natural invisible processes and wished to bear unwitting witness to them. Thoughts were still travelling in concentric circles, they were rounded and wedded to how nature evolves, perhaps shovelling and steering a wheelbarrow would resolve my lack of language and resituate me once again, within lingual time.

.When soil contains a healthy amount of organic matter, worms and bugs break down the material and turn it into a nutrient rich medium for planting. The health of the soil is important because food deprived of nutrients and pumped full of chemical fertilizers is served on our tables. If we do not disturb the soil, invisible microbes form vast fungal networks that contribute to soil structure. No organic tending of a garden is straightforward, it is a slow process of transformation as the gardener stands back and watches nature establish balance. When the soil is healthy and the worms plentiful, raccoons enjoy digging up the worms. When plants are healthy, the groundhogs and bunnies arrive to eat the bounty. But soon the foxes come and then the coyotes. The birds, insects, moths and butterflies are attracted to an organic garden and establish their own balance as they

take care of the aphids. I planted thousands of seeds in the dead of winter in mini greenhouses so each month of the year I was involved in a practical engagement with the garden, from gathering seeds in fall, to planting them in January, handling seedlings in spring, planting seedlings out in the garden later in spring and tending healthy plants in summer. In fall, once again there is the bountiful collection of seeds and through late fall, a celebratory seed sharing time.

At the turn of the twentieth century many schools had working gardens in the US (Selhub & Logan, 2012). In the 1970's Rachel Kaplan (1973) claimed that gardening fosters "fascination", which energizes and focuses attention during learning. Kaplan discovered that horticultural activities improve motivation, communication, grief processing, depressive thoughts, anxiety, sleep, psychosocial skills, self-esteem, stress reduction. These activities also maintain muscle strength and enhance cognition (Selhub & Logan, 2012).

Concerned about maintaining the health and vitality of seeds, Steiner (2011) introduced a gardening method in Waldorf education called biodynamic gardening. Horticultural theories were tested for the biodynamic garden within the fields of chemistry, botany, biology and physics. Steiner believed that all forces, the mysterious, etheric, cosmic and organic should be integrated through the activities of the farmer, for example, planting seeds according to moon cycles and biodynamic methods of preparing compost. Steiner's farming system was devised to ensure that all the goodness that flows from cosmic forces are activated in the soil and passed on to healthy plants and animals.

Cohen and Bresnihan (2017) explain that "Everything to be learned can best unfold when introduced at the right time and in an organic way" (p. 90). To provide a curriculum example for a grade three class that illustrates this point, Cohen describes a project where the children plant wheat seeds with the view to tend the wheat plants in the garden, build an oven and learn how to bake bread. Children labored to dig the garden and witness the green wheat turn to heavy laden seed heads. From the field to the bread oven, at the conclusion of the year students celebrated the bread they made from the grain they grew. They

declared that the bread had a taste like no other bread.

The joys of a garden are indescribable, watching a flower grow from a seed to a seedling is an organic process that affects the heart. I smile in the garden, just a few moments give solace and allow thoughts to slow down. There are so many ways that schools could optimize the schoolyard for teachers and children who wish to grow plants. Wildflower meadows are not costly and they help the insects. Butterflies, bees and birds are constantly moving in the garden, even the small animals and birds play there. Love is in a garden and the more you love the garden the more it seems to love you in return. When we can really sense, touch and feel life, we know how to evaluate a situation that is not vital, to see if our actions need to be adjusted for life's sake.

### The Crescendo: Vision

Three days before the deadline I was sitting at the end of the bluffs, searching for a conclusion and yet not really sensing it. I wanted finality, practical wisdom for schools, critical perspectives, maybe I wanted to show that this long journey has been worth the difficulty. Perhaps I was haunted still by the question of whether this nature inquiry worked, in that it would be applicable to students' lives and learning. On that day the horizon was awash with pink and shapely, cumulus clouds. I started to look innocently- there was a rabbit, and oh, was it not marvellous to see a child holding a bowl up to the sky? The whole atmosphere surrounding the clouds morphed into a multi-layered rainbow, except it was not in an arc, it was more like a mist of rainbow colours that ran straight across the horizon. It was then that it seemed the image crossed over into that other worldly way of being and seeing. The clouds gathered straight along the line of the horizon, covering every inch of it. Then these clouds transformed into shapes as if the intensifying colour birthed their evolving formation. When the golden hue appeared, I was aware that this was a vision. A marvellous city appeared, so breathtaking was the colour, as time evolved the buildings were bathed in a golden luminous light. I could only see the top of the buildings; this image was growing out of the mist. There were two castle turrets, other than that there

were ancient walls, the vision formed into the appearance of a golden city. There were mountains behind the city but then the image slowly merged into to a mountain range. Like the unexpected fall happening with the group, I felt that familiar sense that I witnessed an indescribable occurrence, it was one of those private happenings and I was content with this image, one that would provide personal inspiration in the future. For three days I saw the city in my mind and felt a great sense of peace and love. I thought of Angela who was so excited about the horizon and Isabelle who was ecstatic about other worlds.

The next day I was flipping through Goodchild's *Songlines* (2012) and happened upon her husband Robert Romanyshyn's depiction of an imaginal vision. He called this vision "A City in the Clouds": "...a beautiful city in the clouds. It was made up of many buildings, which gave the city the appearance of great depth. The buildings at the forefront had towers, which made them look like castles. The city was very far away...as if it was at the top of a very high mountain. He writes that he felt as if the city was vibrating but then realized that it was "actually composed of musical sounds" (p. 55). Afterwards, Romanyshyn said that he felt calm and peaceful and bathed in love. He was told: "your task is to gather the sparks of beauty from your world with which to build this city" (p. 55). During the last few days of this writing I carried around Goodchild's book like it held a secret, but of course I did not know what it was. Opening the book to random pages for inspiration I had not yet read Romanyshyn's account until the night before the completion of the manuscript, again, after I had witnessed the vision. If I had read it prior to this moment, his experience may have been seconded into the methodology chapter. Jack Miller suggested Goodchild's *Songlines*, this is a sign of a powerful intuition in an educator. Goodchild maintains these visionary experiences are "epiphanies of the subtle Other World located between the intellect and the senses" (p. 217).

In Indigenous education, vision is a source for art and community (Cajete, 2019). All through this final chapter, there are references to beauty, sound and colour. Gwendolyn mentioned the sound of trees. So, in this case, one might argue that art in turn inspires vision. Deep listening in nature enhances the imagination and the capacity to listen to others. We

prepare ourselves to communicate with the cosmos by honoring our dreams, the air, water, earth and fire, the animals, birds and bees. Beauty holds magnetism and so we are able to see it more and more, feel it more as it builds like a great crescendo.

Deep felt experience with the earth provides a richer avenue for perception than cognition. It is through the unexpected that beautiful visions emerge. When I think of all the surprises that the group and I experienced, it seems as if the earth conducts the orchestra of life and there is great humility in that idea. Intelligence then is not solely a human phenomenon as David Abram (2020) poetically illustrates. Goodchild (2012) claims that visions orient the seer to the heart as they connect with the spirit of the earth.

The opportunity to experience the felt sense of interconnectedness should not be optional in the curriculum. If we listen, feel and see according to a love for the earth, sustainable action will emerge naturally and our thoughts will grow more coherent and less destructively chaotic. Miller's (2018) recent gift to education focuses on love and compassion. Simply, we know that we live better when we love, but we can teach better too. On these pages is the new way of being and learning that Isabelle identified as the aim of this work. There are many ways to relate to the earth with love as Digby, Isabelle, Dylan, Angela, Gwendolyn and Rose show. These students gave me strength to live as I am called to live. I hope when I am no longer mother, teacher, friend and lover on this earth, this work will give these group members inspiration to continue to honor the earth and live as they truly are. This morning the horizon's gift was a rose hued light that was streaming through the trees. Our new beginning starts with happiness and contentment:

Today I am happy. I decided to sit outside in the back yard to read. I set two chairs in the sun and grabbed some water and my book and let the heat soak into me. It is so nice to be warm and relaxed. There are buds on my trees and the birds are singing. The simple sunlight seems to fix all of my problems, at least temporarily, like a hot iron smoothing the wrinkles out of my life. Sitting in the sun it is easy to imagine myself as a dragon, a big, sleepy lazy dragon. I let the sun soak in while the world moves around me.

I pictured serene places I can go to, out of the way places where I am one with my body, trusting it and loving it. In my future I will be happier and calmer and more flexible and trusting.  
(Gwendolyn, 2009)

#### **Years. They come, they smile**

They all but pass away  
I'm going now to the place where  
The rainbow drinks from the lake  
The chord that is nightly strummed  
Just might be a minor one  
But then there comes a minor glimpse  
That suddenly faces out all of this.  
The same song everyday  
Reminds us what we're supposed to say  
Now we're going where the rainbow drinks from the  
lake. (Dylan, 2009)

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