

**FERMENTING THE FREE FOLK SCHOOL: TENDING A  
CULTURE OF PLACE-BASED ECOLOGICAL LEARNING  
AND LIVING**

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

This research examines an example of a place-based learning initiative focused on sharing folk/self-sufficiency skills (the Free Folk School) at the neighbourhood level in helping participants put their socio-ecological values and concerns into action in order to live better in place. The work is inspired by place-based education and folk schooling literature. It mixes the approaches of Grounded Theory and Participatory Action Research, and what the author calls, “place-based marginal praxis.” Discussion of results focuses on ingredients that help in tending a culture where it is more appealing for people to act more in line with their socio-ecological values. The ingredients include: unlearning alienation, reskilling in both “hard” and “soft” skills, reclaiming “self-sufficiency” to mean “community sufficiency” or “self-enoughness,” sharing as a useful tool for adapting to change, searching for living/integrated knowledge, and reconnecting with ancient traditions or intergenerational interactions.

**Keywords: Place-based education; Folk schools; place theory; Grounded Theory; Participatory Action Research; Ecological Education; Folk Skills; Place-based Marginal Praxis; Deskillling; Reskilling; Alienation; Living Knowledge, Integrated Knowledge, fermenting**

**Subject Terms: Place-based education; Environmental Education—philosophy; Education—philosophy; Nature—effect of human beings on; Human beings—Effect of environment on; Social Change; sustainable living; self-reliant living; subsistence economy; bioregionalism; urban ecology; human ecology; bioregionalism—British Columbia—Lower Mainland Region;**

*To all the folks searching to live  
humbly, wholly, and peacefully  
with all beings in their place.*

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*Let nations grow smaller and smaller  
and people fewer and fewer,*

*let weapons become rare  
and superfluous,  
let people feel death's gravity again  
and never wander far from home.  
Then boat and carriage will sit unused  
and shield and sword lie unnoticed.*

*Let people knot ropes for notation again  
and never need anything more,*

*let them find pleasure in their food  
and beauty in their clothes,  
peace in their homes  
and joy in their ancestral ways.*

*Then the people in neighbouring nations will look across to each other,  
their chickens and dogs calling back and forth,*

*and yet they'll grow old and die  
without bothering to exchange visits*

~(Lao-Tzu, 2000, p. 90).

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# CHAPTER 1: OUT OF DECAY COMES LIFE— HOW THE FREE FOLK SCHOOL FERMENTATION STARTER CULTURE BEGAN

## 1. Personal context, concerns, and motivations

Much of the impetus behind this project comes from my own concerns about the socio-ecological decay we all face today, and a sense of urgency around trying to make the world and ourselves whole again. Thus, this thesis project began as I imagine many do: with a feeling that our world is broken or decaying. As I progressed in this work, however, I began to think that perhaps it is not principally the world that is decaying, but rather us. In this case, to attempt fixing the world might mean first fixing ourselves somewhat. As I completed this work, I began thinking that maybe we can never quite fix ourselves, at least at the societal level. Taking a lead from natural processes of decay and rebirth, however, maybe we can at least tap into the remaining nutrients in the decaying matter, and use them as a basis to brew some new, healthier hope for the world and us.

This thesis, then, is in part unavoidably a reflection of me— and especially of my perhaps naïve and urgent desire for wholeness. Unsurprisingly, I knew on a conscious day-to-day level that healing a broken world with my thesis work would be a naïve and tragically ambitious project, but to my chagrin, I cannot claim that this was not my underlying wish and hope throughout this endeavour. However, I thought I might instead settle into a more humble desire of trying to carry out this research with as much integrity as I could muster.

I mention this to convey the idea that I could not escape the generative forces behind this work, which could perhaps also be conceived of as the work's starter culture: first, a desire to heal the world, and then, in this attempt, to be a person of integrity who can act on their own values—both of which represent desires for wholeness. It goes without saying, and you will see in the following pages, that I could not fully embody these desires, but stating them upfront is an effort to make this a more honest and whole piece of writing by baring intellectual *and* psycho-emotional motivations. As

starting points I am sure that, for better or worse and no matter how I twisted them, these desires informed most of my decisions, thoughts and insights along the way. As with sourdough bread, the character of the sourdough starter culture influences the quality and taste of the final loaf.

### **From frustration and grief to joy**

For example, it makes sense to me that my sense of grief about the state of an un-whole world contributed to a great frustration with much academic work. This frustration shaped my decision to try and “do something useful” through my research rather than merely feed into the phenomenon of absurdly useless research described by David Orr (1994, p. 10), and echoed by a friend’s email about declining salmon stocks wherein she states “the best educated nations in the world are using their best skills to knowingly record in ever greater certainty and detail their accelerating destruction, degradation and deadly pollution of every aspect of the biosphere. “ I did not just want to stand by and document this degradation for the academic record. I wanted to work proactively towards a different outcome from the one I knew was looming.

What I mean is this: whereas, during my undergraduate years, I was introduced to ideas as quasi-mystical world-changing powers, I felt that my graduate studies burst that naïve bubble. The academy shifted for me from a place of inspiration and hope where values and actions were intimately linked, to a necrophilic place of professional training with a focus mainly on theory. I was first being groomed as a professional academic, second as a considerate intellectual (hooks, 2003, p.22), and a weak third, as an engaged citizen. Where I once sought out studying as something that had previously helped me enlarge my worldview, develop compassion, and act more in accordance with my values, it suddenly felt suffocating, life-denying and meaningless in that it was a waste of time as far as a suffering people and planet went.

My approach in this work stems from all these concerns. This personal context, as much as a more formal theoretical context, informs the following pages. Dr. Heesoon Bai once asked me what kept me going through my frustration and grief in this work. Her question floored me. How and why, if I had been concentrating so heavily on these negative feelings, had I chosen to persist through this painful process? I had never bluntly asked myself. I thought for a long time about her question and came to the unglamorous conclusion that what kept me going was a deep desire to live well with

fellow beings in place, a hope that this was a joyous possibility, and a will to make some practical moves towards that end. This desire, hope and will, whether I knew it consciously or not in the process of this research, formed the basis of my central research question. I wanted to sound my research question with a note of celebration rather than despair.

## **2. Intellectual context: the importance of place**

My own interests and concerns propelled me to seek wisdom and direction in this project from others who could help me understand what I was feeling as described above, why I might be feeling it, and where to go from there. These authors helped me flesh out the *context, shape, and direction* of this project, which I will briefly explain here and expand on in later chapters, and which is focused on learning-in-place as a way towards lining up our values and actions.

### **Context: ignoring our place-values**

In modern western industrial societies, most of us learn from our institutions of formal schooling, family, neoliberal economics, the legal system, and so on, to gloss over the true well-being of our socio-ecological places; the socio-cultural and ecological relational web where we live and of which we are invariably an intimate part (Gruenewald 2003a; Orr, 1994). Many of us can feel something is wrong with this picture and especially that socio-ecological degradation is a major concern (Bookchin, 2005, pp.82-83). Often, however, we have learned our alienation from our place so thoroughly that we do not even *know* that we do not know our place and its constituent parts, and that this alienation might be a contributing factor to the problem of socio-ecological degradation (Snyder, 1990).

Part of what allows us to ignore the well-being of our places, beyond a narrow definition of humanness, is our seeming inability to act on some of our cherished values about place, when we state them. I sensed that in modern western society the relationships between people and values, and people and place need the most mending in people with whom I share a generation, socio-economic class, level of education and general background. More clearly, we are well-informed about socio-ecological crises, but not only do we not seem to know how to act on those concerns such that we could make meaningful changes in our lives that would result in less socio-ecological harm, we

are actually among those who are causing the most harm through our careers and lifestyles.

In terms of lifestyle, all of us live with the profound contradiction that many of our (lifestyle/consumption) choices fly in the face of our stated (and often entirely heartfelt) concern for human and more-than-human well-being by supporting ecologically and socially devastating practices and production processes (Berry, 1997, p. 18) <sup>1</sup>. In career choice, many incredibly intelligent people, presumably with some hint of care and conscience, squander their intellectual capacities on tools, technologies and methods that aid in dominating humans or the natural world (Orr, 1994, p. 7; Purpel, 1999, p. 188). These inconsistencies suggest that, for whatever reason, we seem to, individually and collectively, lack the capacity or commitment to put knowledge and values into action in a living affirmation of relationship, community, and wholeness.

I wish to maintain here that people in general are not feigning concern; they *are* concerned about social and ecological destruction, but do not know how, or choose not, to put their values into action. People are concerned, if not at the level of care, compassion and empathy, then at least at the level of fear (of their own annihilation by ecological disaster or disease, of assault by socially forsaken folks, or of war— which is not only a cause of such destruction, but ultimately often about a scarcity, increasingly caused by destruction, of social-cultural or ecological resources). For example, a recent study by Decima that focused on environmental destruction found that 90% of Canadians polled say: “ ‘my generation has done an unacceptable amount of damage to the environment’ and 91% ‘feel a moral responsibility to improve the environment for future generations’ ” (Anderson, 2007), yet so many of this huge number take actions each day that refute their appeal to moral responsibility.

Despite widespread concerns, then, a mix of personal barriers (perhaps fear of the necessary cataclysmic upheaval in worldview and lifestyle needed for such change) and structural barriers complicate the desire for a way to live such that one can commit to addressing these concerns in daily life. Structurally, there are a number of factors conspiring against amply and readily offering a meaningful framework for living a life committed to ecological and social integrity; a wholistic life that bridges the gap between our knowing and acting. Among these factors, I would include the dominant educational

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<sup>1</sup> I borrow the term “more-than-human” from Abram to signify what others might call a non-human life world (see Abram, 1996).

institutions, capitalist and/or neoliberal economics, mass media as a form cultural transmission, family, and Eurocentric/patriarchal/colonialism, all of which are nested, interconnected, and fundamentally *learned*. In this project, I chose to focus on more modest personal, rather than structural, barriers to the problem of trying acting on one's values in the hopes that we might at least remove some personal barriers and at best begin to unlearn some of our structural barriers in so doing.

### **Shape: finding place**

In attempting to remove personal barriers to acting in line with our values, we must know where to locate the sources of trouble. Based on the reading I have done, I perceive the trouble with broken humans playing out socio-culturally, spiritually, and ecologically. Sure, the trouble is also political, economic, and so on, but there is an order of primacy that we must acknowledge here. The ecological realm makes the socio-cultural realm possible. The socio-cultural realm makes the political and economic realms possible. The spiritual realm likely enters the picture before or along with the ecological or maybe the socio-cultural realms, depending on where you stand. Therefore, on a basic level I would venture that for a human self there *are* only other humans, places and their associated beings, and some animating magic throughout—relationships, divine presences, time/space, life forces, inspiration etc. Everything else flows from there.

Modern western society seems to locate the source of the trouble almost exclusively within the socio-cultural realm of human existence. The definition of human generally invoked in this case is narrow; encompassing only a collection of blood, bones, organs and maybe an ego-mind trapped inside a skin bag (Naess, 1995b) that relates only to other ego-minds trapped inside skin bags. This being the case, then on a simplistic level, one can understand how lots of “save the world” work is oriented towards fixing or helping humans in their relationships with other humans exclusively in their socio-politico-cultural-economic situations. Occasionally accounting for the possibility of a spiritual component to humanness, we also direct some of this work towards spiritual relationships, but we direct relatively little of it towards human relationship with place (Berry, 1997; Gruenewald, 2003b; Orr, 1994), or better yet, towards fostering magical human relationships with place (Snyder, 1990). Adopting a

narrow definition of humanness that excludes places as key constituents in human make-up makes this oversight possible.

Ecological places, and more accurately our relationships with them, hold promise for me as starting points for learning to live better in and with the world. Working on our relationships with ecological places defines the shape of this work. This is not only because they are overlooked, as I mentioned, but because it makes sense to me intuitively, intellectually, and emotionally that *because* we overlook them we largely ignore an essential piece of ourselves—of what it means to be a whole human. We ignore a primary relationship that allows us to be and continually become human. Some scholars, for instance, suggest that humans owe our minds (language, thought, emotions, sense of amazement, and intelligence), and indeed our physical existence, in large part to our respectful and reciprocal relationships with unique, wild places (Abram, 1996; Orr, 141; Shepard, 1982; Snyder, 1990, p. 31). They go on to say that, preservation of these places and our healthy relations to them is actually part of what *being wholly human* means. Rather than thinking of place as a backdrop for our human actions as is often the case (Lefebvre, 1991), I maintain that we *are* our places and our places are us. What we now do or do not do to place shapes us anew as well—in ignoring the well-being of our place, we ignore our own well-being<sup>2</sup>.

All sorts of modern people have worked to unlearn place-alienation, and reconnect humans with our places. Some are doing so structurally and personally in the names of folk schools, and more recently coined, “place-based education” programs. Formalized folk schooling traditions that originated over 150 years ago in Denmark have always been based in a place and responsive the needs of people, often oppressed or disenfranchised, to learn about how to confront issues facing them in that place. Place-based educators tend to focus more on learning from the ecological relationships in our

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<sup>2</sup> This position is distinct from a simple, linear, dialectic relationship associated with environmental determinism where the thought pattern is: place-shapes-humans-shape-place *ad infinitum*, and tending in one direction, which in today’s terms means in the direction of increasingly barren places necessarily shaping increasingly barren humans. As Shepard (1982, p.62) points out, the debate about environmental determinism is not possible because a worldview frames it in terms that unfairly predetermine the answer: that is, history/culture and nature are separate and competing forces, where it is possible for one to influence the other. Coming from a different worldview, wherein one sees humans and nature as one in the same, does not allow the environment undue influence on human actions. Thankfully, humans are endowed with a spontaneous creative spark— an animating magic— that connects us with place. We have agency to reclaim our birthright and see ourselves enmeshed with our places in a different way than is proposed in the mechanical autopilot environmental determinism dialectic.

place so that we may restore a balanced human-nature interaction. Folk and place-based practitioners, writers, and thinkers, while working ostensibly from different traditions, share a common belief that acknowledging, learning from, and reconnecting with our places and the people therein are key challenges facing modern humans if we are to live sensitively and responsibly with Earth and all its beings (Horton, 1990; Orr, 1994; Snyder, 1990).

### **Direction: lining up my values and actions with this research**

Given my own concern for acting on my cherished values, and through reading, being inspired, and wanting to act on the place-based education, folk schooling, and other literature, I figured that the best, or perhaps at least an honest, way to address this question was to attempt the implementation of a place-based and folk-centred project as part of my methodology.

Specifically, I wanted to focus on testing out a strategy that would allow people to make immediate and tangible changes in their lives to act on their socio-ecological values and concerns. Thus, I decided to try to work with sharing what I might loosely describe as hands-on, “hard,” folk/self-sufficiency skills, such as those related to accessible and low-cost local food procurement and preserving, and working with alternative energy sources. My decision to focus on hard skills, rather than making choices such as selling one’s car, installing water-saving fixtures, or staging sweatshop boycotts, for example, came, in part, out my own personal journey. I am aware of these choices and have made many of them myself: I am at a stage—not a higher or further stage, but just a stage—where I am interested in learning hands-on skills as a way to further act on my values and knowledge with an eye to living better in place. This decision also came out of a worry stated in the literature that, as part of our alienation from place and our values, we are being systematically “deskilled” in the technologies and practices that acknowledge our dependence on natural systems (Bowers, 1997, p.97), and slowly reduced to mere consumers, capable primarily of only spending money, rather than creating. Most importantly, however, I did not want to focus on choices that had “negative” or “anti-“ connotations: giving up this, boycotting that, living with less of X. While these are all important steps, it seems to me that with so much doom and gloom, folks respond better to something they CAN do in a positive and

empowering way that seems less like a sacrifice and more like an added richness<sup>3</sup>. When the quality of our culture is increasingly less diverse, more vacuous and weak in the face of change, we might need to be filled up first in order to begin having the inner personal and community strength and creativity to be able to sacrifice.

This research project has largely been a personal effort to heed the warnings and advice of folk and place-based educators of all kinds—formal academics, activists, small-scale farmers, poets, city-dwellers, and indigenous peoples alike. The scope of this project, as well as the time, resources and circumstances at my disposal, necessitated work on this more modest scale, but I was also inspired in this approach by messages of social transformation through personal and collective grassroots transformation as suggested by figures such as Berry, (2002), Gandhi (1997), Prakash (1993), and others.

### **3. The research project and research question**

Thus, I have tried to focus my methodology, in the spirit of learning-in-place, in the place in which I currently find myself: Vancouver, B.C. Learning from place in a large urban area presents some fundamental challenges, however. Ecologically speaking, I have often wondered throughout my research whether there even is a place left to speak of in the city? In the end, I believe that there is, and attempting to fuse place-based and folk schooling traditions helped me see a way into this urban place that could speak to socio-ecological concerns therein.

For this research, then, I attempted this fusion by trying hard with a group of folks to listen through the cranky clatter of the city to see what we could learn together with and from our place about living well with it. To this end, I organized a series of hands-on skills-sharing workshops that I called the Free Folk School for folks who self-selected as people concerned about taking action on local socio-ecological degradation, and who identified with a cooperative/collaborative and exploratory learning setting. With these workshops, I hoped to create a learning environment where normal folks of all sorts who

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<sup>3</sup> I grant there is something perverse in this approach: as if we do not already have enough richness in our lives. I also believe that having an opportunity to sacrifice or exercise restraint in the face of abundance is an important condition for spiritual growth (and that is how I interpret the lines in the Hinton translation of the *Tao Te Ching* in the epigraph that say: “*Then boat and carriage will sit unused/and shield and sword lie unnoticed.*” But I also realize that we must begin somewhere and meet people where they are at, and in these times, it seems appropriate to me to use this approach as a starting point.

were concerned about the socio-ecological state of their places could encounter one another in the spirit of “do-it-together” skills sharing for community/self-sufficiency to act on their values and learn to live better in place. **My central research question is: what are some of the salient features of learning folk/self-sufficiency skills in a place-based setting that might help people act on their socio-ecological values, and reconnect with their place?**

I conducted post-workshop focus groups with some of these participants, acted as a participant observer throughout the workshops, and recorded field notes based on these observations. I also kept a journal of my own reflections through this process of trying to put a model of place-based learning into practice. The resulting methodology is the beginning of a search inspired by place, impelled by my central research question, and informed by weaving together my insights with those of the folks who participated in this project, and with those of academics and other thinkers. It is a qualitative methodology guided by Grounded Theory and Participatory Action Research.

#### **4. Where this thesis is going**

I want this thesis to form less of an argument, and more of what it can only be: a possibility, and a particular celebration of trying in the here and now, in all its wonder and quotidian comedy, to create a sense of joy around new ways of being and of trying to reclaim our wholeness as humans. These workshops obviously could not fix a broken world, nor did they even connect us directly to our places or each other in a long-lasting way, but I think they help us wring out the decaying matter some of the remaining examples of healthy, whole existence we have available and they do so with a sense of joy.

Specifically, I found that this research celebrates people working together where they are, and with what they have, to learn what sustainable self-sufficiency skills mean for them and their relationship to their values and their places. Themes that I identified in this celebration that I will analyze in more depth include: alienation and community, deskilling and reskilling, self-sufficiency, sharing, living/integrated knowledge, tapping into ancient wisdom and intergenerational exchange, and fermentation as a metaphor for building alternative cultures.

To see these themes lined up like this suggests nothing particularly fresh and new, but I am content with this more humble outcome. Fermentation processes tend not

to be new and fresh; they generally sit around for a few days or months. Through this research, however, I have come to appreciate the poetry of the everyday, the subversiveness of the simple, the radical nature of the most common things that we do (or should maybe do more) that help to mend our relationship to our values and our places. Beyond keeping ourselves and other beings alive and loving, I am not convinced there is need for anything more.

The following pages are organized as follows. In chapter 2, I will outline some of the folk school, placed-based education and other literature that inspired this research and helped activate the starter culture of my own personal experience as outlined in this introductory chapter. In Chapter 3, I will outline the methodological tools I combined to help me answer my research question, and we think of these as the skeletal outline of a recipe for fermenting. Chapter 4 is the taste test, where I lay out the results of the fermentation process. Chapter 5 is food for thought, with an eye (or a tongue?) to thinking about the ideas of this research as pantry ingredients that we might take along with us to help start a fermentation project wherever we may be. What follows is a story of trying to mend relationships between people and their values, and people and their place.

## **CHAPTER 2: ADDING SOME YEAST— LITERATURE TO EXCITE THE FERMENTING PROCESS**

### **Aims of, and ways to think about, this chapter**

My purpose here is to provide the reader with an initial taste of the literature and theory that inspires, informs, and frames this research. I have not exhaustively reviewed a collection of theory. Rather, this chapter is a conglomeration of some ideas with which I have been working, and that I interpret as important in inspiring this research. I focus on place-based education literature, but I let this compost with what I feel are enriching readings from, place theory, folk schooling, bioregionalism, and agrarianism in the hopes of adding important elements to the place-based education discussion. All together, we might think of these readings as a catalyst in the process of fermentation, not unlike yeast; something that excites and multiplies a desired effect.

I invite you to think of this chapter in another way as a series of lenses through which I began trying to make sense of my own and participants' experiences throughout this research. As my supervisor, Dr. Sean Blenkinsop, helpfully offered, one might also think of this chapter as the outcome of my first "focus group," only the "participants" in this particular discussion are texts rather than people. I find this a helpful approach as it lends continuity to the theoretical portion of chapters 3, 4, and 5. In addition, as with participant focus groups, I came to this textual focus group with specific questions to ask, and a set of ideas that I sought to refine further by testing them against the textual "experience" of some authors. Of course, I later test them against the experience of some workshop participants to the same end.

The result, then, of this textual focus group is a set of ideas that I bring to my fieldwork with participants as a theoretical framework seeking further refinement, *and* as a methodological impetus. What I mean by methodological impetus is that before their usefulness in helping me to understand research events, I read the ideas of this chapter as a call to action. That is, the ideas included in this textual focus group form a theoretical framework that demands I attempt to act in accordance with it, even as I conduct my research. The very ideas of this chapter suggest that I choose a

methodology based on putting theory into action. This allows me to test the ideas herein through some sort of practical application to a particular setting. These ideas thus form a sort of testable hypothesis that also strongly informs my choice of research methods.

### **Theory as a journey**

This chapter dwells on one stretch of a larger theoretical journey. The part of my journey that seems most relevant to this project began in an undergraduate geography seminar. There I encountered place/space theory, Wendell Berry and agrarianism, and many new works of bioregionalist poet and writer Gary Snyder. I also read Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1991), and was influenced by the idea therein that most citizens of industrialized nations live most of our lives without ever thinking about the places and spaces where we live; how they are manipulated or constructed to serve the ends of power, how ordinary citizens through ordinary actions can produce them differently to suit human and more-than-human health, or how they create and shape us. Finally, I was strongly influenced at this time by conversations with Dr. Chris Beeman about place, epistemology, ontology, and the transformative power of small-scale farming.

I continued these conversations with a piece of land and a small Albertan community, where I worked for two seasons on a small-scale farm. It was there among helpful people and an abundant land that my sense of belonging to a human, and more-than-human place/community deepened, and I began thinking about what it means to feel more whole as a human. Also, I began learning some skills necessary to put more of my socio-ecological values into action by living locally, providing for more of my own existence, and doing so with a supportive community that acknowledged the importance of health and wholeness in relationships between land and people. These are all ideas you will find herein.

From here, bringing my journey within the scope of this project, I began with a proposal to research a farm-based and place-based education program (through which a number of friends had passed and vouched for its transformative theory-to-practice nature). I wanted to ask how this program facilitated learning such that participants found it helped them act more in line with their socio-ecological knowledge and values. This question sprung from an interest in the links between knowing and being, and to what extent changing the ways we know land and community through farm/place-based

education might change the way we *be* in our place. For the size of an M.A. project, this plan began seeming too ambitious, and did not readily answer the call I felt to put ideas I was encountering into action<sup>4</sup>.

I decided instead to look at a smaller-scale, parallel case involving offering people some hands-on tools (locally focused folk/self-sufficiency skills) to help put their socio-ecological values into action. The section of my journey on which I focus here starts with place-based education theory, and leads to considerations of our condition as whole, relational human beings. This path crosses most often with the section of my journey in Chapter 4 that is an elaboration on these ideas: either through examples that illustrate this theory, or through adjusting the theory when the experience and data point to a different idea.

## **Place-based education**

### **Basics**

At the heart of my research are the ideas of place-based educators. In this section, I deal with the more traditional conception of place-based education. Over ten years ago, the Orion Society coined the term Place-Based Education (Knapp, 2005, p. 277; Sobel, 2005, p. ii), and today defines it as:

...the process of using the local community and environment as a starting point to teach concepts in language, arts, mathematics, social studies, science, and other subjects across the curriculum. Emphasizing hands-on, real-world learning experiences, this approach to education increases academic achievement, helps students develop stronger ties to their community, enhances student appreciation for the natural world, and creates a heightened commitment to serving as active, contributing citizens. Community vitality and environmental quality are improved through the active engagement of local citizens, community organizations, and environmental resources in the life of the school (Sobel, 2005, p.7).

Most literature seems to focus on K-12 schooling, and other authors highlight the following set of common place-based practices, pedagogies, and desired outcomes that

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<sup>4</sup> I will not claim to have successfully implemented any set of ideas in the end. This project has reinforced for me that the translation from idea to action is not necessarily direct or linear, and I cannot claim that this project resulted in people necessarily acting more in line with their values or living better in place. Rather, we all explored together what we might need to do so.

fill out this definition. 1) Investigating and documenting regional cultures and histories as they relate to one's own life or one's community life helps learners connect socio-culturally to their communities. 2) Investigating local natural phenomena, processes, and places through hands-on observation, measurement, and restoration projects helps to develop a connection to the natural world and a sense of wonder about more-than-human life. 3) Using real-world problem solving or action research to investigate and address community issues of interest and importance to learners reveals the complexity and interconnections that link these issues with other factors. 4) Providing internship and entrepreneurial opportunities to learners allows them to build the necessary skills to imagine living in their places long-term with viable economic prospects. 5) Drawing students into community decision-making processes by attending municipal government and community meetings encourages active citizenship (Gruenewald, 2003a; Smith, 2002). This list is helpful, practically speaking, but I will add some of my own thoughts to it throughout this chapter, specifically focusing on the importance of learning folk/self-sufficiency skills, and on the importance of learning to recognize the wild everywhere, including urban places.

From the above list and other accounts, we can see that generally-speaking, place-based practitioners' pedagogical goals and practices are most often allied with those of problem-based, environmental, outdoor, ecological, and community service learning education (Woodhouse & Knapp, 2000). As it has evolved theoretically, its proponents have also linked it with critical pedagogy (Gruenewald, 2003b), ecosocialism (McLaren & Houston, 2004), and socio-ecological justice education (Furman & Gruenewald, 2004) to widen its focus beyond primarily academic and ecological concerns. Here, I tend to agree with Gruenewald (2003a, p. 620) who states, somewhat contrary to the Orion society definition, that the central point of place-based education is not to boost academic achievement, but "to extend our notions of pedagogy and accountability outward toward places. Thus extended, pedagogy becomes more relevant to the lived experience of students and teachers, and accountability is reconceptualized so that places matter to educators, students, and citizens in a tangible way." The suggestion seems to be that the act of reconceptualization in this case cannot only happen in our heads. It must also happen by extending ourselves towards our places; going directly to them to learn from them about how we can be accountable to them.

## **As critique and antidote**

This is where the more traditional definition of place-based education begins to fan out and be framed as both critique of, and antidote or response to some of the alienation generated in the dominant education system. In terms of critique, place-based educators claim the dominant education system primarily values the supremacy of knowledge and ways of knowing that are ahistorical, decontextualized, objective, rational, and as such fragmented and divorced from learners' contexts, emotions, and actions. They also claim it fosters hierarchical, competitive, individualist tendencies in learners to fulfil its primary goal of churning out economically productive units in a highly mobile economy rather than helping us learn about our condition of coexistence with other beings (Orr, 1994; Gruenewald, 2003a).

More specifically, in tracing five dimensions of place, Gruenewald (2003a) provides an excellent starting point for apprehending the usefulness of place as a construct for critiquing how dominant educational ideologies and practices affect five key dimensions of human experience in place. He focuses on the perceptual, sociological, ideological, political and ecological dimensions of place to show how schools a) limit the diversity of experience and perception to which students are exposed; b) obscure the fact that humans *make* places (places are socio-cultural constructs) and that education must attend to this interrelationship because it creates "place makers"; c) stifle questioning about ideologically embedded spatial forms that reproduce uneven power relations; d) simultaneously create marginality, and yet deny it as a space of radical action, through standardization and control mechanisms; and e) are aligned with a global economy that exacerbates ecological problems.

In providing such narrow and limiting ways of knowing and being, education forms a rigid epistemological and ontological framework that undermines efforts to live a life of social and ecological integrity. It succeeds in this by obscuring the importance of encountering the world outside of a rational and instrumentalist worldview, of developing strong socio-ecological values, and of living them out to create healthy relations between people, and between people and our places in ways that we currently do not do.

Beyond critique, and as an alternative to this alienation from self, place, other, and integrated knowledge resulting from the ways of knowing and being reinforced by the dominant education system, a growing number of educators, researchers and

activists are embracing “place” as a conceptual educational antidote of sorts. As a radical alternative to the dominant education system, place-based education is broadly described as an approach that emphasizes intimate connections between self, place, knowing, being, and community— both socio-culturally and ecologically speaking (Furman & Gruenewald, 2004; Smith, 2002). Through integrated bodily engagement in place, place-based educators seek to fundamentally situate learners within, and see themselves as an important part of, the complex relational webs that constitute the places where they *are*.

Place-based education is an inherently multidisciplinary and experiential practice arising from a desire to learn from, and commit to fostering the well-being of a particular place and its human and more-than-human inhabitants. Its goal is engaging students as more than just industrially productive members of a capitalist economy (Gruenewald, 2003a). It has deep grassroots in other traditions, and while only in its theoretical infancy under this name (Gruenewald, 2003b, p. 3), it shows promise in firmly situating educational endeavours in a commitment to grow possibilities for learners to live a life of social and ecological integrity where they can act more faithfully on their values.

The place-based education literature helps point us in some helpful directions. Namely, I think it provides leads for changing our ways of knowing and being in that it changes the way we *encounter* knowledge and other beings in the world. We can begin to know this knowledge and these beings as dynamic, live, and complex relations-in-place, rather than dead, flat and simple isolated notes in textbooks, or isolated individual bodies. Despite this strength, and given its state of relative theoretical infancy, more traditional place-based education literature has some shortcomings both in general, and as it relates to this research in particular.

In light of this claim, I would like to bring in other related literatures to address some theoretical tasks I have identified that I hope helped me to refine conceptions of place and place-based education in relation to this research and in an effort to help me answer my research question. Specifically, I would ask: 1) what *kind of place* do we invoke in place-based education?; 2) how may we reconnect with that place in order to learn about our condition as whole, relational beings?; 3) what is the pedagogical power of place in learning about our condition?; and 4) what might it mean to “learn from place,” and how can we do this? For me all of these questions help address my research question in an effort to mend the relationship between people and values, and people

and place. Beginning with what kind of place I have in mind when I speak of place-based education, I now turn to a discussion of place theory.

## 1) What I mean by “place”

In the following sections, I want to flesh out the richness of place, and try to elucidate what place *could* mean when we invoke it on behalf of an education for socio-ecological integrity. To this end, we must investigate how I understand the concept of place, since this understanding drives this project. First, I understand place in a very multifaceted way that encompasses physical field, the basis of human existence, experience and affect, relationships, and identity formation. In terms of physical field, I will tentatively offer a rough working definition of place. Following Snyder’s (1995; 1990) thinking, I define place as the complex of living relationships, human and more-than-human, individual and (eco)systemic, that constitute a bounded physical field, the fluid boundaries of which might be defined by a combination of watershed boundaries, bioregional climate and plant groups, shared cultural characteristics. This field (in an ideal situation) has the ability to provide most of the needed resources for a simple and ecologically sustainable, yet flourishing existence for all its inhabitants, and may extend itself over a reasonable human scale (walking distance) radius.

Beyond physical field, and more conceptually speaking, I understand place as fundamental to lived human experience (Tuan, 1977, p. 3). Casey reveals the primacy of place as a *condition* of being, not merely a location; place belongs to the concept of existence because “[t]o be is to be in place” (1993, pp. 14-15 original emphasis.):

To be at all—to exist in any way—is to be somewhere, and to be somewhere is to be in some kind of place. Place is as requisite as the air we breathe, the ground on which we stand, the bodies we have. We are surrounded by places. We walk over and through them. We live in places, relate to others in them, die in them. Nothing we do is unplaced. How could it be otherwise? How could we fail to recognize this primal fact? (Casey, 1997, p. ix)

While Casey’s words are helpful in bringing the relationship of place to human existence out of the shadows of the taken-for-granted, it is useful for us to go further than this because places and human existence are not only related in that we are always in a place. Rather, we might also justifiably claim that places are actually what give us an identity as whole humans. With respect to relationships with unique, wild places, for

example, some scholars suggest that humans owe our minds (language, thought, emotions, sense of amazement and intelligence), and indeed our physical existence, in large part, to our reciprocal relationships with these places (Abram, 1996; Orr, 1994, p.141). Thus, “recollecting that we once lived in places is part of our contemporary self-rediscovery. It grounds what it means to be ‘human’ (etymologically something like ‘earthling’) (Snyder, 1990, p.31). Some authors suggest that the loss, or covering up of, unique wild places in the modern world is related to the individual, cultural, and social degradation that seems especially acute now more than ever (Augé, 1995; Orr, 1994; Shepard, 1982). These claims entail that preservation of these unique places and our healthy relations to them is actually part of what *being a whole, healthy human* fundamentally means.

I am also using place as Tuan (1977) does, not to signify a static point in space, but a dynamic set of constitutive relationships and experiences that imbue our lives-in-place with meaning, evoking an affective response in place-dwellers. Places are experiential and integrated centres of “felt value” distinguished from more abstract, fragmented, mathematical conceptions of space by the relationships, memories and complex feelings that constitute them (Tuan, 1977, pp. 4-6). As such, place is seen as a key ingredient in identity formation.

Paul Shepard adds some nuance to Casey’s point, and some significance to Tuan’s point by explaining the importance of place as a *part* of human makeup. He claims that places have both physical and psychological dimensions and that people connect, and develop deep emotional attachment, with places through mythology and ceremony. Shepard says such places act as mnemonic devices for a rich past that evokes the sense of self and sacred history, and thus place plays a key role in the identity formation of place-dwellers so that the terrain becomes a genetic inheritance; literally part of our biological makeup (Shepard, 1982, pp.23-24). In a certain sense, then, place is not only a “condition of existence” or a “centre of felt value”; it is important because it is a part of us, just as we are a part of it. If this is the case, then surely it is important for the human prospect to take notice of what becomes of places, the implication being that what we do to them, we do to ourselves. For example, the last few thousand years of human experimentation with trying to construct urban places at the cost of ecological places, and the resulting socio-cultural decay, seems to indicate that

destroying our places constitutes a form of self-destruction socio-culturally speaking. It is this concern to which I turn in the following sections.

### **Shepard and the differing significance of place**

If place is so intimate to our physical, biological and emotional existence, or if, recalling Casey for example, 'to be is to be in place,' then the different qualities of one place or another we inhabit must have important implications for *how* we "be." Indeed, Shepard implies the process of identity formation is at work in sedentary and nomadic peoples, ancient and modern urban peoples, but that the significance of place differs among various people based on the quality of their experience of it as determined by the quality of the place itself (1982, pp. 23-24). Perhaps certain types of place either call us into relation with them or exclude our meaningful participation in them in different ways. Thinking of Shepard and the differing significance of place allows us to explore a qualifier to Casey's assertion.

### **The urban**

I have been focusing more abstractly and theoretically on what kind of place I mean in my research, but I have often found myself asking not only what kind of place do place-based educators mean more generally, but what significance do specific *places* have for them? What kind of specific place do I speak of in the case of my research? Much of the place-based education literature focuses on rural and ecological places, to the exclusion of the urban and socio-cultural (Gruenewald, 2003b, p.4). As far as the urban is concerned, place-based educators occasionally mention the importance of place in our urban experience, but that usually seems to amount to a passing comment about greening the city.

As I mentioned in the introduction, I often wonder whether there is a place to speak of at all in the city, and if there is, what kind of place is this and how might it affect us differently than, say, a farming region? Shepard (1982, p. 21) draws his line of difference between sedentary and hunting peoples in the *quality of attention* a place inspires. He posits hunting peoples had to be attuned to all sounds in the landscape as voices communicating relevant and important messages about where and how to procure food, and their visual attention was constantly shifting as food was often hidden and seldom found in fixed locations.

Shepard claims this quality of attention shifted (though it did not disappear) with the slow turn to sedentary village-based agriculture. According to him, the new mode of food production made listening to these wild voices less necessary and the hum of village life began drowning them out, while food could be found in the fixed fields and rows marking the new agriculture. Taking a lead from Shepard, I am wondering whether modernization and urbanization might be characterized in part by an ever-increasing shift in quality of attention. I suspect one aspect of that shift is characterized by a turn of our attention away from wild places to human-built places, from ecological to exclusively socio-cultural and, more importantly, industrial aspects of place. Perhaps more importantly, a second aspect of this shift of attention deals with a decrease in or deadening of general attention to our medium. Shepard (1982) claims this has damaging effects on our self-development, which, for the majority of human history has occurred in reciprocal interaction with unique, wild places. The damage is manifest in a degraded social fabric and ecology as people become increasingly numb to the health needs of the wild places to which we owe the grandest debt: our existence in all its physical, psychological, and emotional facets (Orr, 1994; Shepard, 1982; Snyder, 1990).

The modern urban built-up place and its attendant “mythologies” of alienation and “ceremonies” of violence and destruction still play a role in identity formation, as Orr (1994, p.147), and Snyder (1990, p.29) hint at in the case of children developing attachment to a home place, whether wild or domesticated. To lose or perceive we have entirely destroyed our relationship with unique, wild places—those constituted by, and in turn shaping, richly textured ecologies, histories, and cultures-in-relation-to-place—might then negatively affect the quality of our *being* such that we stray further away from living our socio-ecological values.

Wild ecologies and relationships, however, still exist in the city. This statement might generate some confusion about what I mean by ‘wild,’ so I turn to Gary Snyder for, not so much a definition, as a way of talking around this concept. Snyder defines the wild as the Chinese might define the term *Dao*: a quality that eludes definition and categorization as it is always in flux, unpredictable yet reliable, simple but incredibly complex, whole, self-organizing and self-generating. For Snyder, the wild represents a form of freedom in which beings unselfconsciously exercise their innate qualities in interaction with other wild beings; animal, plant and human behaviour are dependent on, based in, and following the dictates of local ecosystems or non-institutionalized cultural

etiquette (Snyder, 1995, p.10). Some elements of Snyder's definition of the wild do not exist in the city. For example, a land base with the indigenous plant and animal communities intact. However, in the city we can still find micro-ecosystems intact. We can also find drainage patterns above or below ground, migratory bird behaviour, humans resisting exploitation and confinement (office jobs?), microbotic life forms creating nutrition and disease, a forceful will of plant communities to re-establish themselves (dandelions pushing up in the cracks of sidewalks), and source elements of all our building materials following their natural life cycles (decomposition processes).

If wild ecologies are so essential to a healthy human and ecological existence, then part of our task as place-based educators is to hold that in mind for the sake of our being. Snyder claims that every region has its wilderness: the fire in the kitchen, the parts less visited (1990, p.30), "a giant downtown building/ is a creek bed stood on end" (Snyder, 1974, p.84). Permaculturists such as Vancouver's Oliver Kellhammer (2003) point to the permaculture term "Zone 5" as a "ruderal ecology:" the disturbed urban areas where natural plant succession cycles can be observed (sometimes including plants that are nearly extinct in "healthier" areas of a country where frequent human traffic destroys their habitat).

I think once we figure out what kind of place we mean in place-based education, our task as place-based educators becomes clearer: it is to look and listen for the wild in our place, to develop a quality of attention that reminds us of its presence and begins restoring our original relationship with it. Conceiving of downtown buildings as creek beds gets us much closer to our original relationship with materials that went into its construction, than would talking about it as a human construction made from glass, steel, and so on. In a best case scenario in the city of Vancouver, if we converted all possible space to vegetable gardens and every single person changed our diet to a less energy-intensive, less footprint-intensive one, our population still requires a vast bioregion to makeup what we could not produce in the city (Bomford, 2008). Holding in mind that the urban *requires* the rural or a bioregion of some sort for its existence highlights that effectively at least some of "the rural" *is* the urban, and vice-versa. This point brings us closer to the fact that we must honour and nurture a healthy relationship with our wild, unique places for our physical survival (not to mention psychological and emotional).

To recap briefly before we move forward: in this chapter, I am trying to set up and advocate for a multi-faceted definition of what I mean by “place” that goes beyond what currently appears in place-based education literature. My hope is twofold: more immediately, I hope this added nuance can help me better answer my research question, but I also hope it might help all place-based educators, myself included, move toward a more robust place-based educational praxis that is more responsive to the particular needs in our places. Beginning with one of four questions to this end, I have asked what *kind* of place do we mean in place-based education? The exploration of this question began with the idea that different kinds or qualities of places actually result in a different human experience of place and the significance or importance we ascribe to those places. As per Gruenewald’s (2003b, p. 4) concern that most place-based education focuses on the rural and ecological to the exclusion of the urban and socio-cultural, the last section dealt with physical considerations of place, specifically in an urban versus rural or wild setting. The following section takes up the second half of this problem: the socio-cultural aspects of place.

### **The socio-cultural or the relational**

Contrary to Gruenewald’s assertion, I find the place-based education literature heartily acknowledges the importance of the socio-cultural aspects of place (though perhaps uncritically, a point to which Gruenewald rightly draws attention) through emphasizing community-building, cultural studies, studies of the cultural margins, and induction into community decision-making processes. Gruenewald (2003b) calls for decolonization in the socio-cultural realm, but I think the larger issue that the literature *does* miss is a more in-depth discussion on the need for acknowledging the deeply relational (in the ecological *and* socio-cultural senses) aspects of human existence in place.

Acknowledging the deep sense of relation I invoke to explain the *kind* of place I suggest that we might want to think about dealing with in place-based education, entails recognizing that humans are do not exist in a dichotomous world where human is separate from nature. We are not merely trapped in the envelope of our skin. What this might mean, but is not often acknowledged in the literature, for example, is that humans might actually constitute a larger, more fluid “field of being”, as Heidegger called it; or a “gradient of involvement in the world”, a field of care and concern as Evernden

expanded on it (1985, p. 64). In ecological terms, let us hear what Snyder (1990, p. 41) has to say about this field: “the sum of a field’s forces becomes what we call very loosely the ‘spirit of the place.’ To know the spirit of a place is to realize that you are a part of a part and that the whole is made of parts, each of which is whole. You start with the part you are whole in.” This field of being or “spirit of a place” in socio-cultural terms is not just a bounded human body, but is constituted by the primacy of tangible and intangible relationships between part and other parts, and part and whole. Such a shift in perception from dualism to interrelationship helps move us in the direction of elucidating our intimate reliance on all beings, and thus the need to care for them properly. An example might help clarify where I am going with this.

An illustration of the field of being and primacy of relationship can be found in the example of a young child who, when hearing her name called will come, but when asked to point to whom that name belongs, is just as likely to signal Mom or Dad as herself. The implication here for Barrett (as cited in Evernden, 1985, p. 64) is that the child identifies her field of being as an event in which the parents are part of her *self*: “ ‘She secretly hears her own name called whenever she hears any region of Being named with which she is vitally involved.’ ” The young child has not yet learned the abstract atomistic social convention, but still lives relationally, as part of other human beings. This relationship plays out in interaction with people *and* places, and is arguably the primal human experience that authentic environmental, social justice and spiritual visionaries tap into when defending a being in threat of *non-being* (Evernden, 1985, p. 64; Freire, 2005; Naess, 1995b). As such, attention to the relational nature of place offers a counterweight to socio-ecological domination.

When we learn in place, whether urban or rural, we have a chance to learn the “spirit of a place” based on the recognition of this kind of relation of parts and wholes, where ecologically *and* socio-culturally speaking, the primary issue is of necessity “ourselves among others” (Evernden, 1985, p. 72). I see the true spirit of Evernden, Snyder, Freire and Naess’s suggestions framing the issue more as ourselves *as part of* others and vice-versa: a statement that recognizes our intimate relationship with all beings as a step toward realizing that damage or nurture directed towards any being is necessarily directed towards all other beings (ourselves included). In this view of place, Steiner (as cited in Evernden, 1985, p. 70) gives Descartes’ cogito, rooted in a dualist

worldview a new and different life, saying “I care therefore I am.” I would amend it further to read, “I am part of others therefore I am<sup>5</sup>.”

An educational strategy that denies our intimate interrelationship with other beings constitutes a fatal severing of humans from life itself. Fatal because these beings fundamentally form part of our selves as we in turn fundamentally constitute them. Perhaps this observation offers an explanation for why incidents (which I would argue are actually not isolated, but connected) of social, psychological, and ecological breakdown are increasing during a time when an individualist, atomistic, competitive ethos prevails. For this and other reasons, I believe we need to orient our place-based education efforts toward intimately reconnecting learners with communities of beings and the relationships that sustain us. This way, we might create more likelihood for acting on our socio-ecological values to reduce destruction. Blurring the line between self and other, humans and more-than-humans, culture and nature, also begins breaking down the same dichotomous worldview that keeps theoretical concerns separate from action, and knowing from being.

## **2) How may we reconnect with this place?**

### **The role of adult and non-formal pedagogy**

Another aspect I found missing from place-based education literature that bridges the first and second question in this chapter is that of non-formal pedagogies. The first question about what kind of place we mean in place-based education clearly refers to a place that may include, but must extend beyond, the boundaries of the classroom. The task of how to reconnect with that place as I have outlined it above might need to happen, then, at least in large part, outside of formal schooling. While it does offer strategies for reconnecting with place, most place-based education literature, focuses on doing so in a K-12 formal school setting (Smith, 2002; Sobel, 2005; Woodhouse & Knapp, 2000). I was also interested in broadening its application to adult

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<sup>5</sup> I say this knowing full well that one could levy the charge that this is flawed argument in that it is an example of circular reasoning, where the “I am” at the beginning of the phrase presupposes the “I am” at the end. To that charge, I respond that I understand this phrase in the co-emergent, rather than the circular reasoning sense. What I mean is that, as I will explore later in the “whole human” section of this chapter, any “I” or self exists and develops only in interaction with other beings or “I”s: any self must then necessarily co-emerge with other selves to actually “be” an “I” at all.

and non-formal settings, but I needed some additional theoretical tools to go beyond the K-12 place-based education discussion. This is where the folk schooling (Horton, 1990), bioregional (Snyder, 1990), and agrarianism (Berry, 1997) literature is helpful; in bringing considerations of place-knowledge and learning to live-in-place outside of the classroom into the broader adult community.

### **Folk Schools: a brief history**

Taking learning out of the classroom and away from textbooks can be a step away from learning commodified by the products of grades, uniform evaluation standards, “marketable” credentials, and so on. Out of the class, we might have more leeway to create or point to dynamic knowledge, rather than just consume and manage static information. The folk schooling literature points to a long tradition of situating knowledge and learning out of the classroom, distinguishing between living and dead knowledge, and getting ordinary people involved in helping one another confront the problems they face in their places (Kulich, 1997; Kulich 2002, Horton, 1990; Thayer-Bacon, 2004).

The idea of a folk school was first propagated by Nicolae Frederik Severin Grundtvig (1783-1872), a Danish poet, philosopher, historian, and pastor. Grundtvig, however, did not found the first folk school in 1844. Christen Kold, inspired by Grundtvig’s ideas, and with many of his own ran with the folk school concept, which began as a school for the Danish peasantry who could otherwise not access an education. Both Kold and Grundtvig shared the ideas that a folk school should be focused on the importance of self-development, in spiritual terms for Kold and more in personal and cultural terms for Grundtvig. They also agreed that the school should have no examinations, should be based on the power of the “living word,” and should in some way create a sense of family or community among its pupils. The latter was often achieved by making the schools residential schools where students participated in caring for the site and one another (Kulich, 1997).

The content of the folk school shifted immediately, from Grundtvig’s secular, liberal education to Kold’s deeply religious focus and it continues to change today, as can be seen for example, in Myles Horton’s focus on social justice at Highlander Folk School in modern-day Tennessee, or in the self-sufficiency skills focus of the John C. Campbell folk school in North Carolina. Folk schools with different content have also

taken root in most Scandinavian and Baltic countries, as well as in Poland, Hungary, Germany, and the U.S.A. (Kulich, 2002). The folk school tradition has also endured for over 160 years in a number of forms. As with poetry, the form provides some structure that sets limits so as to make the form internally coherent, but the form must also allow, “an opening, a generosity, toward possibility” (Berry, 1983, p. 201). The creativity of the content is allowed to be shaped by the demands of the place, or the needs, whims, and social circumstances of the people who work with the form, but ultimately, it must fit the form.

Myles Horton took a trip to Denmark to research folk schools before he started his own Highlander folk school in Tennessee. After reading all he could about the Danish folk school, he realized there was a discrepancy between *historical claims* that folk schools helped democratize Denmark socio-economically speaking, and the *modern methods* they seemed to employ. Upon arriving in Denmark, he attributed this discrepancy to another discrepancy: that between the modern folk school form, and what he saw as the true spirit of the form based in earlier versions of the folk school, but not currently implemented. Horton sought out older students and teachers to get at the roots of inspiration behind folk schools (Horton, 1990, pp. 50-52).

I cannot adequately define all the salient features of this fluid form. However, I must attempt to locate us in the folk school form’s general area and try to point to what I take to be its spirit, if we are to have an idea of what holds the idea of a folk school together. Through my brief review of some of the folk schooling literature, I have come up with a broad set of values that seem to infuse most folk school programs, regardless of content. These values certainly overlap and, as they are fluid, I do not present them as a sort of dogmatic set of principles that every folk school must have. Rather, these are the values from which I took my inspiration in this project, though some of them, such as the residential component, I did not try to implement given either time or circumstantial constraints. In the same tradition of Horton seeking the spirit of the form, I offer the following.

### **Folk schools: the spirit of the form**

As I alluded to earlier, folk schools in all their incarnations also seem to focus on the importance of the “living word” based in experience and relationship with others instead of dead bookish and class-bound information. The living word was meant to

express a vitality and spontaneity in relating to one another and to speak directly to the peoples' lived experience and "awaken" them to the value of their heritage and traditions, be they religious, cultural, political, linguistic or otherwise. One also validated and honoured one's heritage and traditions through regular practice in the arts. Singing, reading poetry, or dancing together is also seen as an important activity for bringing the people closer together with a sense of shared identity and celebration of their work and way of life (Horton, 1990, p.52).

Folk schools were meant to be organized loosely, getting teachers and students together, but leaving enough room for exploration of current themes of importance. Some of the more institutionalized folk schools in Denmark are highly organized, but this is what Horton was reacting against. Their spirit should be one of taking a lead from the problems and issues that people face in a place. Those problems could be as diverse as: marginalized peasants lacking access to formal education that validated their culture as in the early days of the Danish and Scandinavian folk schools, the struggle for racial integration during the civil rights movement in the USA of the 60s, or the need for more ecologically sensitive lifestyles and policies in the modern world (Kulich, 2002; Horton, 1990, p. 53).

Folk schools also focus on non-credentialed education unregulated by the state, and tailor their missions more to peer learning, and letting teaching unfold as conversations on topics of universal human importance. Students often teach one another and share their knowledge based on their needs and interests in their specific time and place, with a focus on their self-actualization in such learning. Rather than simply testing knowledge through exams, which Grundtvig, Kold and Horton all believe become ends in themselves, the aim is meeting the people where they're at and facilitating their learning, self-empowerment and emancipation (Kulich, 1997, Horton, 1990).

This self-empowerment, especially for Grundtvig and Horton, included trying to awaken people to their own potential and capacity for development as a whole person in order to more effectively meet the challenges of their day. As the name implies, this work in folk schools has always been oriented toward "ordinary" folks: usually adolescents or adults, often peasants, workers, cultural and linguistic minorities, and other historically oppressed groups (Kulich, 1997; Kulich 2002, Horton, 1990).

Most of the schools are residential or community-based, emphasizing a human warmth in learning and care for a family or community-type gathering of folks where the teacher lives with students and often facilitates students teaching one another<sup>6</sup>. Specifically, Roberson (2002, p.11) notes that coming together to experience a community and sharing ideas could help marginalized folks in particular solve problems they faced together. Related to the residential feature, it is particularly important for my purposes to establish the link between folk schools and a focus on place. Kulich (1997, p. 9) notes that Kold's "school must not lure his people away from their place and work in the villages." Similarly, Horton and Grundtvig both aimed to fashion adult learning to produce local solutions to specific problems of daily life, meeting learners where they are, and trying to enlarge their views from there (Roberson, 2002, p.12).

### **How the folk school tradition helps us reconnect with place**

These themes begin helping me answer my second question in this chapter: how may we reconnect with the kind of place I outline here? Folk schools bring into play elements I see as important in this quest: experiential, living knowledge that is practically applicable to one's situation; enough flexibility in form to adapt to changing needs identified by people confronting specific problems; teaching one another and sharing knowledge to give us all agency in confronting our problems in place, thus also blurring lines between students and teachers; working at the grassroots level with ordinary people who see intimately what is happening to their places and; working to boost peoples' self-confidence so they can see themselves as important local actors who can influence change and; living in community to foster social growth, cohesion, and thus capacity to deal with what issues may arise in our place.

In his final journal entry after a year in Denmark, Horton scribbled an epiphany that solidified his idea for a folk school firmly based in place:

I can't sleep, but there are dreams. What you must do is go back, get a simple place, *move in and you are there. The situation is there.* You start

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<sup>6</sup> The residential element in particular has shifted depending on circumstances that make time more or less available for multi-month-long courses. In particular, Kulich (2002) notes that as the increasing mechanization of agriculture changed peoples' availability, folk schools had to adapt their schedules accordingly to offer week-long courses. I mention this partly as methodological justification for offering short day-long or half-day courses, as this fits much better with the time schedule of most Modern urban dwellers where I conducted research. That said, I think in an ideal situation, one might try to retain a voluntary residential component.

with this and let it grow. You know your goal. It will build its own structure and take its own form. You can go to school all your life, you'll never figure it out because you are trying to get an answer that can only come from the people in their life situation (Horton, 1990, p. 55 emphasis added).

Horton's insight also inspired me to work with a fluid form that would hopefully grow into itself given clear goals and a situation based in place. The key is seemingly clear and simple, as Horton (1997, p. 55) expresses, "the way to get started was to start." Part of learning how to reconnect with place is to start somewhere, in a living, dynamic place with an idea that this is what you are trying to do.

### **The role of folk/self-sufficiency skills in reconnecting with place**

What I term "folk-self-sufficiency skills," is linked to Illich's concept of "tools for conviviality." By conviviality, Illich means "autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and the intercourse of persons with their environment" (Illich, 1973, p. 11). From here, Illich sees skills as convivial tools that "allow the user to *express his meaning in action*" (Illich, 1973, p. 22 emphasis added). Peeling back the layers from Illich's words, and expressing these ideas in relation to my own project, I would describe folk/self-sufficiency skills as the set of knowledge, abilities, and ecological relationships that in some way help us put our values into action, and directly provide for our own and our community's flourishing existence.

I admit that based on current literature, learning folk/self-sufficiency skills may not be the most intuitive place to attempt answering how to reconnect with place. I will try to justify this choice, partly through theoretical considerations that I found missing in place-based education literature, partly through personal considerations, and partly through circumstantial considerations on which I will elaborate in Chapter 3. My decision to focus on skills grew partly out of my own interest in learning immediately applicable and tangible techniques for living better in place. I felt that for starters, skills related to small-scale and local food and energy provision, as well as "green building" techniques and skills for building or creating the tools and materials needed for shelter, work, and play, were democratic enough to be accessible by the layperson. I also felt they were of enough significance that once enacted they could put a nice dent in one's reliance on energy and goods made artificially cheap by the exploitation of people and ecosystems. As I mentioned in the introduction, I did not feel the need to accumulate more

information. I was interested in knowledge that would help me and others act. I began seeing that skills I was learning on and around the farm in Alberta were a powerful catalyst for working with the more theoretical knowledge of place to which I had been introduced in undergrad. Skills such as learning to grow my own food or save vegetable seeds brought me directly in contact with the place, its rhythms, relationships with human and more-than human beings, dangers, and lessons.

Folk/self-sufficiency skills, the loss and recovery thereof, the relative autonomy they promise to some, and the way they can bring us into direct relation with what keeps us alive, make them important to consider in discussions on what we might need to learn to reconnect with and live well in place. As Jaffe and Gertler (2006) point out in a different, yet related context (consumer (de)skilling), agri-business has a vested interest in keeping consumers deskilled so that they can provide answers to the questions “what should I eat?,” “how should I prepare it?,” and “how should I store it?” More often than not, these answers take the silent form of packaged, preserved and pre-prepared food commodities that usually have no connection to place, and tend to destroy the places in which they are produced and the people who produce them. Similarly, many corporate actors in most sectors have a vested interest in keeping consumers deskilled so that their products, often sourced with disastrous ecological and social consequences, have a market.

I would identify the process of deskilling as a long and slow one, perhaps beginning with Shepard’s observations that a move to sedentary, village-based agriculture replaced our skills of attention to the nuance of the natural world with a different set of skills that identified more readily with the more fixed, and arguably less complex, nature of agriculture. From this point on, through increasing urbanization, standardization, and homogenization of how we produce the things essential to our existence, each individual person is further removed from the skills of directly providing for one’s own existence (Beeman, 2006). What currently comes between most of us and the skills necessary to provide directly for our own existence is a complex of specialists and industrial processes (Berry, 1997), institutions and social services (Illich, 1973), consumer products (Jaffe & Gertler, 2006), money and capital (Lefebvre, 1991; Marx, 1978), and I would argue, our sense of comfort in living with all these factors as taken-for-granted aspects of our lives.

Learning a skill around food production, then, for example, might serve a number of useful purposes. As Wendell Berry puts it,

I can think of no better form of personal involvement in the cure of the environment than that of gardening. A person who is growing a garden, if he is growing it organically, is improving a piece of the world. He is producing something to eat, which makes him somewhat independent of the grocery business, but he is also enlarging, for himself, the meaning of food and the pleasure of eating. The food he grows will be fresher, more nutritious, less contaminated by poisons and preservatives and dyes than what he can buy at a store. He is reducing the trash problem; a garden is not a disposable container, and it will digest and reuse its own wastes. If he enjoys working in his garden, then he is less dependent on an automobile or a merchant for his pleasure. He is involving himself *directly* in the work of feeding people (2002, p.88, emphasis added).

In short, the simple task of growing one's food does at least two things to help one reconnect with place. First, as a reflection of personal agency, it deals directly with overcoming relationships and actions that undergird socio-ecological decay in one's place, while simultaneously enacting a small change to larger structural material relations of society by replacing one piece of the industrial food system with an alternative piece based on healthy being-in-relation. Second, learning one skill can help bring a person in contact with the natural rhythms of a place, as one skill often requires knowledge of materials, cycles, and interactions in a given place. Gardening demands that one learn about climate patterns, the hydrological cycle, the characteristics of the soil, local weeds and their virtues, and with a little creativity, how to responsibly source and build appropriate tools for the job. All of these knowledges bring us closer to living healthily in place.

Ethnobotanist Nancy Turner believes the most important thing we can do for the Earth is to know about and care for our places well (2005, p. 67). By "caring for our places, Turner means specifically that by learning about each other, our traditions, our stories, our plants and animals, and how to work with all of these, we might become better attuned to what places require of us. In contrast, if we simply buy what we need to survive, we miss out on a chance to be brought into a complex web of interconnection that learning some folk/self-sufficiency skills may allow.

Turner points to West Coast indigenous fishing technology as an example of a skill that is of necessity a gateway to learning more about the place. The materials required for fishing lines, hooks, and even to test the stamina of divers necessarily

requires that one learn about different trees, kelp blooms, ferns, and fish oils (Turner, 2005, p. 183-84). One must then know with more familiarity the plants and animals, their soils or larger habitat niches, predators, and the climatic conditions that foster their flourishing, and thus the flourishing of human and animal communities that rely on them.

For Turner, this also means “know-how” or skills are actually *of* the land, or are part of an inhabitant of the land, such as willow. When we lose willow, we lose know-how, as the disappearance of basket weavers follows the decline in willow. The skill or cultural knowledge is lost to such an extent, that even if willow populations are reintroduced, nobody would know how to use them (Turner, 2005, p. 201). Place-knowledge is thus embedded in the land and its complex interactions. This strikes me potentially as a chicken and egg paradox. Do we lose willow first and thus the skills of basketry, or do we lose know-how first, and thus potential willow defenders/restorers? Or do they co-decline just as they may co-emerge? Whatever the answer, when humans are part of the equation, skills and the loss thereof are intimately linked to relationships that ensure the health of a place, and I would say vice-versa. In ecological terms, I can only imagine that the more diverse a land-based skill-set, the healthier the human population will be, and that a diverse land-based skill-set corresponds to the diversity of an ecosystem. Modern humans certainly have a diverse set of skills, but this diversity of skills (mostly industrial and technological in nature) is increasingly applied more universally, thus decreasing the particular diversity of skills that corresponds to a diversity of ecosystems and ecosystem-based cultures. Whether one starts with the health of the land or with the skill, in my mind, both approaches offer potential benefits to the health of the other, and help us reconnect with place.

### **3) What is the pedagogical power of place?**

The importance and imperative of learning from place specifically as a pedagogical tool resides in its power as an epistemological locus of a) experience, b) relationship and c) meaning-making. I explore this claim in the sections below.

#### **a) Experience**

Grounding knowledge and knowing in local experience makes concrete and explicit the destructive and dominating effects of ultra-mobile modern global economic

networks and development on people and their given environments (Gruenewald, 2003b, p. 3). As an example, volunteering with a struggling local small business, or testing local streambeds (Smith, 2002; Gruenewald, 2003a) for contaminants that, once previously banned, are now again in use, will yield rich knowledge about the effects of NAFTA and International Financial Institutions' trade policies on one's community social and ecological community, thus recontextualizing and rehistoricizing knowledge.

I like to think that knowledge might come to be seen in this case as inherent in the act of experiencing, rather than simply as a piece of information that one can stuff into one's head. One can read about NAFTA's effects on the one hand, and claim one has knowledge of NAFTA, but I think a richer and more intimate knowledge comes from experiencing firsthand the emotions, and daily routines and actions associated with trying to make a struggling small business thrive in competition with large corporate entities that benefit from NAFTA policies. One does not have this type of knowledge in one's head. Instead, one *feels and thinks* this knowledge, and likely feels and thinks it most intensely when experiencing the act of trying to keep this small business afloat with a distressed owner. Conceiving of knowledge as embedded in experience makes new demands on learners, as experiences such as the ones above would more directly mirror how knowledge shifts dynamically in relation to real-life circumstances. Learners thus need to engage more interactively with knowledge, and adapt to the constantly changing complexity of this knowledge in order to grasp its importance and meaning.

## **b) Relationship**

Sustained engagement with, and sensitivity to the real life situations of the small business owner and the streambed inhabitants in the example above, offers the possibility of triggering learners' sense of sympathy, compassion, and desire to help human and more-than-human inhabitants. Knowledge thus becomes more integrated with feeling and emotion. This makes knowledge and knowing intimate to learners' lives (or acts of being) and may reinforce the importance of applying that knowledge collectively and individually to make choices for positive social and ecological change in our places. Specifically, to draw on Purpel's (1999, p. 184) language, the goal is to empower learners as moral agents with the strength, creativity and ability to respond (responsibility), and commit to, working through issues of moral concern in their unique contexts. By 'moral concern,' I do not mean to refer to its more traditional definitions as

espoused by authors such as Thomas Lickona, or advocates of character education. The moral concern I refer to manifests itself in many ways, the most important of which for me is in the profound contradiction that many of our everyday choices fly in the face of our stated, and often quite sincere concern for human and environmental well-being by supporting ecologically and socially destructive practices.

Furthermore, induction into the complex web of relationships in place might allow educators to point out that knowledge can be living; as it is embedded in experience, so can it be embedded in dynamic relationships, where learning entails continually acting and re-enacting these relationships to keep knowledge living. This re-enactment of relationships also serves to remind us of the importance of caring for other beings. For example, in the case of fishing technology described above by Nancy Turner, imagine how much more one would be tempted to preserve the health of the plant communities needed to make such technology when one is reminded of the importance of those plants every time one re-enacts the relationship with it in the making of a fishing hook. Would it be the same feeling as when reading a book about the relationship between kelp and humans? Knowledge in this form is relatively flat and lifeless, and does not directly call a person to safeguard the health of the plant communities needed for a fishing hook. One will never achieve the depth of knowledge that comes from directly enacting and re-enacting this knowledge through constant practice. Every time one makes a fishing hook, one re-enacts the complex web of relationships with plants, and thus climates, soils, and animal life with which that knowledge is intimately bound, and reinforces the need to keep those plant communities thriving.

### **c) Meaning-making**

Place-based practitioners theorize that linking learners to their place (as a condition of their being, as part of what it is to be human) initiates a process of changing ways of knowing, and being in, the world; of relating to and encountering the world and beings thereof in a more integrated way with the potential to change the way we understand and create meaning. Ideally, this change balances a dominant objectivist epistemology with a “messy” experiential one, and facilitates a shift from an atomistic or dominating ontology to a relational one, as mentioned above. One result of this balance on the one hand and shift on the other is that place-based education more readily offers the possibility of making students aware of thinking in more wholistic terms of systems,

patterns and relationships in a context, rather than in a fragmented manner. A wholistic approach more effectively uncovers power relations that lead to domination, as it allows us to see more readily the connections between various forces of power and their effects on communities and ecosystems.

Going back to the NAFTA example, dominant discourse based on “objective” data holds that NAFTA benefits individual businesses, sectors and business owners, and thus the entire economy and country (“the rising tide lifts all boats”). The fragmented worldview equates a healthy economy with a healthy country. When, however, we learn about the relationship between how international trade policy affects contamination in streams, we are standing in the affected stream seeing the effects on wildlife, and later seeing the contaminants in the lab, our ability to understand the meaning of the situation more fully is greatly enhanced. We begin to see more easily that a healthy economy does not mean a healthy ecology.

Pedagogies of place can also facilitate learners’ examination of where knowledge (and thus meaning) itself is generated, “who participates in the creation of knowledge, and how that knowledge is valued and wielded in the expression of power relationships” (Brandt, 2004, p. 96). When we learn in place, we are likely out of school or University. Students may have unspoken questions in such a setting about whether what they are doing is “real learning” or “real knowledge.” The novel setting alone gives place-based educators an entry point for engaging learners in thinking about the processes of how we come to know what we know, how we value that knowledge, why “folk” knowledges may take a back seat to “scientific” knowledge generated in a University context, and how there may be no good reason that it be so.

#### **4) What does it mean to “learn from place,” and how can we do this?**

The pedagogical power of place has the potential to be very strong. Deeply felt experiences of learning in-place are what politicized major environmental figures such as John Muir, Rachel Carson, and Aldo Leopold (Snyder, 1990, p. 32). Places, as experiential and integrated centres of relationship and “felt value” have the power to change our worldviews and move us to fierce action against domination (Harvey, 1996, p. 303). However, place only has this power when we take notice of it as something at all. Place often goes unnoticed by us given the increasing homogenization of places,

and the fact that our experience of place is so commonplace (Casey, 1997)—especially when the dominant North American education system treats it as such. As a basic step, we must learn to acknowledge place in order to learn from it, try to reconnect with it, and then listen to what it has to tell us. Some place-based educators suggest that once we listen, we might see ourselves reflected to ourselves in our treatment of, and interaction with, place (Gruenewald, 2003a, pp. 636-637). However, what it means to “listen” to place, and how exactly we engage in that listening process is unclear in the literature.

The first part of question 4 is very interesting to me: what does place actually have to teach us? How does place “teach”? It is obvious to some that place is not a subject or actor, but I think challenging this notion is a first step in answering this question. We might need to begin thinking of place as a set of relationships that is able to “teach” us something. Learning from place might first mean identifying and acknowledging the place where you live, getting closer to it and letting yourself be addressed by it, and called into a relationship with it wherein you exercise the ability to respond to what the place calls you to do. To take a simple and perhaps more readily understandable gardening example, in planting my quinoa seeds in November and seeing they do not germinate, the place is telling me something if only I would listen. At face value, it is telling me it does not want to grow quinoa here and now. This could be for many isolated reasons: too cold, too wet, I planted too deeply or shallow, in the wrong soil, at the wrong stage of the moon’s cycle, and so on. However, this is not very helpful; how do I figure out which combination of factors is actually responsible for my quinoa seeds not germinating? Clues abound. I may have noticed one year seeing quinoa grow side by side with lamb’s quarters (a local garden “weed”) and remarked that they look very similar and grow similarly. I may then have looked them up in a book and seen they are from the same plant family or I may simply guess this based on their similarity<sup>7</sup>. This gives me clues as to how to grow quinoa: probably in the same conditions in which lamb’s quarter thrives, and I should maybe plant it around the time that lamb’s quarters germinates in early spring. The place has told me something about how to grow quinoa, and thus about how I may survive. The place will also give me feedback over the years that will manifest itself in the health of my quinoa plant, my soil,

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<sup>7</sup> The book can tell me some useful things about quinoa, but it cannot likely convey how quinoa and this particular place interact. I can only have a chance at grasping such subtleties by listening to my place.

the organisms in my soil, and even perhaps in my own health. I need to develop an “ear” for these hints that the place provides.

As for strategies for *how* we can learn to learn from place in order to live more in line with our socio-ecological values, we may first ask what is *here*? Who defines that and how? What is happening here? What can I do here? How does what is happening here relate to what is happening in other places? These are not obvious questions for some, and so part of our task as place-based educators is to bring them up in the first place.

In this research, I focus on exploring one of these questions in particular: “what can I do here?” This question entails I may need to know how to do something. Thus, I have focused on learning folk/self-sufficiency skills and being sensitive to what learning these skills tells us about our place. I will explore this question most in depth in chapter four. I should remind the reader that the four questions I asked in this chapter are sub-questions that I think help me answer my larger research question.

Briefly, as far as the importance of skills goes in lining up our values and actions, I identify strongly with food fermenter, Sandor Katz’s assertion in a recent lecture that “sustainability is participation.” The current American food system, for example, is set up so less than one percent of the population supplies 99% of the population. The results stemming from this separation of people from the land and people from the skills they inherently possess are diseased people, lands, animals and economies (Katz, 2008). We cannot buy our way into a sustainable world, build our way into sustainability, achieve a perfect scientific grasp of sustainability, or let technology help make us sustainable. We must actively participate in living sustainably in place and the only way we can participate is if we know how, which is where learning skills comes in. Otherwise, we contribute to a fragmentation of our person wherein we must work at indoor jobs that often result in production of goods or services we do not agree with to pay for that which we are inherently able to provide more directly for one another and ourselves. We begin splitting ourselves from our place and our values, immediately.

All the literature I have brought together so far is in an effort to move towards the idea that learning in place might lead us to a new way of being that is more integrated and whole. It is to the splitting and the reuniting of our fragmented selves that I turn in the final section of this chapter.

## The whole human

*And why do I call renown a calamity profound as self? / We only know calamity because we have these selves. / If we didn't have selves / what calamity could touch us? / When all beneath heaven is your self in renown / you trust yourself to all beneath heaven, / and when all beneath heaven is your self in love / you dwell throughout all beneath heaven (Lao-Tzu, 2000, p. 15).*

*"I believe that the community—in the fullest sense: a place and all its creatures—is the smallest unit of health and that to speak of the health of an isolated individual is a contradiction in terms" (Berry, 2002, p. 146).*

The promise in place-based education literature and folk schooling literature that most inspired me is that these practices could possibly help us learn to be whole humans again. They can potentially do this by illuminating place as a relational node that brings together people and ecology, people and people, and even people and our values, thus making us more integrated or whole and lining up our actions with our stated socio-ecological values.

Many of us exist as somewhat fragmented beings. As inheritors of Kant's rationalist anthropocentrism, we conceive of ourselves as supreme beings above the other constituent beings of our places (Bai, 2000, pp. 4-5). As inheritors of a dualistic ontology rooted in Descartes' conception of the mechanical universe, we conceive of ourselves as subjects separate from a world of objects (Bai, 2001, p. 6). Our rationalism and dualism makes possible a global economy where humans can also be treated as useful objects; where we must perform a production-oriented job that often puts us in the strange position of having to contradict our stated values (Berry, 1997, pp. 18-19). Our fragmentation seems cumulative in this view, and it keeps multiplying. We produce one thing in our work, but do not consume it. We consume what others produce in their work. We suffer for these distinctions because we have it inherently within us to provide for all our needs with the help of a small group of caring people, yet we currently rely on industrial services, systems, institutions, and money to care for us or provide for us (Illich, 1973, p. 3; Illich, 1981, p. 2).

We need a new way of being that is healthier and makes us whole again. This is a daunting task, as Bai (2001, p. 7) points out since "it seems we have nothing less than the weight of the human evolution to struggle against." I see a way out through recovering a more relational sense of self, however. When I speak of the "relational self," however, I must qualify what I mean since relation takes many forms. In the spirit of Bai

(2001), Naess (1995), Taylor (1991), and others, I mean relational in the non-dualist and dialogical senses, in which the idea goes that we come into the world predisposed to non-dualist, dialogical relation with others, our places, and ourselves. I alluded to it earlier with Heidegger's idea of a "field of being". We learn by social conventions to conceal, ignore or fragment this relationality. I want to evoke a concept of relationality that begins blurring the lines between self and other, human and more-than-human, and human and place. I also mean to evoke this concept of a relational self as a more whole, integrated, and flourishing human than is our modern, fragmented self.

When looking to what I mean by wholeness, I turn to Wendell Berry's particular discussion of the links between wholeness, health— both of which share a root etymologically—and integrity or integrated-ness. In short, Berry implies "to be healthy is literally to be whole" (Berry, 2002, p. 144). In addition, our sense of wholeness derives mainly from two states of being. The first is a state of internal completeness or "singular integrity," wherein we dwell in line with our values and abilities to provide for our communities and ourselves. The second state is characterized by a sense of belonging to others and to our place (Berry, 2002, p. 144; Berry, 1997, pp. 18-22). And this is the beginning of a discussion on why a more "whole" human is a more flourishing, healthy human.

Charles Taylor (1991) expresses that the self is by nature dialogical. That is, the self can only exist in relation either with other people or with more-than-human sources, whether religious, environmental, or historical that "transcend" the self. Taylor lays partial blame for the slow degradation of the modern social self on seeking self-realization, authenticity, or identity formation only within one's self. One is less whole when one does not consider the other beings or forces that must play a role in shaping the self, which is always dialogical in nature.

Naess (1995b) expresses a similar idea with explicit reference to the ecological in his notion of the ecological self, wherein self-realization entails a deepening and broadening of the self from the narrow sense of ego, to the more encapsulating sense of self that includes ecological beings. This is a process of deepening identification with all beings to achieve a more wholistic sense of self. Naess takes the idea step further than Taylor, however, in positing that a person who is comprehensively mature ("being mature in *all* major relationships") will find it in his or her human nature to identify self

with other living beings (1995, pp. 225-226 original emphasis). That is, one is more whole when one recognizes the importance of other beings as part of one's self.

Place gathers together the important elements highlighted by Taylor and Naess in that it is a starting point for inspiring a sense of belonging, a recognition of the importance of the other in forming our selves, and developing a stronger sense of integrity than we now seem to hold. Really listening to place and engaging skilfully with it helps us focus on relationships with plants, animals, values, other humans, and all the other relationships that sustain us, physically, and in our sense of self. Listening in this way to place may help us realize we cannot flourish alone, but that we only flourish in recognition of our deep interconnection with place, and when we can live by what we hold dear. This sets us on the path to mending the relationship between people and values, and people and place.

Echoing and expanding on Casey's "to be is to be in place" is Freire's "[h]uman beings *are* because they are in a situation. And they *will be more* the more they not only critically reflect upon their existence but critically act upon it" (2005, p. 109 original emphasis). The ideas in this chapter have been an inspiration to this project, as well as a series of lenses through which I began understanding my and others' experiences in this project, but they are also a call to action, as Freire's words suggest. Place-based and folk educators call on us in their own ways to commit to and inhabit our values rather than stand at a safe intellectual distance from them; to *critically act upon* our stated values in relation to the place, context or situation of which we *are* a part. In this way, this literature has acted on me as yeast might act on mycorrhizal fungi in a compost pile. It excited me, made me want to *act* faster and more effectively, and I hope it made more energy available to the participants of Free Folk School workshops. This action-oriented feature of the literature is largely what inspired my methodology, which is the focus of the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER 3: WORKING WITH A RECIPE, ALLOWING FOR SPONTANEITY—METHODOLOGY**

### **Why do this research?**

Freire (2005) writes about how it is easy to slip into despair when dominant ideologies lead us to believe we cannot do anything to make positive change. I felt growing frustration and despair with learning about education as the practice of freedom in a setting that seemed completely antithetical to that practice, where I am required to do what feels mostly like busywork in the name of learning about that practice. I felt the weight of this irony and uselessness, but I also heard those educators who inspired me—Freire, Horton and place-based folks— saying that anyone could be an agent in the face of such despair. These writers were implying and demanding praxis of their readers.

If I was to take this literature seriously, I felt I needed to take the spirit of an idea such as Freire's critically acting upon a situation in order to be more fully human, and make it the cornerstone of my methodology. I was encouraged in this endeavour by Patti Lather's articulate case for trying to link one's methodology to one's theoretical concerns and commitments (Lather, 1986). Methodologically speaking, this project at its heart is my attempt at putting one interpretation of the theory in the previous chapter into practice through trying to live it. When I initially asked myself why I should do research at all, I was not satisfied with the traditional answer of trying to accumulate more knowledge through observing and recording phenomena (Stringer, 1999, p. 7). Nor did I aim to gain the supposed ability to better predict and/or control phenomena based on the results of my data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 3). Rather, my hope and aim is that the exercise of trying to put theory into practice allows for continual reflection on that practice as a way of helping me, and hopefully others, generate theory and socio-ecological practice that are better suited to this place. I wanted to encourage all involved in this study, myself included, to create theory (and practice) through constantly confronting lived experience and working with it here and now (Lather, 1986, p. 261). To match the living, dynamic qualities of the place, I felt I must work with a knowledge that

one could not accumulate in one's head, or on paper through due process of investigation and collection. Rather, I sensed I needed to work with a knowledge embedded in a process of living, becoming, and that needed constant reinvention through living in interaction with place in order to be *known*, let alone relevant. In the tradition of folk schools, I also wanted this process to validate and hold up living “folk knowledge”— which truly comes alive when folks meet up to talk together, share, and work on a project of common interest— as a valuable form of knowledge. I think of the observations in Chapter 4 as representing knowledge co-created by participants and myself-as-participant in this sort of setting of meeting, sharing, and working on some projects that concern us all.

Put in other terms, the way in which I interpreted the folk/place-based theory from my “first focus group discussion” made up a sort hypothesis that I tried to test through putting it in practice in a specific place. The hypothesis embedded in Chapter 2 is obviously quite sprawling, hence the need to draw it into the confines of a place. I would articulate the kernel of the hypothesis as: learning folk skills can bring place into our hearts and minds in more of our actions, thus helping humans flourish by making us a little more whole, and less socio-ecologically destructive beings. I wanted to allow the place and the beings thereof to bump up against and push back on the theory, thus slowly giving it a fluid shape that suits the place in order to hopefully improve on the hypothesis and continually test/apply it anew. Horton sums up my justification for doing so: “I used the best method I had of presenting ideas—not talking about them, but acting on them. People learn faster from actions than from anything else” (Horton, 1990, p. 196). Given the urgency of socio-ecological decay, I felt we needed to learn fast, and we needed to learn within the limits set by our place.

## **Entering the methodological wilderness**

In attempting to make turning theory into practice the heart of my methodology, I often felt like I was straying away from more conventional and widely accepted qualitative methodologies, much like the process of fermenting strays from conventional recipes and rigid ways of creating food. In fermenting, one often starts with a recipe, but the nature of the process is such that one must expect a different result every time and be flexible enough in methods to allow for the wonderful surprises the fermenting process often brings. This is what I wanted in a methodology, and the thought of it was

both fearful and exciting. I was heartened to read a number of passages from qualitative research texts that suggested this is perhaps the nature of much qualitative research.

For example:

Speaking in this vein sounds as if we create a methodology for ourselves—as if the focus of our research leads us to devise our own ways of proceeding that allow us to achieve our purposes. That, as it happens, is precisely the case. In a very real sense, every piece of research is unique and calls for a unique methodology. We, as the researcher, have to develop it (Crotty, 1998, pp.13-14).

I found further justification for my methodological choices in the place-based literature. In particular, I was heartened by Wendell Berry's discussion of a process that aptly described what I wanted my research methodology to represent at its best. In his discussion of the Orthodoxy, Margins and Change, Berry writes about going out into the wilderness and foregoing rigid and uncritical orthodoxy in order to find, not "truth," but the real complexity of the world and a fuller range of possibilities from which to live (Berry, 1997, pp.173-175). Not all these possibilities are good, Berry suggests, but by bringing these possibilities back from margin to centre, the wilderness wanderer has a chance to avert the tendency of orthodoxy to die rather than change (potentially taking many of its adherents down with it) by portraying a more wholistic picture. This approach has yielded rich insights for many of my folk heroes—Horton, Freire, Berry, Snyder—and for other critical folks living on the margins since the beginning of human culture, and I would like to see it further developed as a legitimate methodology. Perhaps one might call it Wholistic Marginal Praxis or Wilderness Praxis. It is certainly both exciting and appropriate to me, given the topic of my research, to think of my project as one that strayed, even a little, into the methodological wilderness and away from a methodological orthodoxy that generally seems unconcerned in its practice about acting on what radical or socio-ecologically justice oriented literatures beg of its readers.

## **Analysis using Grounded Theory...with a twist**

I did not enter the methodological wilderness without tools, though I adapted the tools to my needs. My main tool was Grounded Theory and I will first outline how a more conventional Grounded Theory approach shaped my work, and then examine some ways in which I diverged from this approach. In general, Grounded Theory is a good fit since it lines up well with theoretically notions that undergird this research. As a method

of analyzing data, Grounded Theory allowed me sufficient room for an iterative and exploratory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This approach fit well with my notions of praxis in that data collection and analysis develop in relationship to one another. One collects data, analyzes it to create theory that is grounded in data that informs future data collection, to further ground theory, and so on. Thus theory and data are not conceived of as separate, but related, which is how I conceive of theory and practice also.

Grounded Theory also fits with ecological notions important to this research such as interrelatedness and emergent properties. Grounded Theory analysis points towards multiple relationships between major constructs or categories, and the higher order theoretical properties that we can perceive from recognizing such relationships (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The same idea applies to relationships between elements in a place, and this kind of systems or pattern-based thinking implied in the place-based and ecological theory literature shaped how I analyzed the themes appearing in Chapter 4. Overall, Grounded Theory is a suitable choice for this project as it is a useful methodology for trying to discover *relevant* concepts and hypotheses in an area of inquiry that is new, which is the case with this project (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 2).

Both Strauss & Corbin and Glaser have developed criteria for identifying “good” Grounded Theory. Since Glaser’s are simple (1. It must fit the situation, 2. It must work: i.e. help the people studied make sense of their situation and better manage it [Dick, 2005; Glaser, 1992]) and overlap very clearly with Strauss and Corbin’s, I will focus on how I used the latter criteria in my study as a benchmark. Grounded Theory derived from one’s data should fit and reflect the phenomenon studied rather than impose an awkward theoretical framework on the phenomenon. In my effort to facilitate an iterative process, I provided an initial research question that was roomy enough to allow my final research question to structure itself around what I found in the data. My initial research question had to do broadly with the underlying thrust of this work: learning how better to put socio-ecological theory into action.

The second criterion is that the theory generated should be understandable to those studied and to others involved in the same field. In my case, there was no professional field to speak of, but certainly, other regular folks interested in learning folk skills and in lining up their actions with their values. I struggled with this criterion in trying to balance the fact that I am writing this thesis mostly for an academic audience that

demands a certain level of theoretical engagement. My hope is that the theory is understandable to the participants in the way it is applied to organize the workshops and encourage further skill sharing and learning. Indeed, participant comments in focus groups suggest that this is the case, even if the written portion of the theory is somewhat confusing.

The third criteria potentially contradicts the second in that it demands a generality of theory through broad, conceptual, and therefore abstract interpretation, with enough built-in variation as to be applicable to a wide range of settings. In some ways, this was the criteria I rejected most wholly as too near a positivist interpretation of the world, and more importantly as a point that can be seen as contradictory to the aim of place-based educators of developing a specific, grounded focus in the local. Certainly, the idea of reclaiming folk skills with a supportive community is broad enough to apply widely in any community where there are folks interested and a few other folks who can facilitate the process, but the specific salient features of that reclamation will certainly vary from region to region. In the case of a North American setting, some of the salient themes I identify in Chapter 4 such as overcoming alienation and a frontier- style image of self-sufficiency may not be applicable even in certain contexts in North America itself.

Finally, the theory should be modifiable enough to anticipate and accommodate variables that arise in challenge to the theory. My work is certainly modifiable, has already shifted to accommodate such variables, and would probably benefit from some challenges, as does most work of this sort (Chamberlain, 1995; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Indeed, “rigour” in Glaser’s emergent theory version of Grounded Theory comes from the constant search for evidence that disagrees with emerging theory. I tried to adopt this approach by always keeping an eye out for tensions arising in the data, the results of which will become more obvious in Chapter 4 (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

### **How I diverged from conventional Grounded Theory**

Grounded Theory is an inductive process, the main goal of which is the generation of a general theory from particular instances, as opposed to testing a general hypothesis (Maxwell, 2005, pp. 42-43). This is my first divergence with Grounded Theory as I was testing a hypothesis of sorts, but even within the Grounded Theory tradition, there is a plea to researchers to generate our own methodology of generating

theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 8). I chose to generate theory through a methodology of trying to put a hypothesis made up of theory into practice.

One of my own personal criticisms of Grounded Theory is that, though it appears to allow for an “organic” emergence of data, it is sometimes too contrived and dogmatic as a method. It is in danger of leading a researcher to proceed on “auto-pilot” through the steps laid out in the literature. This weakness is characterized by Glaser and Strauss’ assertion that following the Grounded Theory method may not lead to Grounded Theory, but Grounded Theory can only be discovered by following the Grounded Theory method (1967). I tried to be open to methodological incursions that might disrupt this series of steps, as I felt that would allow for a truly more iterative and exploratory process.

The literature advocates data collection and analysis before bringing in theories from existing literature in order to ensure theory arises from data and to preclude pre-existing constructs from shaping theory too much (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I diverged from this because I cannot imagine ever entering a research situation with no existing theory informing initial data collection. In addition, the particular thrust of my research question (how to learn to better apply theory to practice) required that I have existing theory in mind.

The ultimate goal of analysis using Grounded Theory is increased “density” or “saturation” of recurring categories or constructs and dealing with unexpected findings by following up with theoretical sampling. I do not claim to have reached this final goal, given the limited timeframe and resources available for my study. I did not reach saturation, but instead focused on recurring categories and constructs. Many findings were unexpected and I did not follow up with theoretical sampling, though I did briefly touch on some of the most compelling unexpected findings if they seemed relevant to my research question.

Since the early 1990s, Grounded Theory has seen a split in philosophy that began with Strauss and Corbin’s publishing of *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory procedures and techniques* (1990), and became entrenched with Glaser’s response: *Basics of Grounded Theory Analysis: emergence vs. forcing* (1992). Glaser’s title implies the heart of the difference, namely that he thought Strauss and Corbin’s methods forced data into preconceived frameworks by “actively provoking” the data and asking questions of it such as who? what? when? etc. in order to find conceptual

categories. This is in contrast to Glaser's beliefs that a researcher should ask "neutral questions" such as "what is this data a study of?" or "what category or property does this incident indicate?" and exercise patience and restraint to let conceptual categories in the data emerge rather than overconceptualize (Glaser, 1992; Locke, 1996; Melia, 1996). In many ways, I employed both of these techniques in interacting with my data. On the one hand, I employed Glaser's approach to aid in allowing participants to direct what data was important data by trying not to overrule their thoughts with my own. I identify on the other hand with Strauss and Corbin's more constructivist, and less rigid procedural approach (1990, p. 59) because it allows me more flexibility to probe in directions that seem promising once participants touch on a category a few times.

## **Participatory Action Research**

My secondary tool was Participatory Action Research (PAR). Similar to how I approached using Grounded Theory, I will mention how a broadly defined notion of PAR guided my work, even while there were some of aspects that distinguish PAR that I did not implement. Broadly speaking, Horton's description of PAR might well be a description of my own project:

It is an investigation and an analysis of a problem by a group of people whose lives are directly affected by that problem. Ideally, their investigation will lead to action. Participatory research differs from the more conventional kind done by experts, usually identified with universities, in that it doesn't take decision-making away from the people. Instead of becoming dependent on experts, the people become experts themselves (Horton, 1990, p. 208).

My assumption was that what bound this self-selected group of participants and I together in this research was the problem of trying to align our actions with our values in order to make our lives less socio-ecologically destructive and more rooted in place.

Greenwood & Levin locate philosophical precedents for PAR in a university setting with pragmatists such as Dewey, and emphasize two central parameters of this pragmatist underpinning that informed my research: "knowledge generation through action and experimentation in context and participative democracy as both a method and a goal (Greenwood & Levin, 2003, p. 148). Indeed, I tried to emphasize co-generation of knowledge and self-determination through experimenting with putting theory into practice in place. This meant involving, and trusting the knowledge of, those who participate in

the study in analyzing problems we all face and trying to work through them and transform our situation with practical solutions (Blaxter et al. 2001, p. 67). In turn, I conceived of my role more as one of researcher-as-facilitator (of workshops, for example) to try and address community needs, more so than as impartial, aloof investigator (Stringer, 1999, p. 24).

A secondary goal of this research that lined up well with PAR was to help all of us “ordinary folks” realize that the knowledge existing among us could go a long way towards achieving the primary goal of putting values into action if only we would come to value it and share amongst one another (Blaxter et al., 2001, p.68). The idea was to try and validate “folk knowledge” and thus “the folks” as agents capable of making positive socio-ecological change without having to wait on governments or corporations to provide a service or product. PAR thus links up well with my notion of praxis in that it emphasizes confronting a situation or problem, thinking about it together, and then acting together in order to address the problem (Blaxter et al., 2001, p. 67; Stringer, 1999).

### **How I diverged from PAR**

This general description of PAR explains a methodology with which I identify philosophically far more strongly than Grounded Theory, however, there were certain key aspects of my research that make it difficult for me to claim PAR permeates it. For example, a major aim of PAR is to increase fairness, wellness, and self-determination among participants, which was an aim I shared; however, due to time and financial constraints I did not involve participants in an important step on this process: synthesizing and writing up data (Greenwood & Levin, 2003, p. 145; Stringer, 1999, pp. 9-11). Participants, however, certainly helped with the creation, and analysis of knowledge and themes throughout focus groups.

PAR often works with problems in the lives of participants that might be described as “major” (Greenwood & Levin, 2003, p. 148). I doubt this to be the case with most participants based on the lightness of conversation and tone in the workshops. Furthermore, I was not working with members of a cohesive social group in facing a problem, but a loose group of relatively unassociated people (Blaxter et al., 2001, p. 69). Despite these differences, I was certainly guided by ideas of PAR and you will find them scattered throughout the next sections.

## **Putting Grounded Theory and PAR together: methods and techniques for gathering “Grounded Participatory Action” data**

In combining a “wholistic marginal praxis” methodology that invites trying to stray from methodological orthodoxy by putting theory into practice, with Grounded Theory and PAR, the resulting methodology might be called something like *Place-based Marginal Praxis*. Given my understanding of these words in this project, “place-based” has connotations of wholism and groundedness important to this research, “marginal” implies the importance of breaking out of orthodox, and Praxis implies the importance of participation, and a constant shifting relationship between theory, and practice.

In carrying out a methodology of Place-based Marginal Praxis, I used a combination of methods such as organizing participatory workshops, focus groups, participant observation and field journal notes, and a personal journal to record my own emotions. I checked each of these data sources against one another in an attempt to verify or challenge themes as they arose, using my adaptation of Grounded Theory.

### **Sampling**

To draw people out to workshops and focus groups, I compiled email lists from signup sheets posted at previous workshops and neighbourhood events in Mount Pleasant, Vancouver. I sent notices out to these emails and to what I thought would be socio-ecologically-minded or place-based groups already in existence such as neighbourhood listservs, permaculture and gardening organizations, alternative energy organizations, and university ecological education groups. I also ran notices in grassroots, alternative publications such as the Tooth and Dagger, East End Food Co-op newsletter, and SPUD newsletter. Eventually, in partnership with others, we set up a website to advertise workshops, and I would usually put up two or three posters at key locations such as the Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood house, and neighbourhood signboards and coffee shops.

I tried explicitly to not use Place-based education language or other academic jargon that might risk alienating most people. Instead, I tried to use language that would convey accessibility, financially and otherwise, in order to bring in a wide diversity of people. The buzzwords listed at the top of workshop notices were “free-of-charge,” “hands-on,” “with potluck lunch.” To attract those with socio-ecological “values” and

concerns, while trying not to sound too much like a hippy, I put the following description at the end of the notices:

*The Free-Folk School is a Vancouver-Based learning initiative that emphasizes bringing local folks, local knowledge and local resources together for free-of-charge, hands-on learning experiences that focus particularly on skills to help reduce our negative ecological impact/footprint, increase our individual and community self-sufficiency, and build healthy community/social relations.*

*We value and try to work towards non-commodified, non-institutional, non-credentializing, non-evaluated learning and yes-accessible, yes-joyous, yes-empowering, yes-collective learning (among other lofty goals)! Consuming less and relating more, might be one way to sum it up.*

*If this sounds like you, and you are passionate about something you would like to SHARE with folks by offering a free/for donation only workshop, we are now looking for facilitators for the spring season workshops. Please contact Andrew Rushmere at arushmere@hotmail.com or 604-708-8314 if interested. Thanks!*

The inclusion of this final text was inspired by the PAR approach in an attempt to attract a self-selected sampling of folks who might hold strong socio-ecological values, a fondness for their locality, and a desire to learn in an accessible hands-on, informal setting in order to improve their place (Stringer, 1999, p. 10). I sent notices out 10 days before a workshop and took email registration in first-come, first served fashion. There was a waiting list for each workshop. I sent participants last minute details one day before the scheduled workshop. In addition to workshop participants, I had to attract workshop facilitators, who in turn became focus group participants, and thus form part of my sample. I found most of the facilitators through word-of-mouth and personal connections, as well as through asking workshop attendees familiar with the structure whether they would like to facilitate any workshops.

Focus group participants self-selected from people who chose to come to workshops and stay afterwards for a potluck lunch and discussion. In total, 46 different people participated in six focus groups, with seven of those people participating in two

focus groups, and one of those people in three. All have consented to participation with the understanding that I would not use their real names. See Appendix 1 for the consent form. It would not be possible to provide a “typology” of participants, as they ranged greatly from workshop to workshop. Focus group and informal discussions before and after workshops, however, did allow me to gather the following impressionistic sketch. Workshop and focus group participants tended to represent what seemed like a wide spread of socio-economic ranges, though tending more heavily in numbers towards the middle socio-economic strata, with a fairly even split of students and middle-class workers. The occasional professional and low-income participant also participated. Most participants were white, female, and university educated. This seemed especially to be the case in the food/gardening-related workshops. There was more cultural diversity and more male participation in the solar water heater workshops. All workshop facilitators were white, university-educated and in their 20s or early 30s, with an even male-female split. There were a few participants who expressed they suffered from mental health issues, but the rest seemed to lead happy, engaged social lives from what I could tell. After the workshops, I would leave out a signup sheet and ask participants to spread the word and refer potential facilitators to me.

## **1) Methods of putting theory into practice**

### **Setting up Free Folk School workshops**

Setting up the Free Folk School Workshops was the first method I employed in this research. It is the main attempt to put theory into practice on my part. I wanted the project to arise from the place and the people as much as possible, and I wanted help from a community in this. As in PAR, I wanted my role as researcher to be more one of facilitator to community needs, than one of impartial, aloof investigator (Stringer, 1999, p. 24). To this end, on March 9, 2007, I gathered a group of people I had met or heard of in my short time in Vancouver who were involved somehow in what I would identify as place-based practices, and whom I thought might have an interest in starting a place-based learning project. I asked them how they would imagine such a project, and whether they might like to be involved.

Though I felt a bit awkward about the meeting given that I did not know many of the people, the suggestion came out that rather than meet again, we might better find out what it is we wanted to organize for others if we organized something for ourselves,

based on our own interests. This way, it would form a sort of PAR project where we could test interest with others, while experimenting ourselves a bit. I ran with it, unfortunately alone, as everybody else liked the idea, but had commitments of their own. Given time and budgetary constraints, as well as the fact that I was relatively new to Vancouver at the time I initiated this project, I did not have the luxury of selecting exactly which skills and instructors the workshops would focus on. To keep it small and manageable I decided to focus on “hard” skills that people could use immediately should they wish. I simply began where I was (Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood, Vancouver) and searched for people willing to act as facilitators.

I ran two pilot workshops, one on March 31, 2007 in a Mount Pleasant neighbourhood backyard about building a solar water heater from salvaged materials, and the other on May 20, 2007 at Point Atkinson (Lighthouse Park) on identifying and harvesting edible kelp and sea life. In the former, I engaged in informal discussion with participants to try and tease out possible themes for focus group questions. I also asked everyone to fill out a short questionnaire about what they liked/did not like about the workshop and to identify what other skills they would be interested to learn and whether they, or anyone they knew, might wish to facilitate a future workshop. In the latter, I piloted some focus group questions that arose from the first pilot and handed out a similar questionnaire at the end (by email this time as it had been pouring rain the entire 3 hours). Besides identifying themes and piloting questions, my aim for the pilots was to test whether a suitable number of people would be interested in attending, and to get a sense for who they were, why they wanted to learn this skill, and how they wanted to learn it. I hoped this would help me structure future workshops.

The other workshops that make up the core of the research included: Identifying and gathering wild urban edible/medicinal plants on July 8, 2007 in Mount Pleasant (wandering workshop); fermenting foods and beverages for preservation on August 12, 2007 at my home in Mount Pleasant; vegetable garden seed saving (run in partnership with the Environmental Youth Alliance on September 8, 2007 at the Means of Production community garden in Mount Pleasant); building a solar water/space heater from salvaged materials on September 15, 2007 in the facilitator’s backyard in Mount Pleasant; knowing your organic garden soils and cultivating soil health (run in partnership with the Environmental Youth Alliance on September 22, 2007 at the Means

of Production community garden in Mount Pleasant); and home cheese making on November 11, 2007 at my home.

In line with the folk school and place-based education literature explored in Chapter 2, I was interested in attracting facilitators who were willing to facilitate participants in teaching one another and sharing their knowledge in a hands-on setting, rather than people interested in Freire's (2005) "banking model" of education whereby teachers cram information into passive students' heads. For each workshop, I would meet beforehand with the facilitator to brainstorm ideas and chat about each of our expectations, thoughts, goals, worries, and hopes, and come to a suitable arrangement based on these. We also worked out together a cap on attendance numbers that ranged between 12-15 participants each workshop. Workshops ranged from 3 hours in length to 8 hours in length, always with a potluck lunch for those who wished to stay. Some workshops had different rhythms than others (i.e. were more or less hands-on or exploratory). If there were needed materials, the instructor and I would source whatever was needed (i.e. salvaged materials for the solar water heater workshop), unless it was something that participants would take home, in which case, they were asked to supply materials (i.e. bringing milk and a container to the cheese making workshop meant you could take a share of cheese home). Setting up the Free Folk School workshops was the most direct and tangible method I had for trying to put theory into practice and have this project speak to the needs of this place, but I also found that journaling helped keep me focused on how I was faring in this process.

### **Journaling: emotions**

Another twist to my Grounded Theory approach that makes up a Place-based Marginal Praxis is that I prefer to think of the theory as not only grounded in data, but also grounded in my own feelings. I said the workshops were my first method, but in a way, I came to the decision to initiate the Free Folk School by using all my emotions as data and journaling them at the early stages of this project. At the time, I was contemplating the Linnaea farm project, reading the theory that appears in Chapter 2, and knowing that many of those writers actually do engage in praxis in their personal lives (Berry, Snyder, Gruenewald, Horton etc.). Many of my journal entries at the time reflected an emotional response of feeling torn by my initial research decision to simply observe a project in the hopes of accumulating knowledge, when I knew all about

pressing socio-ecological issues and that there might be ways to direct my work toward trying to address them. At this time, Heesoon Bai forwarded me a Parker Palmer article that spoke directly to what I was feeling:

If higher education is to serve humane purposes, we who educate must insist that knowing is not enough, that *we are not fully human until we recognize what we know and take responsibility for it* (2007 my emphasis).

This is Rowe's know-how / know-why distinction, this is Orr's worry that

'The vast majority of so-called research turned out in the modern university is essentially worthless. It does not result in any measurable benefit to anything or anybody...It is busywork on a vast, almost incomprehensible scale' (Orr, quoting P. Smith, 1994, p. 10).

These are my worries too, and this is also my worry, as reflected in some of those early journal entries, that I was about to spend two years of my life involved in a completely useless undertaking as it relates to our failing socio-ecological health.

In research, grounding oneself in emotions is likely a contradiction to many, where emotions are generally seen as the realm of occasional hysteria, lack of control and loss of rational thought. Palmer, and some feminist researchers however, go on to point out the importance of taking one's emotions seriously as valid ways of coming to important knowledge about our situation in the world (Fonow & Cook, 1991, p. 11). My emotions in my journal entries were almost agonizing to reread in writing this section. They were screaming at me that a more conventionally defined research project is not what I wanted to be doing. It is too bad it took a scream for me to finally notice, but part of the problem is, very few of us are encouraged to validate our emotional knowledge in the academy. Validating emotional intelligence as justification for a methodological choice is a somewhat frightening task, but I also believe it to be crucial. The academy will become obsolete, if not first an even more dangerous perpetuator of socio-ecological destruction than it already is if it cannot respond in a practical and meaningful way to the ecological and social challenges that weigh on the hearts and minds of many. I feel that everything we do must be reoriented toward making research more practical to this end and "total immersion" in these problems, including in their affective dimensions, is key (Punch, 1994, p.86).

## **Journaling: listening to what the place has to say:**

To this same end, I wanted to use what the place had to say about my research as a valid form of data. For me, listening to place and emotion are some good first steps in talking about a new way of being. This was a difficult exercise, and one fraught with risks of anthropomorphizing place, so I have left it out of my “official” methodology. For now, let me say that I, at least superficially, tried to let this place imprint its concerns and priorities on this project by means of allowing time for reflection and journaling on what the place might have to say. I think a methodology of listening to place and receiving feedback from place is a promising and important area for further methodological study and validation.

## **2) Conventional methods**

### **Focus groups**

I conducted six focus group discussions over a period of approximately eight months. I kept discussions to an hour in length, recorded them on an Olympus DSS digital voice recorder, and transcribed them to my laptop. I conducted no follow up interviews due to time constraints and a feeling that participants had already given a lot of their time to participate in workshops and focus groups. The focus group discussions generally began with a go-around of names and why people chose to come to this workshop or what interested them about it. I then followed with a semi-structured focus group question guide with open-ended questions, a sampling of which is included in Appendix 2. Questions differed from workshop to workshop based on the themes participants identified. I initially generated my focus group question guide for the first of six core workshops from the questions that came up during pilot workshop discussions. Subsequent guides incorporated questions that arose in previous workshops based on what themes I and participants flagged as important, intriguing, or strange. The purpose of the questions was to both stimulate the co-creation of knowledge and theory by participants, and provide a way for participants to reflect back to me what they identified as the theory or values embedded in the practice of learning folk skills together in this setting. To this end, Chapter 4 is largely an exploration of the differences and similarities between my vision, and what participants were saying.

I hoped open-ended questions allowed participants to help direct the conversation and take ownership of it. Semi-structured questions allowed me the flexibility to probe interesting points, to focus on recurring themes, or to tease out ideas that seemed to contradict those points and themes (Fontana & Frey, 1994, pp.364-365). A semi-structured guide also left room for the responses from one focus group to shape the direction of questions in subsequent focus groups, which facilitates effective Grounded Theory analysis by allowing data to shape the process of inquiry (Stern, 1980). In this way, I conceived of all the focus group discussions as a sort of iterative collective conversation that flowed from one group to another, where I would pick up on themes from one focus group and then say to the next something like “the last group thought X. What do you think about that?” or I would ask a similar question a number of different ways.

I realize I made a number of potentially unconventional and problematic assumptions in doing so. Namely, that one group would be able to speak to the concerns and issues identified by a previous group; that one can consider six focus group discussions strung out over a period of eight months to be a “conversation” with any sort of continuous thread; that some meaningful data could be teased out from these discontinuous and irreplicable discussions. I think there is an argument I can safely make, however, for this approach. Primarily, the aim of focus groups for me was to increase reciprocity between myself as “researcher” and participants as “researched”. I wanted to involve participants in meaning-making and co-creating knowledge arising from trying to practice one’s values (Lather, 1986, p.264). Most of these participants identified with one another, and with the themes coming out of focus groups. They were heartened to hear others shared similar concerns and interests, and there was a certain sense of feeling like we were all “in the same boat” working towards similar ends, albeit often with different means. In addition, I was after an iterative method for generating knowledge, where the idea was to not move forward in a linear direction, as a “thread” per se, but rather to move in self-referential spirals. In focus groups, we might explore a theme, see where that takes us, return to the theme, but perhaps from a different angle based on where the theme originally took us in order to formulate a new relationship around it. I might then return to that theme again in a separate focus group to try and reformulate the idea with another group of people; to run it by them and see their take, thus hopefully achieving a multifaceted view of any one idea that more accurately reflects the myriad ways of experiencing or thinking about an idea or phenomenon. To a

certain extent, this approach meant I had to be open to having my “pet theories” critiqued, disregarded, or changed (Lather, 1986, p. 276) by what participants brought to the table. I hope this openness is reflected in the differences between Chapter 2 and Chapter 4.

As far as standard the significance, generalizability, reliability, and validity of this type of data go, I will define them, somewhat at odds with standard methodological practice, (Adler & Adler, 1994, p. 381; Blaxter, et al. 2001, pp. 221-222) based primarily on this research’s contribution to the well-being of place. The significance I am concerned with here has more to do with whether the research contributes to helping us all act better on our socio-ecological values and live better in our place. This research, by its context-specific nature, cannot be generalized except in the sense that other such projects should try as much as possible to organize themselves around the understanding the needs of the place before application (Greenwood & Levin, 2003, p. 151). Folk skills might not be an appropriate focus depending on where one is. The case might be different for reliability. If another researcher were to use the same methods and try to replicate this study in the same place, I believe they would come up with similar results, though their interpretation might differ from mine. As for validity, and whether the techniques I used actually relate to what I was looking for, I think it is fair to say that they do. I also, as mentioned above, tried to let participants and the place determine the validity of this study. To strengthen validity, I would suggest future projects focus more on what the place has to say. In place-based work, we are all ultimately accountable to our places (Gruenewald, 2005).

### **Participant observation and recording field notes**

On the scale of balancing detachment in observation with complete immersion, I tended towards the latter as a participant observer with the aim of “becoming the phenomenon” and trying to “grasp the complete depth of the subjectively lived experience” (Adler & Adler, 1994, p. 380). Adler and Adler’s description of participant observation as a method that is suitable for looking for categories that are not predetermined, and trends, patterns and styles of behaviour rather than minute details fits well with the emphasis on spontaneity and patterns-thinking sought after in this research project. I hoped participant observation would also help me in my aim of not intimidating, alienating, or discomforting participants by more detached styles of

observation (Adler & Adler, 1994, p. 382). Participant observation also furnished me with opportunities for richer “auto-observation” and journal reflection through allowing me to go directly to the experience I wanted to study myself. I could try putting theory into practice and to learn in these settings along with participants, which I hoped would allow me to “gain a deeper existential understanding of the world as the members see and feel it” (Adler & Adler, 1994, p. 386) as I reflected on not only participant experiences in these settings, but my own as well.

Many of the traditional steps of observation (choosing a setting, gaining access, asking “gatekeepers” for formal “entrée” etc. [Adler & Adler, 1994, p. 380] were not a problem for me as I created the setting and was the gatekeeper. Beyond this, the observation step was somewhat difficult in the first few workshops because I was distracted by organizational and logistical details. As I relaxed into the rhythm, however, most workshops “ran themselves” with great help from the facilitators, of course! As far as my participant role went, I mostly tried to stay out of the way, beyond making sure people were comfortable. I tried to allow them to do what they wanted to and mostly observe interactions, postures, gestures, and other phenomena through the day. I also engaged participants in informal conversation during activities. I made no effort to record my observations during workshops, as it would have made the setting too awkward for people to feel at ease. Instead, I made field note entries immediately upon coming home from workshops and tried to recall in great detail the day’s events and notable moments.

Contrary to conventional practice, I endeavoured to make recording my field notes not only descriptive, but also conceptual and analytical. This increasingly became the case as I often decided to merge my personal journaling with recording field notes in order to let my emotions, and the place enter into my considerations. Such merging seemed only fitting given, again, the emphasis in the literatures cited here on integrating rational and emotional faculties in knowledge generation, and on listening to the place. For some, the danger with this approach is that my preconceptions might dominate my entries, but while this may be so, I feel like the fuller knowledge offered by emotional and place-based insight justified a potential slight increase in appearance of my bias in the data. Indeed, there is an argument for legitimating that my biases form a key part of the shape and reason for this study (Lather, 1986, p. 259).

## **Transcription and coding**

In general, I kept with the 2 core processes of Grounded Theory analysis identified by Strauss and Corbin (1990, p.62): 1) constant comparison of data to data, theory to data, and literature to data and theory and; 2) asking questions of the data. The questions I asked of my data included: "What are common themes that keep appearing here?" "Why do these appear: is it determined by how I am asking questions/setting up workshops, or am I leaving enough room for participants to bring up what they see as important?" "What are the links and/or tensions between these themes/the literature/ the theory/ my journal entries/ my experience?" "Is there a message 'between the lines' in the data that I am not seeing on the surface (i.e. what do peoples' silences, body movements, laughter say?" "Who is saying the things that interest me most and what is their background?" "How do I make sure my interests do not blind me to important insights that participants may have?" Also, as detailed in Strauss and Corbin (1990) I engaged in memoing to prevent small thoughts or details triggered by data analysis and coding from slipping away, and in conceptual diagramming to try and facilitate finding relations among categories.

More specifically, as per Dick's (2005) process (in which each of these steps are recognized as not necessarily discrete, but overlapping), I began with a situation and open-ended research questions, collected focus group and participant observation/field note and journal data, and transcribed and coded as I collected. Immediately coding allowed me to identify themes, and incorporate those themes into subsequent focus group question guides, observations, and journal entries. I coded by conceiving of coding as the starting point of my analysis, in which I would not just name categories descriptively, but begin applying analytical concepts to them (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p.30). For example, I would begin reading a transcript and identify overarching categories in the margins (i.e. Learning and Knowledge, Alienation, Food, Ancient wisdom). As the discussion became more specific I would break down categories into sub-categories or properties (i.e. sub-categories included type of knowing or learning relationships, cause or focus of alienation, spirituality of food or luxury of food, oral traditions or intergenerational learning, and more generally properties included "more or less frequently mentioned" "more or less emphasis of importance"). On the page, the sub-categories appeared as nested items inside overarching categories. I arrived at naming categories and properties wherever possible by using participant language, but

when this was too cumbersome or not quite appropriate, I identified language that I thought fit well with the concept (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 32; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, pp. 67-69). Each time I coded a field note entry, transcript, or journal, I added the categories and properties to a separate sheet to facilitate comparing and making links between them and the categories appearing in subsequent transcripts. This sheet eventually looked like a list of categories with references to where I could find mention of them in each transcript. For example, the code: “Deskilling/reskilling (soft skills, twice) swh 5” signified a mention of the category “deskilling and reskilling” and the subcategory “soft skills” twice on page five of the Solar Water Heater transcript. Where appropriate, I made links between categories and compressed them into larger categories (i.e. I merged “emergent knowledge” and “exploratory learning” into one category as mention of them seemed to go hand in hand). The categories that appeared most frequently were the “core categories,” most of which make up the focus of analysis in the following chapter, and a few of which I left out due to limitations in scope of this project. In the interests of keeping the project at a manageable scale in terms of time and scope of data, I did not add to my sample by theoretical sampling to search for differing properties until my categories saturated. As it was, I identified over 60 categories, so the problem was more one of choosing the salient ones as there was no possible way I would saturate all these. I then sorted my memos, and checked them against my data and the themes I had identified and began forming hypotheses. It is at this point that Dick says we should access literature to verify data, but I had been accessing it all along for the reasons identified above. I finally began writing based on my skeletal outline of memos (Dick, 2005).

## **Ethical considerations**

The main ethical issues present in this research are the most common ones: informed consent, right to privacy, protection from harm (Fontana & Frey, 1994, p.372; Punch, 1994, p. 89). As I mentioned above, all participants gave informed consent and agreed to use of pseudonyms. To the extent that I could, I warned participants of potential physical harm through use of tools, slipping, etc. and took precautionary measures where possible. Emotional harm never seemed like a strong danger, but I was attentive to situations where it might be possible. To the question of whether interviewing (in my case, group interviewing) is unethical because interviewers might manipulate subjects and treat them as objects, I would respond that I was genuinely interested in

the well-being of participants and in the integrity of what they had to tell me (Fontana & Frey, 1994, p. 373). I did not want to receive specific answers from them, and I was very keen to involve myself in empathetic and compassionate ways with what they were saying. I have also tried to minimize deception by being very candid about my biases, paradigm, and intentions in this work. Finally, part of the reason for offering workshops was that I wanted to be able to offer something of value to participants in exchange for their participation in this study. The greatest possible ethical concern I have with this research is to what use it may be put by somebody else who interprets it in malicious ways. On the one hand, I think this concern is minimized by the fact that likely, very few people, let alone people with broad malicious power, will read this research. On the other hand, I can only hope that the ideas herein are placed responsibly enough in a theoretical context that it becomes very difficult to interpret them in damaging ways.

### **Limits of this research**

The major limits of this research I would identify are those with my own relationship to this place: namely, that I am not a long-term inhabitant here, even though I strive for sensitivity to place, and do what I can on a daily basis to listen to place. I am not entrenched in a community here, biotic or social. My relative newness to Vancouver also made it feel overwhelming to seek out a stated and existing community initiative to which this project might sensitively contribute, rather than hinder. In a sense, this project was picked out of the air and, as such, risked imposing a research agenda irrelevant to what was actually happening on the ground.

Whether one frames it as lack of time or too ambitious a project, I created this limitation as well. My data analysis was somewhat scattered as I could not achieve data saturation given the time and scope of this project. Part of the problem was I wanted the project to be relevant to a community of sorts. For this reason, I held the initial exploratory meeting with place-engaged Vancouverites and it became quite an open project, which I hoped would leave room for the organic and spontaneous vision and contribution of others. In the end, this in itself, turned into another sort of limit in that, contrary to my desire, it began as just me organizing and driving it in conjunction with individual instructors. Later in the project, three co-organizers came on board, however, and two of them are still active with the project.

Another perceived limit I had with the project was that I did not know whether participants would ever use the skills they learned. In some ways, I shrugged this off, however, as the more important point in my mind is that the workshops and discussions form an invitation to dream. If they serve as an exercise in imagination and stretching ideas of what learning and living in place could be in such a way that they inspire other action (such as the important points I identified in the assumptions section: relying more on neighbours, reusing more, buying less etc.), not using the skills themselves seems beside the point.

### **My assumptions in this research**

There are too many to list, really. I hope I have justified a few of them in Chapter 2: that folk skills can help people act on their socio-ecological values and live better in place, that there is such a thing as “more fully human” in the sense of opportunities to flourish, that knowledge can be living, that place has something to “tell” us, and so on. There are, however, a few other key assumptions to identify and try to justify that are mainly embedded in my research question. For one, to characterize this project as one of place-based learning may be debatable to some place-based educators, as I did not do this in an explicitly rural and ecological setting, the setting with which place-based projects are most often associated (Gruenewald, 2003b, pp. 3-4). Nor did I even put people in contact with larger open “natural” spaces in Vancouver or “cultural” projects. I have tried here to a) start where I am at as Horton (1990) suggests, and “dig in” as Snyder exhorts (1995, p.43). This meant purposely trying to unseat notions of place-based education that privilege association with rural, ecological settings. We need place-based education everywhere, and in the city, I would argue it needs to be focused on more than just community gardens and stream rehabilitation, as essential as these pursuits are to a healthy urban place. I would also hope that we might overcome narrower definitions of place, as I have outlined in Chapter 2 and come into a more robust definition of place that also points to the skills and life choices needed well to live in a place.

Secondly, it might be a stretch to assume that all workshop participants had socio-ecological values they wanted to act upon, or that action thereupon would necessarily mean a positive outcome socio-ecologically speaking. This assumption is the most difficult one for me to justify, as I did not talk extensively with all participants

about their values, nor is it easy to measure net positive socio-ecological outcomes from the application of such skills. As to the former point, I merely assumed the workshop notices/descriptions would attract people with those values. However, in the solar water heater workshop, for example, some participants identified that their primary reason for wanting to learn that skill was to save money. A few other participants seemed to have mental health issues that eclipsed a connection between these workshops and the idea that one may act more faithfully on one's socio-ecological values. On the other hand, those who self-selected from workshop participants to join focus groups tended to identify with the general feeling of having socio-ecological values they wanted to put into practice more fully. As to the latter point, I felt safe assuming that, should they want to act on their socio-ecological values, the outcome could only be positive. Perhaps it would not be immediately or measurably positive, but I hope it might at least lead to further searching for ways to bridge this gap, or that in incremental steps, a person would buy less, recycle and reuse more, and depend more fully living processes and their neighbours than on products formed by intense resource extraction and energy use.

The idea that acting on one's socio-ecological values necessarily entails living better in *this place* is not immediately obvious since many people do not subscribe to or see the world with a notion of place-ness at all. They may be planning on moving out of this place in the next year or on never paying much attention to place in the ways I have described it here. They generally do seem, however, to see a link between acting on their values and the result being an improved world-place ecologically speaking, if not local place. I tried to make the connection between living one's socio-ecological values and improving one's place wherever I could in discussions.

Finally, I should mention the largest assumption of my research is that I would be able to address my research question through qualitative methods based in a constructivist epistemology. A constructivist epistemological framework allows me to acknowledge that participants and I were creating meaning together and that the meaning of reality is open to our particular interpretation, rather than assuming there is an objective meaning out in the world that we could discover (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). One point, however, in which I would like to remove myself from a constructivist worldview, is that I do not believe the world had no meaning before human consciousness engaged with it (Crotty, 1998, p.43). That is too anthropocentric a worldview that neglects the idea

that before humans or with humans, all beings in the world have their own intrinsic worth and meaning (Snyder, 1995). Another point that I do not think constructivism grasps entirely is the idea that knowledge itself can be living or can inhere in relationships, as I have suggested in Chapter 2 and will elaborate on in Chapter 4. I do not know of an epistemological framework that allows for this belief (perhaps some indigenous worldviews), but it is one I came to through this research.

## CHAPTER 4: TASTING THE FINAL BREW— DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS<sup>8</sup>

### Organization of themes

It is now time to have a taste of the results of this fermentation project. As with a fermented brew, they are unique to this project, may be interesting and strange, and certainly cannot be replicated uniformly. I have organized the following discussion by choosing themes that seem to answer most directly my central research question: **what are some of the salient features of learning folk/self-sufficiency skills in a place-based setting that help people act more effectively on their socio-ecological values, and reconnect with their place?** In this case, by “socio-ecological values” I do not mean just any values. Some so-called socio-ecological values might be used to create more socio-ecological degradation. For example, the current push on the University of British Columbia’s campus to build LEED certified “green” buildings for staff and students to reduce commuter traffic threatens to extinguish the only remaining semi-wild place on campus- 24 hectares of mature forest and an agro-ecological and education farm/Centre for Sustainable Food Systems. What I mean by socio-ecological values then, are those values that desire to see healthy, whole, relational selves and places as outlined in chapter two.

I originally thought in the case of this study, that my research question naturally breaks down into the sub-questions: What skills might we want to learn to this end? are some skills more effective than others? in what manner or by what techniques

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<sup>8</sup> Quotation notations in Chapter 4: I have quoted from transcripts in full, including my own notations. Here is the key to the meaning of my notations: CAPS signal participant emphasis, Italics, my emphasis. A \* signals when the group or a large number participants agreed on a point expressed with “uh-huh”s or “yes” etc. The # signals laughing, and several in a row of either \*\*\*\* or ##### signals sustained agreement or laughter, respectively. The @ signals an “uh huh” or expression of agreement from me specifically. The [ ] signals when a participant interrupts another participant, but does not interrupt the flow of the conversation. The interrupter’s words appear in the brackets. All names are pseudonyms except my own, and I try to set up the context, discussion, or question that led to a quotation where such briefing is necessary for understanding. Workshops are noted by shorthand names (i.e. soils, solar, cheese, etc.).

(educational and technical) might we learn them most effectively to this end? However, I slowly realized that to more effectively address this question, type of skills and manner of learning seemed less important than dealing with the medium in which these skills are learned. By medium, I mean the interrelated cultural, spiritual/emotional, relational, educational, and historical contexts that inform how one is or is not supported in learning these skills, and ultimately that inform human flourishing. This is not to suggest that the type of skill and the manner of learning it are unimportant. Participants seemed to more easily answer those questions for themselves. The more difficult questions to answer centred on the complex web of factors that enable or hinder learning folk/self-sufficiency skills as a way of learning to better act on socio-ecological values and live better in place. After all, as Bowers says, “it should be recognized that without an ecologically centred cultural support network it is difficult for environmental reformers to live what they advocate” (Bowers, 1997, p.97).

With this in mind, I have grouped themes together in two sections. First, I focus on themes that frame a broader context in which people seek out these skills or this type of learning. It is important to note that the themes framing the context are deeply intertwined. They also suggest some conditions to overcome in order to act on our socio-ecological values and live better in place, and I deal with them accordingly. In the second section of this chapter, I examine the themes that touch on the type of educational ethos and relationships in learning such skills that facilitate bridging the values-action gap. Finally, in the spirit of summary, I talk about the theme of fermenting as a powerful metaphor for thinking about the how to tend a culture of place-based, values-action integration. While all of these themes arose in focus group discussions, I will also weave focus group insights together with academic insights and my own reflections, where appropriate.

Besides being most relevant to answering my research question, all of these themes were touched on at least once in each focus group discussion, and were treated at length in at least a few of those discussions. This is an arbitrary reason to focus on them in some ways, but perhaps it allows us to think of them as archetypes of sorts: the common thoughts that seem to inhabit the imaginations of people striving to act on their socio-ecological values in order to live better in place. Finally, there are indeed some points of tension between themes that I highlight in chapter 2 and those of chapter 4. There some also some significant points of agreement. I do not think we should have

difficulty finding reasons to suggest why the analysis of chapter 4 maps well onto the literature in chapter 2. That the folk school tradition has endured for at least 150 years, if not millennia under different names, suggests that there is something in that form that resonates on a philosophical/theoretical level with the experience of “regular folks” no matter what particular struggles they face. There is also, as Snyder (1995) highlights the fact that humans have been fundamentally place-based beings for the vast majority of our history as a species. The trend towards extreme mobility and place-blindness is very recent. Perhaps for this reason, there is something about the place-based education literature that resonates deeply with our long human history of living-in-place.

## **Framing a context: conditions to overcome**

### **Alienation and distancing**

Scholars and participants alike seem to be aware that alienation is a basic condition in modern life and in our efforts to live better in place (Bookchin, 2005, p.82). It is the negative model from which we springboard to say, “we do not want to live that way, as we have been,” which in itself is a sort of alienated approach. It seems to me that our task is to look for positive, non-alienated models for living better in place, and I found glimpses of that in learning folk/self-sufficiency skills.

As it is commonly conceived (i.e. in the OED), alienation refers to an emotional, psychological or existential feeling of separation, distancing or estrangement from self or living others. Marx pushes this a bit further. Through his extensive observations, Marx linked an original cause of this multifaceted condition to a specific change in material relations involving government taxation laws in Prussia that forced small, self-sufficient land-holding farmers off their land to work in factories as wage labour for others (Beeman, 2006, pp.244-245).

Marx (1978, p.95) himself described alienation resulting from this change in material relations as estrangement from one’s own essential human being, or “species-being,” and from the free expression thereof through working, creating, playing, loving, eating, thinking and so on. It is important for my purposes to note that Marx’s species-being signified a human intimately related— through providing for one’s own healthy/whole existence— with oneself, one’s own spiritual essence, other humans, and with the natural world (Marx, 1978, p.77). Marx’s concept of humans as intimately

interrelational beings—as beings that are only flourishing humans to the extent that they are not alienated from these relationships— shares a foundation with other conceptions of the self that extend beyond the narrow view of a human trapped in a skin envelope. Some examples of these include a self that is formed in relation to human others (Lao-Tzu, 2000, book 13, p. 15; Taylor, 1991, pp. 33, 91), and the more-than-human world (Lao-Tzu, 2000, book 13, p. 15; Naess, 1995;). These more wholistic conceptions of self constitute what I call here a relational self, or being-in-relation. It follows that alienation from one’s essential human-being—or being-in-relation— explicitly entails separation from other humans, one’s labour, the products thereof, and nature (Beeman, 2006, p. 245).

For example, in a discussion about factors that divorce us from basic sources of human nourishment, Barb pointed to rising urbanization, which alienates us from the land to the point that we now call it “real estate.” Immediately thereafter, Dana highlighted how barely any of us could make any of our own clothes as we are removed from the skills needed to provide the labour and products that satisfy our own basic needs (Seeds). Finally, in a separate discussion, some participants mentioned how separation from other humans through alienated work ultimately fragments our essential being as well:

*Patricia:* You know we work more, but we work in all these isolated ways so we don’t interact with people that are important to us as much...”

*Quinn:* “it’s a symptom of industrial revolution where it’s more efficient for people to work at specializations instead of being jack-of-all-trades because it’s more financially prosperous for—and that’s why it’s like that but whether it’s better for us *as a whole* is questionable, right?”

*Patricia:* Well as organisms, as biological organisms I think quite clearly it’s NOT better for us. You know, it may be better economically, but not emotionally, spiritually (Solar, emphasis added).

This sketch of Marxian alienation, while only impressionistic, gets us started on the present discussion with an eye to how alienation from our essential human being—our relational self—means a lack of spiritual and emotional nourishment. We experience

emptiness, dis-integration, or disconnect between ourselves and others, the land, our labour, and the products thereof.

The modern condition of alienation described by participants is particularly detrimental to efforts at mending people-values and people-place relationships because we are born into it, and thus it is an invisible factor in the dis-integration of these relationships (Bookchin, 2005, p. 82). As Beeman (2006, p. 245) remarks, while alienation was a new phenomenon in Marx's time, in modern western culture it frighteningly forms the basis of our interactions with place and I would add with our work, our selves, and each other, contributing to a fragmented, disconnected existence. Some participants touched on this point within a discussion about why most modern western citizens do not participate in providing directly for their own existence:

*Carl:* But this is kind of a *new way* that it [distancing from one's own food production] happens you know in an industrial, knowledge-based economy it's kind of knowledge at the top. Then you know, maybe industry, you know you can get your hands dirty if you're a mechanic, but growing food kind of seems like, we only leave that for you know immigrants.... because the \* rest of us don't wanna do it, we've become so alienated from that, which is scary [*Barb:* wow, yeah].

*Iva:* I also think, like to get back to the intuition question you had, so much of our culture has been for you know, well the last 100-200 years increasingly and at a just exponential rate divorcing us from our natural intuition and instincts... if you look at the big picture of what's happening in industrialized societies and just how many increasingly social problems we have and mental health problems and children becoming violent because they're not getting basic nurturing etc., I think it's all part of the same divorcing from you know, basic human nourishment, instinctual, intuitive common sense. We have so much, so many institutional structures and aspects of our culture that specifically divorce us from our basic instincts \*(Seeds, emphasis added).

It seems to me that Iva's thought links basic human instinct and nourishment with caring for others and our own mental health, whereas alienation correlates with a

breakdown in social relations with others and with one's own mental health. The fact that we are born into alienation and divorced from our basic selves thus has grave moral consequences, as alienation is not simply an inwardly felt emotion, the only consequence of which is private suffering. Rather, it manifests in how we come to know ourselves—and *be*— in the world; namely, we learn to act as isolated selves competing against other selves for domination and possession in an attempt at freedom from alienation-as-existential-lack (Bai, 2001, p.7). In other words, as alienated selves, we feel empty and that we are missing something important in life, but the main way we feel we can fill that emptiness is through competitive, materialistic, violent means.

To be alienated in both eras (Marx's time and ours), then, refers to being worked upon by material relations that emphasize having and competitively accumulating capital at the expense of time and energy otherwise put towards freely expressing and nurturing one's own species being. Marx (1978, p.72) said of alienated labour that the more humans put their lives into something that is not themselves (and thus not relationship with others, place etc.), the less they retain of themselves, the more they lose themselves, the more they become objects, and the more their lives belong not to themselves, but to the object: money. You no longer do the things you do: money does them for you (Marx, 1978, p.96). Witness the buy/donate-your-way-to-sustainability-and-social-justice phenomenon in high profile event slogans such as Vancouver's EP!C sustainability expo: "buy a better future." The expo is essentially a trade show for a cornucopia of "sustainability" products— you no longer need to act on your socio-ecological values; money will do it for you... but you will pay a steep price: your wholeness. When we use money as a flimsy proxy for important actions we actually need to take ourselves in order to restore wholeness to our places, and thus ourselves, we lose a piece of the meaning of what it is to be human.

I fear that as the modern heirs of this state of alienation, however, we have lost sight of the fact that it was originally *learned en masse via coercion*— it is not an inevitable human condition<sup>9</sup>. Some participants, however, see the glimmer of an alternative to alienation in learning folk/self-sufficiency skills with a close community or

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<sup>9</sup> I do not wish to suggest that alienation began in Marx's time. Others such as Shepard (1982) posit that it may have originated with the beginnings of agriculture, sedentary lives and surplus production. I imagine there were instances of it even before this time, but I think we would be correct to assume that Marx identified the first case of popular, en masse alienation—felt acutely by a significant portion of society.

family group. Speaking to why she is interested in coming to this particular workshop, Patricia says:

I think another thing I like about this is that if you're going to a workshop where you're gonna learn life skills to apply, presumably you're gonna construct these kinds of things with your family or with your friends, you know, the people that are gonna be using the ultimate product, right? So it becomes a way of working together, practicing skills together and spending time together and I think that's something that we don't do (Solar).

To put more of our energy, then, into the simple tasks that keep us alive, that we can perform together, and of which we jointly enjoy the benefits reaped through our own labour—growing our own food, providing energy by the grace and skill of our neighbours and the sun—, seems a fuller and more free expression of our species-being. As beings-in-relation, we act more in line with our values in order to fill our spiritual/emotional/existential-lack in a less socio-ecologically degrading manner, thus working toward a better relationship with place.

### **Deskilling and the need for reskilling**

*stay together*  
*learn the flowers*  
*go light*  
(Snyder, 1974, p.86)

Part of what it means to be alienated in modern western culture is that we are deskilled—that is, we exist in a cultural medium that distances most of us from skills that allow us to more freely express our essential human being through our own labour and the products thereof. I initially began thinking of the “important” skills for living well in place as the ones that helped us directly provide for our own *physical* existence: hard skills that help us provide our own food, shelter, and clothing. As important as I still believe these skills are, I am coming to realize in part through this research that if we wish to act more faithfully on our socio-ecological values and live better in place, then we must conceive of our own existence in more relational and wholistic terms: physical *and* spiritual, emotional, psychological, etc. Beyond hard skills, we might need to learn how to listen to and respect mystery and wonder (Evernden, 1985, pp.139-141), how to

appreciate beings for their intrinsic value (Bai, 2001; Naess 2005, p.68), how to appropriately produce our own comfort, pleasure, health, and beauty (Berry, 2003, p.261), and how to overcome the mental games that values such as competitiveness and hierarchy engender (Bookchin, 2005). Doing so, might give us a much more ample set of tools to attempt reconnecting to our values and place.

The implication of this approach for overcoming deskilling as a factor that frames the context in which people seek out folk/self-sufficiency skills is that we must begin to conceive of our deskilling in a number of ways. I interpret the excerpt from Gary Snyder's poem, *For the Children* that appears at the beginning of this section as advice for future generations about what skills will be important for human flourishing. Not only do we need skills to help us directly provide for our own physical existence, we also need those skills that: help us know how to "stay together" relationally in community; help us "learn the flowers" and the local context, patterns and interconnections by which life in our place is governed, and; help us "go light" with frugality and minimal attachment to baggage of all sorts (material, physical, psychological, informational etc.). And this is just to name a few skills.

Wendell Berry locates part of our vast deskilling in the genesis of a highly industrialized and specialized society. Indeed, he claims that specialization is the disease of the modern character in that it deprives individuals of a personal wholeness and competence once found in more self-sufficient and decentralized peasant or tribal communities (Berry, 1997, p.19-21). Berry too means to speak of skills to provide directly for our own existence in terms more broadly than just the physical. He also means relational skills around knowing how to live in community and work through relationship problems, skills around living frugally, but with enjoyment, and skills around learning how to sensitively fit oneself into one's context through an intimate knowledge of place (Berry, 1997). All of these and more contribute to making a person whole through the free expression of one's humanness. This means one has enough independence, competence, and agency to act immediately on one's values without needing to wait on a corporation, government, or one's money/purchases to do so (Berry, 2002; Jaffe & Gertler, 2006, p.1), but still recognizes a healthy dependence on the socio-ecological relations that support one's existence (Berry, 1997).

Some participants at the seed saving workshop echoed some of Berry's sentiments, specifically in relation to the food system:

*Len:* I think we're very much at the cusp of a highly structured civilization that depends upon you know a small group of highly trained individuals who have taken upon themselves to produce food for us and so the majority of people have become you know [*Kari:* removed], yeah removed from the food system and I live with somebody at home who does everything that he possibly can to get away from the kitchen ##, his girlfriend does all his cooking and when she goes out of town he'll just go to the store and buy like a plethora of frozen dinners, pizza pops, and I think that's become sort of the norm is that people have become used to this fact that they don't need to know these skills.

*Kari:* I think too a lot of what we talked about with the systems in place in terms of Monsanto and globalization and industrialization of food, we don't NEED to know these things as much anymore, right? \*, sort of what you're saying, you know, growing up in the city I don't need to grow my own food because I live 2 blocks from the grocery store, right? Until you start to step back and think about: okay, what are some of the consequences of not being connected to our food, there doesn't feel the need to be involved in that process \*(Seed saving).

Len and Kari's conversation is important for getting a sense that, perhaps in an overdone show of privilege that allows us to keep our hands out of the dirt, many of us feel safe not knowing food provision skills. We trust somebody or something will provide food for us as long as we provide money to pay for it. We are skilled at making money and quite comfortable with that arrangement, but as we have seen, making money is not a real skill that helps humans freely express our being-in-relation. Recall Marx: "you no longer do the things you do. Money does them for you." In my mind, and in the ensuing focus group discussion, the consequences Kari alludes to have to do in part with missing a chance to reclaim a part of what makes us whole as humans. Indeed, this conversation led directly into Iva's comments in the previous section about modern society structures/factors that divorce us from basic human nourishment.

What stuck out for me in the fermentation discussion about deskilling is that even after Ingrid expresses raw fear at the possible consequences of our lack of food

provision/survival skills, her underlying tone was still about losing something greater than just the ability to feed our physical selves:

*Ingrid:* Yeah and, and, it's, I mean it's scary to think that if the whole industrial production system collapses there won't be—people won't know how to feed themselves (laughs)\* like for me that's TERRIFYING...and it's sad, I mean it's a sad commentary that people, people don't know that you can make sauerkraut with a plastic bucket in a month you know like that, that's totally foreign, and, and I feel like there's a really big disconnect between the majority of people and things that they consume and most people don't realize that the things that they're purchasing, they are simple skills that they can learn. You know once you get everything in a flashy can with a flashy this and a flashy that\* it just seems so foreign and so DIFFICULT (Fermentation).

The “sadness” to which Ingrid refers, I read as a feeling of estrangement from, and potential loss of, something that brought us in contact with natural rhythms and brought us happiness, or at least a sense of competence, satisfaction and self-confidence in being able to enact our own values.

Despite the sadness and possible terror of being deskilled, participants desiring to see people reskilled somehow encountered apathy or disinterest in others. This is a problem because, while we are born into deskilling and various forces such as industrialization, centralization, specialization, and so on, may conspire to keep us deskilled, we also allow our own deskilling to continue. Immediately following the above discussion was this thought:

*Yolanda:* But they're [people in general] not interested in doing that [*Ingrid:* No!] You know on the strike line I talked to a girl about making salsa. I said, “oh it's so easy to make it” and I explained it to her, like the non-cook way in a blender. She said “yeah, but it's just easier to go down to [*Ingrid:* yeah] across” whatever that store is, Que Pasa and buy it right? [*Ingrid:* yeah, reluctant] (Fermentation).

The same sentiment also came up in the soils workshop in relation to Vancouver citizens feeling it was just easier to let the city workers take care of neighbourhood

maintenance jobs than it was for the neighbours to get together for a work bee. What worries me in all this is the “it’s just easier” feeling and specifically that “it’s just easier for *distant* others to provide for us: easier to go the store, to let the city do it, to microwave a pizza pop. I fear what we potentially lose when distant others provide most of our food, for example, is a certain measure of control and autonomy and freedom to determine the healthy and enjoyable conditions of our own existence.

Through the course of these workshops, I began wondering whether this “it’s just easier” feeling is partly due to a fault in how reskilling is often approached: as a technical task or imparting of technical information that requires hard labour, expense of personal time and energy, and dry learning manuals or methods. While I tried to create a learning environment through community-based workshops where that would not be the case, I think I still fell into the trap of glorifying technical learning over more poetic and wholistic learning that accounts for the emotional, spiritual, psychological dimensions of our existence, not just the physical.

To speak of skills and being deskilled does not have to mean that a reskilling must take the form of technical manuals or other reductionist, step-by-step approaches often associated with “gaining skills.” Indeed living-in-place, I would argue the term implies, does not just involve hard skills of living (or the art of living, as Orr would have it [1994, p.14]), but is itself a *living* skill, a dynamic process. In philosophical terms I mean a constant “becoming” (Freire, 2005, p.84) of a whole mind-body-spirit-place-other complex that occurs most richly in dialogue and community with others (Freire, 2005; Naess, 1995; Snyder, 1974; Taylor, 1991, p.31). In poetic terms, I mean a skill that still refers to a form (an ecological worldview premised on place-based being-in-relation, for example), that gives appropriate and responsible limits to the skill’s application, but the content of which is dynamic rather than static. I mean knowledge that embodies vital creativity: the often organic, spontaneous bubbling-up of life from under the weight of mechanistic, linear, industrial rhythms and ideologies. Borrowing from Snyder’s (1980, p.44) perception of the form of poems, we might see spontaneous knowledge appearing here more as moments, “knots in the grain,” whorls, gyres, or individualized turbulence patterns that rise out of the form (worldview and/or place) as an intensification of the flow of that form that grows and subsides as the life of the form changes. I would use these philosophical and poetic ideas to depict the form of knowledge desired for reskilling-in-place: a fluid form that gains its relevance in dynamic relationship with place and its

beings. This expanded definition of skills is important here in relation to my research question, as it represents a critique of my approach to skills in this research, and a map for proceeding in future projects.

Participants furnished clues for such future projects of how to see and practice a more poetic and life-affirming path to reskilling. In his personal efforts to live more lightly in place, Nate shared his sense of impossibility and difficulty in the face of learning such skills alone. He stressed the importance for him of the “emotional or affective experience connected to any learning experience, and the affirmation of participating together” with other humans as a key to dynamic learning (Wild edibles). Fiona reminded me of the importance of “re-skilling ourselves also not just in the skills of how to make cheese, but of how to troubleshoot, right because we’re so used to having experts do the thing for us” (Cheese making). She underlined the creativity, self-confidence, and satisfaction inherent in learning the skill of troubleshooting, which sets the stage for a more dynamic and unpredictable type of learning to take place. Similarly, Oksana reminded me of another dimension of reskilling in saying: “there’s also a re-skilling that goes on, of some of those types of things that we learned at more psycho-emotional-type levels about competitiveness” (Cheese making). We must unlearn the “be-the-best-at-this-skill” impulse because it tends to cut off paths of meaningful dialogue and relationship with others as we strive to be the best at any given thing. Finally, Fay especially brought reskilling alive for me, and away from a reductionist, technical approach, in her openness to the mystery of learning a skill:

*Fay:* when I thought about re-skilling, also the word “demystifying” processes came to my mind, but the thing is that as we get deeper into any discipline, it actually remystifies because we begin\*\*\* to realize that it’s much bigger, much broader, much deeper than any of us have ever thought of individually. \* So the thing is that what’s interesting about this kind of thing that you’re doing Andrew is that a number of personalities... get together and do that same thing together and what that does is it broadens the experience because each of us has something different to contribute so I don’t even think—like when we were in school, and maybe it’s better now, like there was only one true way, you know \*\* and I think what we’re finding is that there’s a multiple of ways to do

things. \*\* There's multiple ways of making cheese...or whatever it is that we're learning about\*\*\* (Cheese making).

What Fay believes reskilling brings back to peoples' lives "is a deep sense that we're more than shopping" (Cheese making). You can see it in her longer comment that for her the richness of learning a skill derives from the diversity in interactions and relationships around the learning of the skill. Skills sharing in community is a complex ecology of direct relationships. The act of buying something is generally a two-way, two-party, linear exchange. Even when one conceives of buying as an act that draws in vast networks of exchange, the difference is still that those networks are indirect and distant, generally speaking. We *are* more than shopping and more whole than industrialized consumer culture would have us believe—more able, more creative, more complex, more interdependent, capable of better than using money as a proxy for living, and capable of learning this complex creativity in life-affirming ways where reskilling is a joyful activity that helps us act on our values.

### **Bucking fear, self-sufficiency and the cult of the individual**

Alienation and deskilling, then, are part of the same problem that provides the backdrop to our modern existence: one that I would characterize most importantly as a distancing from our essential being-in-relation that saps us of the strength and creativity needed to act with integrity on our socio-ecological values. But one more contextual factor that overlaps with these two to form this backdrop came out strongly through these focus groups. While reskilling for self-sufficiency was definitely an empowering thought for most, there arose a definite tension between our desires for a seemingly individualized or immediate-family-oriented version of self-sufficiency, and a wariness of the North American frontier-style individualism often wrapped up in that version of self-sufficiency. I would imagine that sitting with this tension and trying to clarify what we mean by self-sufficiency also forms a piece of the background of learning to live well with place.

In the place-based literature, we have examples of this tension over time. Figures like Thoreau, Bill Copperthwaite, Helen and Scott Nearing, and even many young aspiring farmers today embody North American ideals of freedom through individual/small family self-sufficiency, while there is also a critique of modern western individualism and atomism implicit in some of these figures, and more prominently in the

writings of ecological place-based thinkers such as Bowers, (1997), Gruenewald (2003b), Prakash and Stuchel (2004), and Snyder (1995; 2004). With this latter cluster of literature in mind, I would suggest the individualist version of self-sufficiency could be a dangerous route especially if we are motivated by fear, and that thinking of sufficiency in terms of the “tribe” or larger cultural change may be central to value-integrated, place-based efforts.

Focus group participants also embodied this tension. On the one hand, some of them likened self-sufficiency to a way to buffer one’s own household from oil running out and from other perceived post-apocalyptic scenarios:

*Diane:* For me, self-sufficiency is like if there is a breakdown in the city chain, in the networking chain, and those Costco trucks don’t roll in with my food, that I, if I gather the skills over time I could provide food for myself and those I care about, however, because of my means of production, because my space is small, it would have to be a chosen few, it could not be extensive, so for me that’s self-sufficiency (Seeds).

Such scenarios, while frighteningly real enough especially for low-income folks who already live in the shadow of such breakdown, may only acutely affect most of these workshop participants relatively far off in time. In the meantime, and on the other hand, many of us seem to suffer despair in the present, perhaps partly *because* of what we lose in striving for an individualist version of self-sufficiency motivated by fear: part of our being-in-relation. Herein lies the tension, the second side of which emerged in a discussion on the ongoing shift from oral, face-to-face knowledge transfer to book/computer learning. I asked what we gain and lose in the shift. Bea answers:

In North America, we have a very independent mindset, an individual mindset and that, you know, I’m gonna do it for myself and so “I’ll just figure it out” seems to be kind of prominent. But I don’t think it’s very effective, and it also makes us feel lonely and feel isolated\* so I think that this kind of thing, this kind of gathering or way of learning is almost like creating an urban tribe or something like that## we can all get together and just share information really

informally instead of just valuing the individual, you can just value the group for what the group knows (Fermenting).

Other participants highlighted that beyond loneliness and isolation, “just figuring it out” alone is sometimes plain boring or, as Nate mentioned in the last section, very difficult to do. Perhaps the most interesting point for me was that, in learning self-sufficiency skills, participants often identified the need for community in order to keep up hope and to keep fear at bay. For example, in the Cheese making focus group, I asked what fears and desires motivated people to come to this workshop, and Fay began flushing out her desire to see joyful, positive, collective cultural change, rather than individual change or cultural change based on fear and negativity. She began talking about how 60s era self-sufficiency ideals carried rugged individualist frontierism elements, and how a collective approach has greater possibility of success, but that many modern collective approaches are fear-based and apocalyptic. On this note, she says:

And what we're doing here [in this workshop] is changing that and I think that's very hopeful and the thing is that during the cold war and the whole concern about nuclear annihilation!!! ### and Helen Caldicott telling us how many seconds or minutes we were before midnight, like D-day and going on marches and down Burrard street with our placards and that kind of thing, and even the solidarity movement around union stuff: a lot of it was against things\*\* and I think when I came to the farmers' market I thought this was the first time, and it was like 13 years ago as one of the founders, that I was actually FOR something \*\*\* and I think so what we're doing here is incredibly positive. And when I went to slow food and Carlo Petrini spoke and raised the tears of thousands of people, I'm afraid, he just, he's one of the founders of slow food, but he talked about our connection with food and culture and making things and it's about PASSION and that passion cannot survive on mediocrity and that's the one thing that we have that the industrialists can't take away from us is that we will have incredible culture. We will have cheeses that are diverse and flavourful and interesting, we will have fermented foods, we

will do all these things and it's because it will be BETTER than what you can get in the supermarket and that, having that quality— you know people won't DO things because it's the right thing, they have to get some pleasure out of it, so I just think this is the perfect thing—the perfect thing\*\* (Cheese making).

Fay's enthusiastic appeal to joy, pleasure and passion through living and learning in cultural community represents what feels like a nascent recognition here that to move away from alienation and deskilling might require a sort of joyful dependence on others. This is where the discussion seems to shift from an ideal of self-sufficiency to what might seem on the surface like its opposite: dependence. So what is the nature of this dependence in an analysis on the desire for self-sufficiency, and how might it better allow us to act on our socio-ecological values?

Following on Fay's insights, and in a discussion about why participants are interested in cheese making specifically, Fiona offers insight into the nature of what a joyful dependence-in-independence might mean:

*Fiona:* To be independent from the Capitalist market system and independent from dependence on things that have, you know plastic and that kind of thing, but at the same time dependent on a culture or people which is really different than what happens in a capitalist system where you don't know them and things happen at a distance.\*\* It's different to be dependent on Bea for my sauerkraut or Ed for my cheese, you know, than to be dependent on some faceless entity \*\* so it's kind of that balance of changing who I'm dependent on \*\* (Cheese making).

Fiona envisions independence from industrially produced goods and a distancing industrial capitalist system, and dependence on known and trusted people in the vicinity, in place. The task at hand is to get our minds clear about who and what it is we depend on. For participants, dependence seems to start with the local people and ecosystems with whom they have a personal relationship, whether it is with the seeds from our food crops, with Bea who makes the sauerkraut, or with the complex interaction of organisms that *is* sauerkraut. Perhaps a better way of conceiving of this (inter)dependent-self-sufficiency is by asking with what beings are we *healthily* interdependent? We might

answer: beings with whom we may exist in such a way that we can mutually encourage one another's full flourishing potential, whether human or more-than-human (hooks, 2000, p.4; Naess, 1995).

Indeed, the interesting thing to me about this version of dependence is that this answer is actually hooks' definition of love. hooks also offers us a further clue by thinking of love as a verb, not a noun. Quoting Fromm, she draws attention to love as an act of will and choice " 'to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth' " (hooks, 2000, p.4). Perhaps part of the problem with self-sufficiency is that we often think of it as a noun: *something* that can be collected or "gathered" as Diane mentions in the first quotation in this section, in bits of knowledge. The problem with collecting self-sufficiency knowledge is that we can also then hoard it, keep it from others, and thus again take us further away from acting on our socio-ecological values.

Hoarding impairs a strong sense of in-place community, which impairs truly "sufficient" living based on acting on our socio-ecological values. I realized through this study that my aim needed to shift from "collecting" skills to fostering a context for keeping them *living*. Collecting generally deadens or stultifies— one collects *things*— whereas, practicing within an appropriate context or place that gives day-to-day relevance to skills keeps them living. Patricia sees extending one's self by sharing information as essential to building a strong community fabric, and building a strong community fabric as essential to learning the live sufficiently in place:

*Patricia:* I really like that there's the sharing of information {in the workshop} and I think that builds community fabric. I think these kind of open-to-anyone-interested workshops build community fabric and that if we want to have a stronger community, that we need to all share our skills with each other. So to me, apart from the interesting skills that I'm learning, that are very applicable in many other venues besides this particular one, I REALLY like that I'm gonna know these people that I don't live very far from in a bit more depth and you know that if I run into somebody on the street, then I'm gonna have a connection, and I think if we want to reduce our ecological footprint, then we do have to depend on each other in a different way, so I think ANY steps that we take to create community fabric, you know whether it's we're all gonna sing

together we're all gonna build something together or I'm gonna teach you this skill that I have and you're gonna teach me something that you know. All of those things contribute to, um a more conscious environmentalism (Solar water).

Thus, self-sufficiency for a "conscious environmentalism" cannot mean simply sufficiency of a narrowly defined self. Patricia's indication is that this "sufficiency" happens better in the creation of a culture-in-place, a context, or a medium in which skills can better thrive and where people can learn how they can best survive together. We may need to consider new ways of conceiving of sufficiency:

Kate: I've actually thought about this a number of times before, like where I use the word self-sufficiency and I realize I don't necessarily mean individual self-sufficiency\*, but maybe we're lacking a word because I don't actually know of a vocabulary for the sufficiency of a community or [a collective] a family and I use the word in terms of self-sufficiency, meaning not having to rely on large corporations and so it's not meaning that I don't need my family or neighbours or community, but does anybody know of a word that would describe it?

Andrew: The best I've come up with is community sufficiency.

Iva: That's what I was gonna say, communal self-sufficiency (Seeds).

Reflecting on this and all these conversations made me realize that, entering this research I too held onto to certain notions of individualist self-sufficiency. While I think I also did, in part, hold onto a vision of self-sufficiency that recognized dependence on others, what I did not see is that perhaps complete self-sufficiency is not the goal to which we must strive first, but strength in community or "communal sufficiency."

Another way to think of communal self-sufficiency is to reclaim the meaning of "sufficiency" that correlates with "enoughness." Self-enoughness recognizes that at a certain point after nurturing one's self in important and basic ways, one might choose to extend one's self in an act of love as a being-in-relation, to nurture the flourishing and growth of all other beings. Yet another way of thinking of self-sufficiency more clearly might be to first clarify our notion of "self" as a relational self that includes others and our

places as I suggested above. Thus may the tension between individualist notions of self-sufficiency and a critique of North American individualism be overcome in favour of better acting on our socio-ecological values so that we may live better in place.

## **Educational and relational ethos**

### **Sharing**

The factors that frame the context in which participants seek out these skills are all characterized by a distancing from one's being-in-relation with the world that seems to sap one of the creativity and strength needed to act on our socio-ecological values. Even if one has hard skills, but experiences alienation, lacks more intangible emotional/psychological skills, or strives to exercise their hard skills in relational isolation, it seems difficult to live more in line with one's values past a certain point.

Similarly, in speaking of learning such skills to try and more effectively bridge the gap between socio-ecological values and actions, one must also analyze the educational medium in which these strategies are employed. I will begin such an analysis with a discussion of an ethos of sharing knowledge, and sharing in general as a powerful way of extending oneself as a being-in-relation and encouraging values-action integration and human flourishing in place.

It is important for me here to distinguish sharing from "regular" methods of teaching/learning. All teaching might be said to be a form of sharing, but I would venture that more conventional forms of teaching wherein the teacher conveys knowledge to a group of students are more a one-way imposition of information than a mutual and sharing exchange of knowledge. Where conventional teaching is one more expert person teaching other people, sharing might be conceived of as teaching *each other* and might thus lead to a sense of collective expertise. It may also seem trivial to devote a section to sharing, which probably seems like an obvious ethos to cultivate when trying to make change. I was surprised, however, at the blocks to sharing identified in various ways through the workshops.

My favourite example of this and of the power of a sharing medium for helping one find a way to use one's skills towards helping oneself and others act on one's values came out with the soils workshop instructor, Nancy. In my field notes journal I recorded my feelings about a preparatory meeting with Nancy before the soils workshop. Nancy,

an M.Sc. student in soil science was very knowledgeable about soil chemistry, physical structure, and biological make-up. She was also passionate about ecological health and community-based action research, and was trying to structure a research project where she could use her knowledge to help community gardens by testing their soil. In our conversation, I was struck, however, by the disconnect between Nancy's important specialized knowledge about soil health, and an immediate practical application for that knowledge in the community. At one point I asked: "so community gardens receive these soil analysis results and then what?" Nancy was not sure how exactly to help community garden members understand and act on the scientific and dense analysis results, and she thought this workshop might present an opportunity for her to try and work out communicating such specialized knowledge in a way that most people could understand. She had excellent knowledge and skill to offer, and she had socio-ecological values towards which she wished to apply that knowledge and skill. Still, she was running up against barriers to fulfilling this wish in the University, where arguably knowledge should be public and sharable, but is often experienced by students as private, valuable, and thus not to be shared without proper compensation or authorization.

When she entered the workshop medium, where sharing was stated from the outset as a desirable way of dealing with knowledge, she felt more free to share her skill with others, who in turn gave her feedback, and facilitated her increasing effectiveness in using her knowledge to better act on her socio-ecological values. I would not claim that Nancy instantly "figured out" how to do this with one workshop, but she made a start, which was a breakthrough. Nancy's knowledge began as expert knowledge, but in sharing with others, she was able to learn as well from others' needs, questions and insights how she might apply that knowledge more appropriately to what her values asked of her.

Sharing knowledge, as opposed to being taught it, holding it in, and only using it for our own good, allows us to exercise more facets of our human existence, namely those that acknowledge our need for others. Sharing knowledge might be conceived of as sharing a piece of oneself, extending oneself, while at the same time making one vulnerable. This conception of knowledge moves knowledge away from being a noun or a thing to deposit *in* oneself, toward being a process that exists in relationship or dialogue. Indeed, participant insights suggest that perhaps humans need to share knowledge as a basic part of what it means to be a whole human.

When I asked to what extent these workshops intuitively made sense to participants, Diane spoke critically about what she called “the cult of the individual” or western individualism, and said:

to come together and share information is A) rather subversive and B) against what western culture is teaching us...so I think away from [western] cultural programming and more to what it is to be human, it makes perfect sense [yeah, totally].

*Iva:* and this is what, say, 99% of human history’s survival has been based on so I think it’s really in our blood in a way...

*Brenda:* Yeah, I think people just coming together to share information on obtaining and growing their own food is really a basic, has to be a basic human, almost reflex\* (seeds).

Brenda, Iva and Diane make a link here between sharing knowledge, and what being human intuitively means. What does it mean if sharing is so much a part of us that it is “in our blood,” yet we exist in a “cult of the individual” where the dominant tendency is to not share beyond a limited circle? There is a disjuncture here and I think Diane hints at one of its causes: cultural programming.

Sharing knowledge might be in our blood or be a basic human reflex, but we can be moved away from that instinct or medium by the cultural programming of various institutional powers such as a University, as seemed to be the case with Nancy. Following on the heels of the previous discussion, Carl observes:

“and also just in terms of local knowledge and any knowledge being like commons and so much knowledge, or any commons has become privatized and that’s kind of become segregated and we’ve kind of all bought into that as university attendees, but at the same point kind of bringing some of that back and going ‘this information is open it’s for life it’s for community, it’s...’ that’s where knowledge should be and kind of bringing it back to that place (seeds).

According to Carl, it behoves us to engage in cultural programming and bring knowledge back into the sharing medium of the commons, or back into the service of “life and the community.” Nevertheless, he leaves us speculating as to why exactly. Using the insights of other workshop participants, I would suggest first that it helps us

keep up with our sharing instincts as perhaps that is part of what has made humans so adaptable through, as Iva said, 99% of human history. Nate elaborates a bit more on this adaptation piece. He sets it up by expressing that the value we as learners collectively attribute to sharing-as-educational-ethos is as important, if not more so, than the value attributed to it by, and because of, those with expert educational credentials who have only recently begun framing the discourse of what is “real knowledge.” He mentions that:

the way we create value has only for about 150 years been so invested in somebody with an education credential telling students what they need and are supposed to learn. That’s a VERY short history and the creating of value is being more widely understood among educators, teachers and other people in general as something that we ALL contribute to because, simply enough, in a complex world we can’t have one expert; we need to create that knowledge together. Otherwise, it doesn’t adapt quickly enough (Solar water).

I think Nate’s comments need some clarification. First of all, we have invested great value in people with educational credentials telling students what to do for far longer than the past 150 years. The “traditional” mode of education, explained by people like Dewey (1938, p. 3) has existed in universities and schoolhouses for many more than 150 years, but I still think Nate’s point is interesting in that for much of the time we have invested value in such people, it would seem that humans have been ill-adapted and have caused increasing socio-ecological degradation. For example, some go back to Descartes or Galileo to make this connection (Bai, 2001, p.6; Orr, 2004, p.31; Evernden, 1985, pp. 17-18). Others may go further back. My point is not to claim that “modern” education, per se, causes socio-ecological degradation, but that perhaps there is a correlation between such non-sharing educational modes, the worldviews and ways of being that brought them about, and socio-ecological degradation.

Let us delve further into how knowledge sharing might not only help us to adapt socio-ecologically speaking, but might also help us better live according to our socio-ecological values. This shift away from valuing knowledge sharing in relatively recent western human history might be one reason why we are becoming so excessively damaging to ecosystems and one another. For example, some participants in the Wild Edibles workshop identified that sharing knowledge through face-to-face interaction forces us to “re-process” the validity of what we claim to know, as we are accountable

directly to those with whom we are sharing that knowledge, and presumably, about whose well-being we care (Wild edibles).

What comes out in knowledge-sharing is a realization that the people we share it with might be adversely or positively affected by that knowledge; they might get sick if they eat a poisonous plant that I told them was fine to eat, so I make sure through consulting with others (books and people) that I confirm or refute its safety. In this kind of sharing, I recognize immediately another being's well-being, and that my knowledge exists in relationship to that being's well-being. Whether this recognition arises through a less altruistic sense of accountability or a more altruistic sense of care, it is still a step towards recognizing the health of other beings. I have a sense of responsibility with respect to this knowledge and I am more likely to use that knowledge more in line with my values as it not only represents a "know-how", but a "know-why" (Rowe, 1990, p.127) kind of knowing in that it is not a knowledge for knowledge's sake, but a knowledge embedded in a specific relationship and with a specific purpose bound up with ethical questions. Such an interaction, based on sharing is, for Brenda of the seeds focus group, not just about community building, but at its root is about healing, which you will recall from chapter 2, is intimately related to wholeness.

### **Relational integrated/living knowledge**

This discussion of sharing gets us closer to the present section's analysis, specifically in its relational aspect. In this section I would like to explore a yearning I heard throughout the focus groups, but one within which I feel there is some confusion. The general tension I perceived was located between desires for what I will call here hands-on learning as opposed to desires for more passive book/computer-based learning. Dwelling within this tension led me to surmise that perhaps hands-on learning was not necessarily what people were looking for, but that it was therein that they more often found what they might have actually been looking for. There were hints in their words that it may have been something more relational, and what I call here *integrated/living knowledge*. In addition, I came to this suspicion partly because I include myself among those who desired more hands-on forms of learning as a perceived path toward more effectively acting on my socio-ecological values, and relational or integrated/living knowledge gets me closer to what I think I was actually looking for.

In many of the focus group discussions, I heard not only a yearning for hands-on, rather than book/computer-based learning, but claims that the former was a superior way of learning to the latter. For example, in explaining why he was interested in coming to the workshop, Quinn said:

I was also intrigued by the learning— interactive hands-on learning as opposed to learning from a book or learning from a class. And actually learning while doing and seeing all the little bits because usually when we learn from a book there's all these things we miss out on and forget (Solar water).

Specifically this sense of missing out, or the feeling that something was missing when learning from books or computers was prevalent in many of the discussions. Let us listen to Ming express this. After a comment about there being better ways to communicate than through the written word, we hear the following:

*Ming:* For the past couple of years, I've been trying to teach myself how to bake a loaf of bread. I got this bread book and I kept reading it and I just felt like I couldn't begin, like I just can't do it by reading and then my Mom came to visit and I was just like Mom [laughing] can you just show me how to bake a loaf of bread? So she just walked me through and said "okay the dough's gonna feel like this at this point," so I push it and it was just so [*Quinn:* there's information there that was not on the page]. Right. I had to see it and I had to just have that interaction (solar water).

Similarly, in the fermentation focus group after a discussion about oral traditions and knowledge transmission, Ingrid explained how her sister had made fun of her for asking for one of their mother's recipes rather than looking it up on the internet. Ingrid, however, did not want to look up the recipe on the internet because she felt internet recipes were more homogenous than the original family recipe, and thus somehow not as "satisfying." Yolanda added that she felt technology negatively changes the way we humans relate to one another; that we lose something in this exchange (Fermentation).

Despite claims that we miss out on something through book/computer-based learning, I also heard opposing sentiments and strong reactions to them. In the fermenting discussion, Bea explained how one of her friends "just reads things in books

and therefore it must be true and that's the only way he likes to learn, like he's not very social" (Fermenting). She explained why her preference was otherwise, and many people animatedly jumped into the discussion in support of her, making it impossible to transcribe.

The tension around this issue also exploded in the Solar water focus group, where there was a major debate stretching over two full transcript pages, mostly between an elementary school teacher and a graduate student in education, about whether reading or the printed word constituted valuable forms of learning, or mere distractions. However, I am not willing to write off or completely ignore books/computers as effective ways of learning folk/self-sufficiency skills. Indeed, Gary Snyder, arguably a very hands-on learner and a thinker who is greatly respected, claims that today books are some of our best "teaching elders" (Snyder, 1990, p.66). Participants often seemed to be stuck on defending one extreme or the other. When I pressed a bit further to try and see if there was more to it than this strict dichotomy, as one might expect, yet others advocated for using a combination of means.

Patricia spoke of the back-and-forth interplay of learning by physically handling something and *then* working with that knowledge in a recorded or written form to help us internalize the meaning of that knowledge for us based on our own experience of it (Solar Water). Fiona also says of her workshop experience:

*Fiona:* like it was like talking with everyone and then we were sort of using the books to corroborate a little bit or recognizing that we didn't have all the knowledge, so I mean, yeah, I trust books obviously, I like books, but there's something nicer like when you have a human to talk it through with (Wild edibles).

I would suggest this combo-knowledge becomes an internalized part of us because we assimilate it using more facets of our human existence: the rational *and* sensuous, or emotional rather than just the rational. Also, as Bowers points out the type of interaction called forth by the printed word, whether on paper or a screen, serves to reinforce the appearance of being an *individual* thinker or observer (Bowers, 1997, p. 113). As such, it does not as readily speak to the important relational part of our experience to which Fiona refers, and about which I have been writing here.

The issue here does not seem to me to be only about these debates between hands-on/text-based learning, but perhaps about the type of knowledge that people seem to encounter more frequently in hands-on settings, but that also can exist in interaction with certain texts. I will call this knowledge that I claim can be found in all these circumstances “*relational integrated/living knowledge*.”

Soils workshop participants got at an important facet of relational integrated-living knowledge that has to do with knowledge that leads to connections with related knowledge. Brian shares:

I also like, this situation today [the workshop] was kind of vertically integrated in a sense that you have the soil workshop, there wasn't a classroom, and I know about EYA [Environmental Youth Alliance- workshop partner] but some people didn't. And I never knew about this site [community garden hosting space] so I've learned about this site and some aspects of their [EYA's] programming and so on and the soil bit and then this discussion about learning and so that's quite a big spectrum of stuff and that's kind of cool you cover so much territory and yet there's a thread that sort of ties it all together, and so I kind of like that, there's a narrative thread that kind of joins, and to the different people in the group (soils).

Brian, points to the complexity and dynamism of a “vertically integrated” knowledge that leads a learner to all sorts of related interests. He encountered this situation in a self-identified “hands-on” learning setting, but it seems that for Brian, what is important in this particular case is not so much knowledge of soils, nor that he learned something hands-on, but all the relationships around that knowledge and where they might take him.

What I think hands-on learning sets in motion more frequently and effectively than book/computer-based learning are relationships with knowledge that are more congruent with our lived human experience of it, because they engage more facets of our full human experience through interaction, invitation to dialogue, or physical/sensuous contact (with the land, for example).

Furthermore, relational integrated/living knowledge comes alive in relationships that change and grow, as does the knowledge. Iva gives a good example of how this

knowledge works when she quotes her Iroquois mentor with whom she worked in New York State, who suggests:

One of the best things to do for Iroquois communities to help them continue to get more healthy and vibrant is if everyone learned how to make traditional corn bread...his point was that we all need to go back to these really basic traditional skills because there's so much knowledge packed in them on so many levels and layers if you know how to make cornbread then you got a lot going on there that you know how to do. Just keeping all the varieties of corn and everything...it's such a beautiful example of that combination of human interaction with a plant, the corn plant (Seeds).

Iva's example is interesting to me in that she begins to uncover layers of relationships between knowledge, skills, and people. Iva's comment arose in answer to why she is interested in saving seeds, and so I assume here that she means to make a link that learning to make cornbread in the traditional manner entails learning to save corn seed. If this is so, then she recognizes that when she learns to save seeds, she learns much more than just the hands-on skill of saving seeds from one or two vegetable varieties. As with the Iroquois, learning to make corn bread, that seed saving knowledge lives also in the knowledge of how to grow and tend several varieties of corn. In my experience, that knowledge of growing and tending corn lives interlaced with knowledge of land and climate necessary to grow the corn. It also lives in relations with community members who teach a person how to make cornbread, and I presume, in knowledge of fire-building, and then perhaps in the kinds of woods best suited to cooking fires, and thus back around to a new family of plants and skills, and so on.

Granted, learning to make cornbread or save seeds does not have to be this complex. However, if one is learning how to make cornbread in one's place, with one's community, and with attentiveness to all the steps of truly making it "from scratch," drawing on the unique features of a place, then this knowledge requires, and leads into, new knowledge that is always connected with other knowledge. The connections extend further into plant, animal and human communities based in one's place. Whereas, if one is learning how to make cornbread from a book or the internet, that may or may not lead to more living knowledge of making corn bread. I suspect knowledge in this latter case can similarly "live" if a person is curious and motivated, or if the book/internet site invites

the learner to explore how one might trace the steps back to milling one's own corn flour, or even growing corn for milling. This seems rare, however, and still does not supply a supportive network of relationships that might encourage a person to actually accept such an invitation or follow such curiosity.

The supportive networks piece is significant here. Nate corroborates my view and adds the importance of a relational or affective element to human experience and thus to how we learn. He invokes psychologist and cognitive neuro-scientist Merlin Donald, saying:

our minds are connected with language and with ideas that we couldn't really put together on our own, but we're able to put ourselves in the place of another person and that bootstraps or accelerates our learning into way more complex relational kinds of things that are a combination of concrete physical and feeling, but also abstractions... but that's what's so cool about this kind of thing ["hands-on" workshop], and that's why I think doing this kind of thing with people, I mean we're looking at each other, you know, I see you taste this, you know \* or you hand me something or I look at other people sharing and that's just a very rich kind of information that must push some kinds of buttons inside our brains or other parts that get us going, kind of thing.\* So that's very verbal and cerebral to read it or to be told or shown, but to be here exploring it together involves much more of the mind-body complex, both in an individual and a collective mind-body complex sort of way and that's why I absorb it more \* (Wild Edibles).

Involving the physical, affective, and rational in learning represents much more effectively the whole human being, in all its dynamism. Such knowledge cannot be contained or predicted and it would seem our brains have evolved to deal with this kind of complexity, according to Nate's interpretation of Merlin Donald.

This is only a sketch of relational integrated/living knowledge, but this conception of knowledge is central to addressing my research question, and specifically how we might need to re-conceive of our relationship to knowledge so that we begin to actually *live* our knowledge to better act on our socio-ecological values and live better in place.

But how can one *live* one's integrated/living knowledge? If knowledge were living, would not it already do the living for you? I would answer negatively to the latter question. The former question is a bit trickier and addressing it briefly may help us answer the second question more amply.

Again, using the words of participants, I would start trying to answer the first question with how Dana sets up her desire of how to live in a big city: "I really want to learn how to bring the natural cycles of life into an urban environment, whether that's community or food and culture and all of the ways that you might mean that" (Cheese). These natural cycles are always present, so it is not so much about bringing them into our lives, but awakening to the fact that they are our lives. When we do this, and try to truly follow natural cycles mindfully or in a meaningful way, we are trying to live knowledge. Living according to a seed-plant-flower-seed cycle necessarily leads us to explore other cycles because it spontaneously invites us into dialogue with it in a context. Our interaction with a dynamic cycle in context asks questions of us, such as "what does this seed need to grow well here?" and "what does this plant need to produce viable seed here?" thus setting interesting problems for us, and drawing us into a living relationship with knowledge in place. But it is more than this too.

I think Carl hints at a crucial element of how to live knowledge:

when we don't know the land and trust that it's abundant we kind of have this "I'll protect myself, I'll take care of my own only" and kind of whereas if we understand the land and if we take care of it, we understand that it's abundant and I think that comes to play in all of it [food production] too in terms of how we rely on one another and how we participate in it (seeds).

What I see Carl hinting at are the ways in which understanding land, and that it is still abundant requires that we care for it, which leads to also recognizing that we must rely on others to truly care for the land, and that we thus need to care for others too. Whether Carl means humans and more-than-human others, I am not sure, but I would argue we do need to rely on human and more-than-human others, rather than compete with them, to truly live our knowledge because it is in our interactions with these others that knowledge gains its living quality. To live our knowledge happens in part through caring for land, which is also caring for other beings. In truly caring for the land we take

responsibility for it, and for ensuring we responsibly live our knowledge in the land, as in the discussion about sharing and taking responsibility for the well-being of others with whom we share.

For example, Thea, from the Wild Edibles group in a discussion about ethics in harvesting wild plants expressed a contrast between much learning now versus:

how people used to learn, but not just that people used to learn from each other, but that the things that they learned were not so abstract as the things we learn today, like they were really based on what there was. So when we talked about like, living gently on the land and or teamwork or things like that, they weren't just metaphors it was literally like, you had to do those things \* or you couldn't live \* and now we can say it sort of metaphorically because, well I can also, like, piss on everything and it's fine, like it's not gonna affect the environment... I think you know if we were having the same thing [learning about edible plants] and you, my parents or my siblings, or my community teaching me this 200 years ago or 500 years ago, you would've been explaining to me that we don't just pull everything up \* and you would've explained to me how and why and it all woulda made perfect sense \* it wouldn'tve just been like, "because I say so", but there would have been a reason based in nature why we do what we do (wild edibles).

"What there was" were relationships! Relational integrated/living knowledge is knowledge that is often linked directly into how we provide for our own existence, often serves to bring us directly into contact with our places (thus often appearing hands-on), and often brings to mind our dependence on those places and the beings therein such that we live better with one another and encourage mutual human and non-human flourishing.

### **Historical medium: relationship with the past**

In this study, comments on an educational medium or ethos that supports learning to act on socio-ecological values and live better in place often went hand in hand with comments on a supportive historical relationship to the same end; namely, the

importance of intergenerational learning and connecting to ancient traditions. Many of the above examples of sharing folk/self-sufficiency skills and keeping such knowledge living referred to examples set by elders and traditions: books as teaching elders, Iroquois elders, 500 year-old communities, 99% of human history, and so on. For many participants, living well socio-ecologically speaking, it seemed, would be made easier and more comfortable if one could be immersed in the pool of tradition or at least connected to it through living elders. In the absence of such an opportunity, people seemed to find some small glimmer of reconnecting to a tradition of sorts in seeking out folk/self-sufficiency skills.

The general feeling among many participants seemed to be that learning in intergenerational settings and connecting to ancient traditions through knowledge-sharing, story telling or other oral and/or hands-on traditions was always “just the way it’s been” for humans until relatively recently in our history.

*Kate:* that’s been the system for you know since time began, people verbally sharing knowledge and telling stories and that kind of thing and that’s how knowledge is passed on (wild edibles).

*Ming:* I just think that’s how people WERE learning more in these types of settings, hundreds or thousands of years ago, but, you know since governments started enforcing these standardized schooling systems, that’s all we know and most of what our parents have known (Solar Water).

“The system” in Kate’s words and “these types of settings” in Ming’s words both refer to the preceding transcript conversations about older, intergenerational, experiential, hands-on, collaborative learning, which was always spoken of in a positive light and in contrast to modern modes of educating. These older traditions were also identified as existing on the far side of a divide in which, unfortunately, most of our living elders also exist, rather than form a bridge across it, as Ming’s final phrase suggests. Having lost that connection to tradition, and since the common perception is that living within tradition was always “just the way it’s been,” the upshot is that we are now in a position of needing the reclaim these links or “fill the void.”

*Tracy:* We don’t have that oral tradition anymore, this [workshop] is a way of filling in that void of that you know, oral tradition of how things are

passed down @, that people have done for thousands of years, you know without having any special expertise...I don't have an oral tradition from my ancestors (Fermenting).

Whether these depictions are historically accurate or not, they were interesting to me, and I think very relevant, in that they were seemingly powerful narratives that motivated participants to seek out these folk skills. Elza from the fermenting group expressed an "attraction to the ancient" and saw a direction in old folkways for living better in place. Often these narratives were tinged with nostalgia, loss, and perhaps a sort of loneliness for both young and old, as Noeleen and Mary express in their conversation:

*Noeleen:* But I think we need more multi-generational...I come from a small town.

We HAD a community and it was a conscious effort to create one and we had created change in our own little way, small change...when you have multiple generations, something happens,\*\*\* you know from both ends, the older take from the younger, the younger take too...

*Mary:*...As I'm painting [games onto a neighbourhood picnic table] the kids are all coming and talking to me. You know they just wanna sit and talk\*\* and nobody sits and listens to them and you know they wanna know what you know too (Soils).

Hearing these sentiments expressed led me to ask what is attractive about reclaiming tradition. Tracy from the fermenting discussion expressed that the thought of being a part of such a tradition despite having "missed out" in a family context would be "comforting" and "nurturing" "from a spiritual point of view." I think there is a need for clarification at this point. I am fairly certain that participants were not idealizing ancient traditions as inherently more sustainable. We have plenty of examples where that is not the case: the Roman Empire or potentially the ancient Mayans and other peoples who, to the best of our knowledge, may have exceeded their place's carrying capacity.

Rather, it seems to me that the more acute feeling among participants was this sense of "historical" loneliness, if one could call it that. I would describe the feeling as a sense of separation from, or maybe even abandonment by, one's ancestors with no

obvious way to reconnect to them. Listening to participants, I felt they were expressing being lost in time in a certain way; afloat in the open present with no ancestral grounding. Perhaps this grounding in the past served to help limit a dauntingly limitless sense of possibility, the modern symptoms of which might arguably be seen in an increasingly “boundary-less” global economy, and a sense of infinite resources.

These examples indicate that most participants feel a shift for the worse has occurred in educational systems that pulled us and our parents away from a sort of connection-by-birthright to ancient traditions and intergenerational relationships perceived as generally warm, comforting, supportive, and in many ways necessary to flourishing as a whole human. The fact that education has become an institution at all might be part of the problem. Perhaps, as Illich has suggested (1973), this is because institutions such as the school actually usurp our opportunities to actively do the work of caring for, and teaching one another. We no longer tend to one another’s physical, intellectual, spiritual, or emotional health in the same ways we may have before. Rather we farm those acts out to the health care institutions, educational institutions, religious institutions, and counselling professions, respectively.

Educationally speaking, where learning in a family, mentor/tutor or apprenticeship-type relationship may have at one time been the general rule, we now have, as Nate expresses,

this conception that’s, uh, terrifying in a way, of uh schools as being this incredibly rarefied environment. You know we’re in a room with concrete walls, often all the colours are very similar unless the teacher spends a lot of his or her own money to decorate the walls and they’re briefly interspersed with periods of urgency, hurry and/or terror (Wild Edibles).

Modern learning can be lonely and scary for many. On the other hand, school can also be a haven for children with abusive home situations. In either case, however, School does not necessarily intimately connect us with a supportive historical medium or tradition.

This longing for an intergenerational link to ancient traditions suggests to me that sharing knowledge and telling stories in intimate settings between generations is

important, not just for adaptation's sake as I discussed above, but because it is a part of what being a whole and flourishing human actually means.

Bringing this conversation back to why connecting to tradition and ancestors is important for helping people act on their socio-ecological values and live better in place, I would suggest based on participants' stories that it has something to do with a sense of mystery and imparting a love of, and respect for, miraculous processes linked to nature. When I asked how participants became interested in seed saving, two of them replied that adult mentors (father, and mother, in these cases) had introduced them to the mysteries of plants, growing, and thinking wholistically and they were both fascinated from a young age by "how it worked" (Seed Saving). One of these folks went on to mention her elder Iroquois mentor (same as above) as a significant influence in her adult life for a similar reason.

For young people, I think it is awe-inducing to hear someone with lots of experience and age say they don't know something and that lack of knowledge is beautiful, wonderful and even important for living well with the world, as opposed to a sign of failure. An entry in my field journal relates my own thoughts on my "attraction to the ancient" and the part played by an intergenerational learning setting in that attraction. I know in my own life that I have ascribed a lasting importance to some things elders in my life expressed was beyond their comprehension (the workings of nature, questions of human existence). Even without knowing why—with no logical or rational reason whatsoever to do so— I always held those things as important to remember, think about, and be in awe of. As it turns out, I would come to devote much of my time and thought to some of those things through intellectual and personal pursuits.

Learning folk/self-sufficiency skills is one manifestation of having those interests that I now recognize as a pattern in my life. In elementary school, I was captivated by attending historical re-enactments and historical sites with my father, where actors "lived" seemingly closer to natural cycles and rhythms and practiced folkways that were mysterious to me: Fire making with bow and drill, churning butter, tending crops. In high school, I was enthralled when one of the teachers I most respected brought minimalist survival skills teachers to our outdoors club. I organized a self-directed course in minimalist survival skills. As a university student, that interest has played out on a larger scale as I have systematically sought out folk/self-sufficiency skills and those who teach them in my own adult life. I too have lost all direct connection to my ancestry and any

traditions of which I may have been a part. I feel sadness and maybe even resentment at not having that privilege, but I feel excitement in the face of being “let into” the traditions of others close to me and seeking out a wiser way of life.

Human flourishing is a thread that has run through all of these themes and it made a strong appearance in this final theme as well. It fascinated me that such a strong nostalgia existed for meaningful and enduring relationships with our lost traditions and elders. I was even more intrigued when I saw the Canadian OED’s third definition of Nostalgia: 3. severe homesickness [modern Latin, from Greek *nostos* ‘return home’]. It made me think again that as place-based educators, we need an expanded definition of place and home and what living well there might mean. Home is not just physical. A deep yearning and nostalgia for tradition, ancestry and living links thereto suggests that tradition and ancestors are also place and home. Caring for place might mean caring for ancestors and traditions; keeping them alive as we might strive to keep an ecosystem alive as part of what makes us whole and helps us flourish.

### **Summary— fermenting the Free Folk School: tending a culture of place-based values-integrated ecological learning/living.**

In this attempt to answer my research question, I am at a loss in many ways for how exactly to summarize each of the themes I have just examined and to qualify how effective learning folk/self-sufficiency skills in a place-based setting is in helping people act on their socio-ecological values and reconnect to their place. In the ways I have described above, learning folk/self-sufficiency skills can certainly be perceived as helpful in some ways to some people, yet the particular way in which I approached this project suffered from some important gaps. In attempting to summarize the conditions under which folk/self-sufficiency skills might be most effectively employed to answer my research question, I have imagined it as a process analogous to that of fermentation, as it is rich in imagery and metaphor around creating and tending new cultures.

The process of fermentation using lactobacilli, yeasts, and combinations thereof means taking food (or in the case of compost, food scraps and other organic materials) and creating conditions therein that nurture the growth of these bacteria or yeasts, which work to cause a radical transformation in the food or the compost. The result of this process is a whole greater than the sum of its parts. Sauerkraut is not just cabbage and salt, but becomes a complex of healthy bacterial flora, enzymes and vitamins (Fallon,

2001). Compost is not just piles of vegetable peels and plant stalks, but is rather a living entity full of millions of microscopic soil animals and fungi that make up a healthy soil. In the case of food, this transformation aids in preservation. In the case of both compost and food, this transformation adds nutrient creation and helps the body/earth receiving the food/compost to assimilate these nutrients, through enzymatic action or mycorrhizal association, respectively (Fallon, 2001; Howard, 2006).

First, fermenting itself has historically been a place-based practice. Very different healthy milk cultures and uses thereof, for example originated in different parts of the world based on the unique constraints and attributes of each place (Bulgarian yogurt versus the Finnish Piima, versus the Russian Kefir, for example); different strains of wild yeasts exist in Egypt and Canada, thus giving the “living” quality to an endless variety of sourdough-type breads; different soils, compost regimes, grapes, and yeasts create different wines from different geographical regions as the concept of “terroir” suggests. All these fermenting traditions and their diversity arise from the uniqueness of a particular place and allow for a great deal of variety and flexibility based on cultural and regional differences.

Similarly, useful and life-giving folk skills often arise out of the unique factors of a given place. For example, the burning of whale grease lamps in the arctic versus the practice of making cedar hats on the North American west coast, versus the saving of squash, bean, and corn seed in Central America, none of which would have arisen in any of these places, but where they did. The general skills, however (burning fat, weaving with plant materials, saving seeds) allow for a great deal of flexibility to fit cultural and regional differences.

This is not to suggest that fermenting different milk cultures or practicing folk skills only work well or at all their places of origin. I enjoy kefir and viili (a milk culture of Scandinavian origin), as well as saving bean seeds, and making solar water heaters in Vancouver. Rather, the important point is that for useful (life-giving, democratic/accessible, durable) folk skills to arise at all it seems a strong culture based in place is a precondition—I would be curious to see what skills or “local” food cultures (do we have any?) of our hypermobile American society last for thousands of years and remain useful.

The other point is that these skills be flexible enough in form to allow for adaptation to circumstances that share some fundamental similarities (perhaps climate,

for example), yet wish to maintain some important differences (perhaps culturally speaking). This flexibility or adaptation, among other benefits, provides incredible diversity, which, as ecological principles suggest, keeps a culture resilient in the face of challenge and change.

The importance of diversity in place-based cultures leads to the second way in which fermenting metaphors can help us learn how we might most effectively apply folk skills to answer my research question. Culturing through fermentation creates a mini-ecosystem full of micro-bio-diversity, and as such, provides better resistance to invading putrefying bacteria and resilience in the face of challenge or change (Fallon, 2001). Learning about the benefits of this diversity may be a link to helping us conceive of diversity in general as healthy for resistance to or resilience in the face of the putrefying forces in our lives. The monocultural industrial mind, for one, tends to exert a narrowing influence on our vision, leading us to believe that there are only certain ways of living (owning a car, house, many consumer goods etc.). In fact, there is a variety of ways of not only surviving, but of flourishing. I imagine it would do us a great deal of good to appreciate the diversity that is offered by human cultures who have been perceived as backwards, un(der)developed, savage or dirty for much of modern history. Indeed folk skills that employ more ecologically appropriate technologies and scales of use thrive with many of these peoples, and in turn have historically allowed these people to thrive in conjunction with their supporting ecosystems.

Thirdly, speaking of the need for a strong culture in modern North America, leads to the question of how to create or tend that culture. As far as creating that culture goes, I am wary of suggesting any consistently workable method given the obvious complexity of the process. I suspect, as with fermented cultures, it is a relatively slow process of letting the diversity of living elements in a place mingle, merge and begin to shape and change one another to the extent that they become a new living entity, greater than the sum of its parts.

To the question of how to tend that culture well (let us say a culture of place-based values-action integration, part of which involves the learning and practice of folk skills), on the other hand, fermenting or culturing, as a metaphor points to certain conditions that might help that process along. The most important factor in my mind is the provision of a suitable medium for culturing.

Thinking of the importance of the medium, I remembered also that Horton invoked a similar image when reflecting on the challenge of deciding to make Highlander folk school a small initiative, but wanting it to transform much larger social structures: “it’s a matter of having a concept of education that is yeasty, one that will multiply itself” (Horton, 1990, p.57). For Horton, having a yeasty concept of education meant focusing less on content, somewhat on methods of learning, and mostly on fostering a suitable medium for transformational learning to occur. Recall the earlier quotation in Chapter 2: “I can’t sleep, but there are dreams...The situation is there. You start with this and let it grow” (Horton, 1990, p. 55).

As I was writing this section, I also came across a passage from Gary Snyder that captures the transfer of the metaphor from the fermenting realm to the human realm:

In the spiritual and political loneliness of American of the fifties you’d hitch a thousand miles to meet a friend. Whatever lives needs a habitat, a culture of warmth and moisture to grow (Snyder, 1995, p. 3).

Snyder’s habitat in those days was North Beach, San Francisco, where a sort of starter culture for what was to be named the beat generation emerged. By Snyder’s account, the starter culture provided a creative and living critique of the deadening institutionalization of poetry, freedom, expression and imagination in the academy (Snyder, 1995). What might a culture or medium of warmth and moisture mean in the realm of learning and living by folk skills? How might we conceive of it? I can offer two illustrations that help me in this exercise.

Imagine yourself as a lone bacterium trying to keep yourself alive in a cold and lonely cesspool, let alone trying to multiply or form a culture in that medium. For many of the participants, keeping their fermenting interest alive is a lonely and difficult task in the world of microwaves, fast food, and chemically produced food “products.” In the fermenting workshop Laura described her realization that one person cannot make their own bread, cheese, sauerkraut and have a job and other responsibilities. It is too much work for one person. It would be difficult and time consuming, but a group of friends could get organized to specialize in what they ferment and share with one another, which Laura describes as “making a culture based on different cultures.”

Indeed, Bea, Dana, others and I do just this: participate in monthly gatherings to exchange fermented food “experiments” with one another. If you’ll allow me to

momentarily to set the scene, you may better imagine yourself as a happy and motivated bacterium among other supportive bacteria, mingling together to create a warm, supportive cultural medium in which you can thrive in your attempts to internalize and reproduce this particular set of folk skills.

When the fermenters gather it always feels to me more like a meeting of the wizards and wizardesses society of Vancouver (a little bit of magic wouldn't hurt in keeping a culture living, I imagine!). We all pile into a generally small and warmly lit space. One by one, the wizards and wizardesses pull mysterious bottles, olden-day crocks, crusty loaves of bread wrapped in cloth, and hunks of crumbling cheese out of their satchels. The bottles generally fizz, pop, or let out a slow and curling wisp of something not quite smoky or steamy, but like the vapour that comes off dry ice. The crocks are generally bubbling, often audibly, the bread looks earthy and health-giving in a most robust sense, and the cheeses' fragrances are deeply textured. It is a sensuous experience just to be in the room with the food, let alone to share the food with everybody. The mystery of each bottle and package raises excitement in all attending. The evening feels warmer and more moist as we go along, due in part to all these bodies emitting BTUs in an enclosed area, but probably also due in part to the homemade wild fermented cider, medicinal beer, and fruit wines, and definitely due in part to the wonderful feeling generated by sharing and trading food, and swapping recipes, stories, politics, fermenting mishaps, and laughter. It feels like one might imagine the middle of a compost pile feels like to a strand of mycorrhizal fungus. The group encourages experimentation, collaboration, and joyous celebration of people, food and life. These are always gatherings that for me can be best described as mutually encouraging of growth (in more than one way!), warm, and quasi-magical, just what you might hope for in a supportive medium.

For me the "warmth" also conjures up images of making positive change in a "slow burn" or "hot coals" kind of way, a way that is sustainable in the long run because it does not feel like one will burn out in an intensely hot and fiery effort. In the realm of social change, fire is the revolutionary moment of upheaval; romantic and longed for, or dreaded and guarded against, depending on your perspective. Fire spreads, destroying whatever lies in its path, and its path is unpredictable. [Food] Fermentation is not so dramatic. It bubbles rather than burns, and its transformative mode is gentle and slow.

Steady, too. Fermentation is a force that cannot be stopped. It recycles life, renews hope, and goes on and on (Katz, 2003, p. 166).

Revolution can be violent, alienating and all consuming in its intention to multiply a transformation. Fermentation, on the other hand, is a more humble, everyday process. Learning a folk skill such as fermentation gives a particular kind of slow burning or warm joy to making change in one's life: discovering with good people the excitement of good food that is good for the earth and our bodies. People can feel a sense of joy, nourishment (physical, spiritual, and otherwise) and companionship in their efforts to live better in their place and according to their values.

Another important insight that I re-learned from both the focus group discussions and my own process of trying to “put theory into action” through this research is that it's much more difficult to attempt such a transformation alone than it is with a supportive culture—it dries a person out. I tended to be anxious and stressed when organizing these workshops alone and often felt suffocated by thoughts of whether people would enjoy them, think they were relevant, take the skills back into their lives and use them etc. During the workshops, surrounding by keen people, those worries dissolved fairly quickly. Even the support of one person who later comes on board to help organize workshops helped relieve the feeling of suffocation. When a third person joined the organizational brew, it began to feel like an even healthier medium.

Fourthly, fermentation does not have to be complicated and nor does sharing skills and tending an alternative culture. Fermentation is indeed complex in its living, biological processes, but those complexities are largely hidden from the view of the fermenter. The simplicity of practically carrying out fermenting is within easy reach of almost anybody. It is accessible and simple. It is also relatively easy to share skills across generations etc. even though they are complex in that they are living and generally part of a culture etc.

As a folk skill, in my mind there is a certain poetry to the everydayness of fermentation; an incredible complexity of biological processes and results are at work in a fermented food or compost pile, yet it remains incredibly simple and limited in form and ultimately, in its practice. Similarly, in my mind, there is also a certain poetry to the everydayness of folk/self-sufficiency skills in that they impose certain limits (important limits, I would argue) based on their scale of application, but can achieve incredibly complex and culturally diverse results when practiced in different places. This is an

important factor if folk/self sufficiency skills are to be effective in bridging our values and actions. They must be democratic in that they are relatively accessible and easy to use, but they must also be part of, and help achieve, incredibly complex outcomes.

I am beginning to think that fermenting is a helpful and accessible practice for getting urban-based people in particular to seek out the wild places in the urban. For urban folks who may not have easy access to a piece of land where they can more readily observe the mysterious processes of life, fermenting becomes a way to “engage and honor [sic] the life forces all around you” (Katz, 2003, p. 27). It becomes a way to enter into relational living/integrated knowledge.

During the Cheese making discussion the most riotous laughter was elicited by Dana commenting on a phrase she came across while researching fermenting foods: “Don’t disparage bacteria; it’s the only culture some of us have.” I think the significance of the strong response to her comment is that for most of us present, there was a deep truth to it. The phrase also suggests a deep longing for a strong culture. That comment and the general reaction to it propelled me to think about fermenting and folk skills in general as something we do have within easy reach to help us build a culture where we can reconnect to our values and place through action. Here we have a group of people, perhaps feeling alienated, distanced, deskilled, or alone in their attempts at doing so, looking for a way to create culture, even if only superficially at first. Fermenting might be the only “culture” for someone alienated from his or her ancestry or who wishes to distance themselves from North American “culture.” Many of the participants in the fermenting workshops recognized the fermenting process as an exciting and accessible analogue of how they were trying to make positive change in the world. Indeed Elza of the fermentation discussion, an organic farmer for 12 years, cited compost as her greatest teacher in living well with the land.

Finally, many people fear fermented foods or compost because they perceive them to be “rotting”, dirty/gross, or frighteningly mysterious. That life humbly and miraculously grows out of rot and decay is one of the basic principles underlying life on earth (Howard, 2006). It would do us well to accept and embrace this fact. Ironically, for those who fear rot and decay, they often fear the wrong things. Fermentation offers an example of something that as a whole food is teeming with healthy life, as opposed to industrially produced foods, which are essentially dead and/or sterile, though they are marketed to us as healthy conglomerations of nutrients.

Similarly our industrial and economic monoculture is also arguably dying slowly as a whole, whereas there is a vibrant folk culture of diversity alive and well on the margins of society. This marginal culture is healthy and nothing to fear, though the same mindframe that fears fermented foods and decay also fears the threat of a diversity of marginal cultures. Like fermented foods, we represent a small share of what is on the plate and we are easily brushed aside by the industrial machine as inconsequential, but I see one of our greatest opportunities to thrive on the margins and ultimately safeguard the processes that link us to the land and one another. A time will come, if it has not already, when we will be forced to realize the need for such links, or cease to flourish.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION—PLACE-WAYFINDING

### Wandering towards future research possibilities

This journey has led me to many unexplored research possibilities. As indicated briefly in Chapter 3, one of the most interesting possibilities for future research has a methodological focus. I would be interested in a project that develops what a methodology of listening to and learning from place might look like. Chris Beeman's (2006) doctoral dissertation is an exciting step down this path. An appendage to this project might be developing a methodology that balances rationality with emotional intelligence. Beyond just methodology, another research path of great interest to me is in trying to immerse oneself as a researcher in actually learning to live well in-community-in-place in the fullest sense possible: living, working, and caring in place side by side with one's supervisor, and committee and colleagues if possible. That is, together engaging in the project of living well with the land and one's values while studying this process from many different angles and interests. This would provide ample opportunity for eco-philosophical ideas to be tested against complex realities and allow place and community to shape them, perhaps with more nuance. The research might be about *the practice* of "building dwelling thinking" (Heidegger, 1993), to examine how we might build or produce (cultivate and construct, in Heidegger's terms), in such a way that we practice dwelling as a key part of what it means to *be* more fully human. For Heidegger, this means remaining in place, safeguarded and safeguarding in peace so that all beings and things may be freed into their own essence. It would be trying to live with humans in such a way that both humans and more-than-human beings are allowed to flourish to their maximum potential, with all the inconveniences and joys attendant in that experience. The idea would be to start with a "starter culture" already in place and see what it might ferment.

Other possibilities that others suggested to me, which might be interesting, in the "variations on a theme" sense include doing a comparative research project where on frames Folk skills as both "folk" in one instance and "science" in another, to attract the "converted" and the "non-converted" and talk with them about relationship with place and

values. The other suggestion was to do another comparative project, but in a community setting and in a more formal University setting in an attempt to wedge open the traditional structure of the institution and allow for such marginal incursions to make their mark. If anyone were to embark on these wanderings, my research project might hopefully yield some useful things to take on the journey. With this hope in mind, I offer the following concluding notes.

## **Raiding the pantry, building the root cellar**

The conclusion title “place-wayfinding” may seem ironic, as the implication often associated with place-based projects is that one remains, rather than wanders. For better or worse, this project has been a wandering in search of place. I think that given our ultra-mobile culture, remaining in place will be difficult for many of us. As I agonized over whether I could legitimately claim to practice or promote place-based education without first being rooted myself in a place, a few conversations led to the idea of thinking of place-based education as a portable toolkit. To align myself better with the fermentation metaphor, I might alter that image slightly to evoke place-based education as a pantry, from which we can gather provisions for the wandering, and ingredients to keep all our ferments bubbling as we go and wherever we go. The idea is that, given our current state of mobility, this pantry must remain somewhat portable for now and applicable wherever one happens to find oneself. One can bring the necessary ingredients for starting to tend an alternative culture, or to trade starter cultures with those already living in a place and who have cultures of their own, and this is a good start. The ultimate long-range goal of these ingredients, however, is that through the delicious cultures they create, they will woo the wandering pantry raider to reroot: literally, to trade in the portable pantry for the longer-term commitment of a root cellar.

Thinking of place-based education in this way was very fascinating to me, as a person with a deep interest in place-based skills, and a desire to be placed, but who is still somewhat mobile. It is also to some extent, a practical implication that falls out of the work of this project. Some of the themes from Chapters 2 and 4 might illuminate some of the pantry ingredients necessary for ferment so delicious, that one might want to create a root cellar that can safeguard all the ingredients in one place for years to come.

## **Where have we come from?**

From the initial awkward meeting of some place-engaged Vancouverites to the Free Folk School, to Fermenting as a metaphor for tending alternative cultures, this project has rumbled along with one main underlying aim: trying to help people put socio-ecological theory and values into practice. The next layer of work involved trying to reconnect with place through this practice. The manner of putting theory and values into practice in order to reconnect with place took the form of sharing folk/self-sufficiency skills with an emphasis on their relevance to place. Through this process, I tried to ask what were some of the salient features of learning these skills that might help all of us mend our relationship with our values such that we act on them in order to live better in our place?

## **Where have we arrived?**

We have not. We have always been here. I cannot say we generated any coherent theory of learning folk/self-sufficiency skills to live better in place. It is what it is, and always has been: what Gary Snyder might describe as a sort of consciousness that has always sprung up in different forms throughout human history that starts with its feet on the ground and works itself into place (1995, pp. 43-45). The salient features of learning these skills, as they appeared in Chapter 4, might be conceived of as the pantry staples. For example, one might take along a few of the relatively ordinary, unalienating tasks that allow us to work together, provide for our own existence, and directly enjoy what we create from our labour. These might give our ferment a delectable foundation based on the tasty privilege of freely expressing our species-being; perhaps some small-scale gardening, some bread making, or some home birthing would do the trick. Perhaps we might put in our satchel some of the less “hard” or “technical” skills that help make reskilling for life-affirming: perhaps some troubleshooting skills, some creativity, some conflict resolution, and some community-building skills might do to give us some sweet and salty flavours to bring out the full flavour of the endeavouring to learn “hard” skills. I might also add a small, spicy packet of ideas around communal-self-sufficiency, just “enough” to remind me of what “sufficiency” could really mean, and also just enough to take away the sometimes unpleasant bitter or sour taste associated with trying to hold onto notions of self that do not allow us to depend on near and cared-for others. We should not forget to add an element of mutual sharing of knowledge so that we may help

one another figure out how to make positive change in our situations. To ensure this exchange, we should include a recipe or two to pass on to others in exchange for their recipes. We might sprinkle in a healthy dose of setting up situations where we can interact with relational/integrated. For example, maybe some learn not just about wheat, but also with wheat. We can grow it and it can show us the plant, animal, and climatic communities with which it regularly interacts. We can harvest it together, process it together, bake with it, compost or build with its straw, tell stories and sing songs about it, and generally live our integrated knowledge of wheat to better engage a fuller spectrum of our senses in the tending of our ferment. Finally, I would take from the pantry an effort to reconnect with historical tradition through reclaiming traditions and ancestry, or learning intergenerationally. Swapping stories or skills between an elder and youth, trying to learn about family recipes or food skills that have arisen out of the long history of the place where you live, making sure we appoint people to carry forth important traditions, caring for aging generations, trying to act with the health of future generations in mind, and generally existing in a medium that brings together past, present, and future relationships might help create a rich and nourishing broth for a good ferment.

In line with the literature in Chapter 2, I wanted my list of pantry staples to arise out of the needs of the place; of cranky Vancouver and its culverted salmon streams, its downtown “creek beds stood on end,” its average annual rainfall, its necessary bioregion, its potholed asphalt, its soil organisms, its extremes of poverty and wealth, its cherry blossom springs, and even its itinerant population. The idea was to ask, “what is here?” and “what is needed here?” (Gruenewald, 2003b, p.11). The billions of possible answers to these questions form the key ingredient in the ferment: the wild yeasts unique to each particular place. With some luck, skill, and hard work, we can combine our pantry ingredients wherever we are, and hope that the wild yeasts from that particular place join the mix to ferment a delicious and healthy brew that will inspire us to set up a permanent root cellar.

## **Where are we going?**

*“Knowing that nothing need be done is the place from which we begin to move”*  
(Snyder, 1995, p. 45).

*“Building in the sense of preserving and nurturing is not making anything”*  
(Heidegger, 1993, p. 349).

If we have always been here, then we have nowhere to go but here and nothing to do. Through the insights I have gleaned from this project, I understand Snyder and Heidegger's paradoxical words and the epigraph to this thesis to mean that the most radical transformation is to work with the basics: the ordinary skills and relationships that help us provide directly for our own and our community's existence. All the salient features identified in Chapter 4 point us in the direction of trying to be human in the simplest way we can. Lao-Tzu says:

You can know all beneath heaven/ though you never step out the door, /  
and you can see the Way of heaven/ though you never look out the  
window. / The further you explore, the less you know. / So it is that a sage  
knows by going nowhere, / names by seeing nothing, / perfects by doing  
nothing (2000, p. 56).

I think this passage from Lao-Tzu, with its echo in the epigraph, reflect the main ideas gleaned through this thesis. Our society seems intent on solving socio-ecological crisis either by expensive institutional or technological means. These are generally projects with a very large scope and scale, which often herald grand new ideas. This thesis, in contrast (or in complement?), emphasizes the potential of small scale, simple, and ancient acts and ideas for trying to deal with socio-ecological crisis. Simple acts like, first of all, getting out of the house. Next, meeting our neighbours. Then, doing something fun together. Possibly after that, working together to improve our neighbourhood or to change how we live a little bit. If we are lucky, maybe we will think to learn a bit about ourselves along the way, and how to line up our actions with our values.

These steps may seem obvious to some (and they are), but to many, especially in urban areas it seems, we do not interact in this way. We handpick our friends, who often live across town, not beside us. We stick to our daily and well-trodden paths to work or friends' places or stores, without lingering or diverging to explore bits of our place (unless, maybe we are out walking the kids or the dog, but even then, it is generally the kids or the dog who want to linger and explore). Many of us do not give ourselves adequate time to reflect on what our values mean for how we should live. I was amazed by how many participants expressed such a sense of joy and even relief at having a chance to meet neighbours with similar interests, reflect on their values through

focus groups, and engage in some simple skills that they could use to change how they act in their daily lives should they choose to.

Through this work, I have come around to the idea that we have always known all we need to know to live well in place. I increasingly see that this knowledge lives within us and between us and our mindful interactions with our place, our folk traditions and histories, our values, us, and others: in relationships at home. The more we try to find it as a society in the dominant education system, in microscopes, in outer space, or elsewhere, the more we stray from all we need to know to live with integrity in place.

## **APPENDICES**

## Appendix 1

### SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

#### Form 2- Informed Consent By Participants In a Research Study

The University and those conducting this research study subscribe to the ethical conduct of research and to the protection at all times of the interests, comfort, and safety of participants. This research is being conducted under permission of the Simon Fraser Research Ethics Board. The chief concern of the Board is for the health, safety and psychological well-being of research participants.

Should you wish to obtain information about your rights as a participant in research, or about the responsibilities of researchers, or if you have any questions, concerns or complaints about the manner in which you were treated in this study, please contact the Director, Office of Research Ethics by email at [hweinber@sfu.ca](mailto:hweinber@sfu.ca) or phone at 778-782-6593.

Your signature on this form will signify that you have received a document that describes the procedures, whether there are possible risks, and benefits of this research study, that you have received an adequate opportunity to consider the information in the documents describing the study, and that you voluntarily agree to participate in the study.

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**Title: Knowing, Doing, Being: Place-Based Education with the Free-Folk School in Vancouver**  
**Investigator Name: Andrew Rushmere**  
**Investigator Department: Education**

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Having been asked to participate in the research study named above, I certify that I have read the procedures specified in the Study Information Document describing the study. I understand the procedures to be used in this study and the personal risks to me in taking part in the study as described below:

#### **STUDY INFORMATION DOCUMENT:**

*Purpose and goals of this study:*

One purpose of this study is to inquire into the learning experiences of adult participants in a place-based, Free-Folk school learning environment. The ultimate goal of this inquiry would be to provide feedback for starting a more established, long-term, stably-funded free-folk school-type learning initiative. Another purpose of this study is to attempt to apply certain streams of

educational theory to practice to see what difficulties and successes arise from this application.

*What the participants will be required to do:*

Participants, if they wish to participate in this research, will be required to attend a free-folk school workshop, sign an informed consent form and respond to questions posed by the principal investigator in a focus group discussion, interview or email survey setting. Participants, if they indicate willingness at the time of the focus group, may be contacted and asked if they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview after the focus group.

*Risks to the participant, third parties or society:*

Depending on which workshop participants attend, there may be use of standard kitchen equipment (stove, heat, knives), the use of power and non-power tools for small-scale woodworking projects and/or the requirement that walking be done over uneven (potentially slippery, if raining) ground. Thus, participants may risk burns, cuts and bruises. Participants who do not participate in focus groups will be asked if they prefer to answer survey questions via email. In this case only (when participants respond via email to survey questions) participant confidentiality **cannot** be ensured by the researcher.

*Benefits of study to the development of new knowledge:*

This study is a pilot of an alternative educational/learning setting. The results of this study will be used to assess the feasibility of establishing, and successfully running, a more permanent, similar type of educational initiative. By participating in the study, participants are helping clarify what challenges and opportunities such a learning initiative present. Participants also gain skills of interest to them through participating in the workshops

*Statement of confidentiality:*

The data of this study will maintain confidentiality of your name and the contributions you have made to the extent allowed by the law.

The researcher guarantees that, to best of his abilities, the personal identities, contact information and any other personal details of participants in workshops, focus groups and interviews associated with this study will be kept confidential. **If you are a focus group participant:** by consenting to participate in the focus group you confirm that any information you encounter will be kept confidential and not revealed to parties outside the focus group. Participants who do not participate in focus groups will be asked if they prefer to answer survey questions via email. In this case only (when participants respond via email to survey questions) participant confidentiality cannot be ensured by the researcher. There

may be photographs taken in this workshop: Participants who do not wish to have their photographs taken for the purposes of data collection in this study must indicate this unwillingness to the researcher (Andrew Rushmere).

*Inclusion of names of participants in reports of the study:*

Names of participants will only be included in an appendix of reports of the study and ONLY if participants give the researcher permission to publish their names.

*Contact of participants at a future time or use of the data in other studies:*

If you would you be interested in participating in a follow-up interview related to this study only, please indicate your willingness in the space provided below (you will only be contacted if you indicate a willingness here to be contacted, and if you indicate a willingness, but wish to refuse an interview at the time of follow-up contact, you absolutely have the right to do so).

If anybody besides the principal investigator wishes to contact participants at a future time, they will have to first contact the principal investigator. The principal investigator will then ask participants for their permission to be contacted by the third party and ONLY give out participant contact information if the participants so desire. If the data is used in other studies, participant identities will remain confidential, as they will be confidential in this study.

---

I understand that I may withdraw my participation at any time. I also understand that I may register any complaint with the Director of the Office of Research Ethics.

Director, Office of Research Ethics  
8888 University Drive  
Simon Fraser University  
Burnaby, British Columbia  
Canada V5A 1S6  
+1 778 782 3447 email: dore@sfu.ca

I may obtain copies of the results of this study, upon its completion by contacting: Andrew Rushmere (arushmere@hotmail.com) or Sean Blenkinsop (sblenkin@sfu.ca)

I understand the risks and contributions of my participation in this study and agree to participate:

PARTICIPANT LAST NAME:

PARTICIPANT FIRST NAME:

---

PARTICIPANT CONTACT INFORMATION:

---

PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE:

DATE: (MM/DD/YYYY)

---

ARE YOU WILLING TO BE CONTACTED AT A FUTURE TIME BY THE RESEARCHER FOR A FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEW (Y/N)?.

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## Appendix 2

### Sample Focus Group Questions:

- 1) (Brief go-around). Name, something about you that best describes who you are/how you define your self (job, school, hobbies, relationships)
- 2) (Brief go-around) Why are you interested in learning this particular skill
- 3) Tell me a bit about what happened today for you? When you think about the day, what comes to your mind?
- 4) Tell me about your *feelings* about the workshop a) before the workshop; b) during the workshop (and can you think of a specific instance and feeling?); and c) after the workshop.
- 5) Why did you wait until now to acquire these skills through this workshop? Why did you not pursue them on your own time/seek out other similar opportunities before? (ie: Why did you come to this particular event and not the knitting circle down the street, the reading group at the library, the local food growing workshop in the community garden, or the really cool class on “fill in the blank”? What attracted you? What were your motivations? Why is *this* workshop important to you?)
- 6) Can you briefly trace back in time and in your life experiences where your interest in this skill may have come from?
- 7) What were your expectations of this workshop? How were they met? How were they not met?
- 8) What for you was the most valuable/important part of today’s experience?
- 9) If you could have changed just ONE thing about your learning experience today what would it have been?
- 10) Tell me about whether/how you plan/hope to use the skills you learned today?
- 11) What other supports/resources/materials/knowledge would you need to integrate use of these skills into your daily life?
- 12) How would you respond to the idea that learning this domestic skill is a political act?

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