

Enlivening our Sense of the World: Environmental Connectedness through Artistic Engagement

by

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B.A., University of Victoria, 1993

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in the
Arts Education Program
Faculty of Education

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SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

Summer 2014

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Abstract

Beginning with the claim that we are more likely to care for and protect natural ecologies close to home (and thereby the environment as a whole) if we feel for them a sense of love and connection, this thesis builds on the foundation that such a felt connection is necessarily aesthetic in that it involves the whole being — including body, senses and spirit. The experience of active engagement in the arts shares many commonalities with that of being immersed in nature. In this regard, being well versed in several forms of the arts can contribute to deeper and subtler interrelatedness with natural environments. Unlike literal language, the arts offer means of learning and expressing what one knows of the world around us in ways that are sensuous, embodied, symbolic and ineffable.

An argument is made for the validation in education of a lived and embedded relationship with the natural world (and with place) and for how the arts can help engender such a relationship. Examples of aesthetic practice and their process are explored: a series of drawings done in two particular wooded areas over the course of a year, and a series of imaginative writings stemming from listening to what certain forms in the natural world might say. This experience of listening is then considered in light of how it might contribute to an increased mindful awareness of self, particularly as an ethical being in relation to other forms of life.

Keywords: arts education; environmental education; aesthetics and nature; ethics and environment; linking art and ecology; linking creative writing and ecology

To Miro, for joy; to Vladan, for hope.

Acknowledgements

My deep gratitude goes to my supervisor, Dr. Stuart Richmond for your wisdom, warmth, understanding and steadfast support, for being with me through this long journey. To Dr. Mark Fettes for your ever insightful feedback, for helping me keep the metaphors true and be faithful to the essence of what I wanted to say. To both of you, my heartfelt thanks.

My appreciation goes also to other faculty members who have been part of the voyage: Drs. Vicki Kelly, Carolyn Mamchur and Sean Blenkinsop — particularly the latter, in whose class the kernel for this idea began to grow, and whose conversation and affirmation around an Alouette Lake campfire on a retreat with the Maple Ridge Environmental School Project research group helped fuel the chapter on listening. Thank you also to the research group members, and to my FAL colleagues, particularly Jan, Marela, Ena, Kathryn and Anne for your support. For wonderful conversations with Charles Scott, to whom all I say seems, miraculously, to make sense.

Thank you to Chris for the early morning wake up calls from halfway across the world and for unwavering support through difficult times, and likewise for support to Leila, Agneta, and Mitra.

For always being there, Milan and Jana Vasko, the former of whom was always on the other end of the line with technical help when it came to the images.

And most of all, to my sons Miro and Vladan, for being who you are.

Table of Contents

Approval.....	ii
Partial Copyright Licence	iii
Abstract.....	iv
Dedication	v
Acknowledgements	vi
Table of Contents.....	vii
List of Images.....	ix
List of Poems	xi
Introductory Image	xii
1. Introduction	1
2. A Felt Connection with Our Environment Is Essentially Aesthetic.....	7
Ideas of Place and Nature	10
A <i>Sense</i> of Place.....	12
Contexts of Learning	15
Meanings of Aesthetic	16
Ways of Knowing	20
Aesthetics as relationship to the world	27
Looking closely, noticing particulars	32
Relating Nature and the Aesthetic to Each Other	34
3. Connections between Experiences in Nature and Aesthetic Practice.....	39
Primacy	39
Beauty and Pleasure	41
Sense Perception.....	47
Embodiment.....	49
Emotion.....	50
Affect and Imagination.....	52
Impediments	54
Arts and Ecology in Education.....	55
Variation	56
Moral Implications	59
Mystery.....	62
Imaginative empathy	65
4. Symbolic Languages: Ways of Absorbing the World and Communicating What We Know	71
Natural Inclinations, Form and Content	71
Modes of Learning, and of Expressing What we Know	76
The Spirit that Moves us.....	82

More than we can say	86
Looking for meaning.....	88
Being Understood	91
The Ear of Language.....	94
Finding one's way	99
5. On Relations with Nature	101
Connectedness with Place	101
Relationship with Place	103
Close to Home	105
Aesthetics as Wide-awakeness.....	109
Ecological awareness.....	114
Memory and Identity.....	117
A few thoughts on love and other elusive things.....	118
Changing Paradigms.....	123
Alternate Perspectives	130
Aesthetics, Ethics, Looking Within.....	133
Dialogues with our Surroundings, our Situations	135
Drawing Outside.....	137
Imagination and Real Contexts	141
6. Walking and Drawing in the Woods	146
7. Listening to What the Natural World Might Say	177
Listening.....	177
Exploring nonhuman voices through human lore.....	181
Perceiving and Silence	183
Considering Animism	186
Inhabiting Non-Human Voices	188
Reconsidering the metaphor of speech	195
8. Reflections of Self in Greater Spheres.....	207
A place to be with self.....	209
On Wisdom and Receptivity	216
Expanded Scopes	221
Parting Thoughts	225
Works Cited	227

List of Images

All works of art by the author are untitled. Unless otherwise indicated, works of art are made in Maple Ridge. Image 3.3 by Takao Tanabe reproduced with permission.

Image 1.1.	pencil on watercolour paper	5
Image 2.1.	pencil on watercolour paper	12
Image 2.2.	Fireweed, ink on paper.....	20
Image 2.3.	Alouette River, Horseman's Park	27
Image 2.4.	Kanaka Creek, Cliff Park.....	37
Image 3.1.	Trans Canada Trail, Burnaby	46
Image 3.2.	Rock Ridge, Maple Ridge.....	55
Image 3.3.	Takao Tanabe, Portrait of a Cedar, Irony Creek, 1995	58
Image 3.4.	cottonwood leaf, thread, pencil, watercolour paper.....	60
Image 3.5.	Trans Canada Trail, Burnaby	62
Image 3.6.	cottonwood leaf, thread, pencil, watercolour paper.....	67
Image 3.7.	pencil and tea on watercolour paper.....	68
Image 4.1.	pencil on watercolour paper	80
Image 4.2.	Ferm, Black Mountain, ink on paper.....	94
Image 5.1.	leaf and pencil on watercolour paper.....	109
Image 5.2.	pencil, tea, thread and watercolour paper	113
Image 5.3.	pencil, tea, thread and watercolour paper	122
Image 5.4.	pencil, tea, thread and watercolour paper	127
Image 5.5.	Miro Burgess, age 6	140
Image 5.6.	Rock Ridge, Maple Ridge.....	145
Image 6.1.	Rock Ridge, Maple Ridge.....	147

Image 6.2.	Rock Ridge, Maple Ridge.....	149
Image 6.3.	Trans Canada Trail, Burnaby	152
Image 6.4.	Rock Ridge, Maple Ridge.....	155
Image 6.5.	Rock Ridge, Maple Ridge.....	156
Image 6.6.	Trans Canada Trail, Burnaby	157
Image 6.7.	Rock Ridge, Maple Ridge.....	160
Image 6.8.	Trans Canada Trail, Burnaby	163
Image 6.9.	Cliff Park, Maple Ridge.....	167
Image 6.10.	Trans Canada Trail, Burnaby	169
Image 6.11.	Rock Ridge, Maple Ridge.....	172
Image 6.12.	Rock Ridge, Maple Ridge.....	174
Image 6.13.	Trans Canada Trail, Burnaby	176
Image 7.1.	Rock Ridge, Maple Ridge.....	180
Image 7.2.	Mitra's garden, ink on paper	190
Image 7.3.	Rock Ridge, Maple Ridge.....	203
Image 7.4.	Rock Ridge, Maple Ridge.....	205

List of Poems

Storm in the Morning	6
Doorway	38
Pause	69
Pages, Trees and Sinews	70
Big Sky	100
End	143
Calling in the Air	144
Dry Day	151
Structure	173
Rooted	175
Alouette River Dike, July	204
Heavy Green	206



Kanaka Creek, Cliff Park, Maple Ridge

1. Introduction

Perhaps like many, I find I have numerous questions about how we relate to the physical world around us, and how those ways of relating affect both the world and ourselves. My inquiry began with melding together two areas that are close to my heart: the arts and the well-being of wilderness areas. My background is in the visual arts, and creative writing has always been a kind of personal refuge; I also have a strong interest in the performing arts, though I am not myself a practitioner. I have taught art to children in various capacities, and my Master's dissertation focused on relations between aesthetic sensibility and personal identity. That has been where my heart and my mind lay. My feet and the rest of me, on the other hand, have always been pulled to walk in natural areas, in woods, in fields and up mountains, and I have felt a need to be in wild places on a regular basis. At a certain point near the beginning of my doctoral studies, I realized that the protection of the natural world was at least as pressing an interest for me as that of arts education. More potently, I had a deep intuitive sense that there are strong integral connections between the two areas of fostering active engagement with the arts and engendering a felt connection with the natural world.

Little by little, I have seen beautiful green spaces in the area where I live disappear, devoured by what many feel is the inevitable path of progress. I had to wonder why so little value was placed not only on preserving these areas for their own sake and that of the life within them, but also on what they might mean to us as humans inhabiting a place we call home. I wondered why few seemed to feel a sense of loss when pristine woods gave way to subdivisions, when farmland became highway, when entire hills with a life of their own were leveled to make the terrain more convenient for the imposition of development. Surely our resignation to the disappearance of these natural areas must also correspond to the eroding of something in ourselves. It certainly seems to correspond to a diminishment in our spiritual selves; yet I wonder, too, is something about our current society also corroding the part of us that is able to appreciate (and thereby help protect) them? In other words, might something of our

aesthetic sensibilities be altering and fading as well, if we consider this kind of destruction normal?

In my doctoral work, I wanted to continue exploring how aesthetic education and engagement in the arts have the power to bring us closer, in a profoundly human sense, to ourselves, to each other, as well as to our surroundings. It was then that I began to realize how much these two areas — those of the engaging with the arts and of engaging with nature — have in common, and how much they both answer to something basic and essential in who we are — as beings with not only keen intellect but also with bodies, emotions, senses, and a need for spiritual fulfillment. Interestingly, our bodily and sensory aspects — those which connect us most to other forms of life — are also what engage us in the arts.

The question that came next was, how might these two areas work together in education? More specifically, how might the arts be a way of bringing about a felt connection with environment, with place and with nature? I did not want to go about this in a way where artistic practice was necessarily at service to the ecological cause, but rather in an exploration of the value that both these areas have for us particularly when they are interlinked, and how they might inform each other through their common ground and ways of affecting. There was also considerable searching into the particular characteristics of that common ground, and the ways of knowing, perceiving and being that it calls upon.

Underneath it all was the kind of sentiment that is expressed by Stephen Jay Gould:

We cannot win this battle to save species and environments without forging an emotional bond between ourselves and nature as well — for we will not fight to save what we do not love.¹

My sense for a long time had been this exactly — that the reason why the degradation of natural areas continues so freely is that something had happened to that emotional bond. Something else interested me as well: while that bond was being eroded, surely something was being eroded in us, too. And perhaps it was something that the arts — through their ways of involving perception, the sensuous, the emotions and a personal

search for meaning — might be able to address, explore and connect with in ways that were meaningful and affective, and somehow intrinsic to the nature of that bond.

As the course of this inquiry progressed, it took on some unexpected meaning for me. During the time in which this thesis was written, I went through some personal challenges that severely shook the ground beneath the relationships of those to whom I was closest. Indeed, all my human relationships, including the one I have with myself, were irrevocably altered. It was a time when everything was exposed and questioned, held up under harsh light and then recounted under some very critical circumstances. While there was much growth that came from it eventually, during the most difficult times there was this intense sense of disconnection that seemed much generalized, a feeling of being removed from everything. In a very real and personal sense, I began to long for a more authentic connection with the world itself — with the physical realm around me and the sense of aliveness I had once felt in response to it. When my relationships with humans seemed to be in a state of upheaval, it was the natural world that called to me. This work then also became a kind of quest to renew my faith in life by connecting with the world.

At the root of the exploration I have done here is that very question: how might we connect, in a deeper way, with the world itself — with the physical matter around us and the life therein?



Part of my challenge has been that the inquiries and directions I've felt a need to explore and include in this thesis are rather numerous and multi-faceted. At the same time, I felt intuitively they all connect to one another as do the strands in a web — all come to a centre that is a kind of home. Yet I've struggled immensely with making the various threads distinct, and with putting them into the linear form that writing sometimes necessitates. Each idea, or combination of ideas, seemed to call for its own particular space, and yet at the same time, they were all interwoven with one another, linking at several levels. They were all part of the kind of connection with the world that I was interested in, in which regard they are naturally all related. I struggled to bring into a

cohesive whole the various disparate streams of thought and the different aspects they take on.

Everything seemed to exist simultaneously as it does in an image, rather than following one after another, as it does in a text. Perhaps what most struck me was how many aspects of life are affected by these ideas, and how they are all, in some way, entwined. The idea of relating to the phenomenal world is an enormous concept, yet one that, in essence, is about particularities, about details, and about the enlargement of small moments.

In that regard, perhaps this undertaking, rather than being like a web which has straight, neat strands, is more like a system of roots that intertwine with one another — their organization and the way they relate to each other is much less orderly. In some places the roots are distinct, their directions clear, while in other places they are quite snarled up. While they all start at the same tree, they sometimes intermingle with the root systems of other plant forms more than they do with their own.

Like roots, which are subterranean, these ideas have at times been difficult to 'see' and to place. One could remove the earth that covers them, but we know that roots are not meant to have light shed on them too harshly, and that they dry up if they are too long exposed. They need the soil that hides them to keep them in place and to keep them nourished. For that is what they do — they nourish the tree, just as, I strongly felt, these things nourish the humanity in us. If one dug the roots up to view or analyze them in a way that is more convenient, they would likely be severed, possibly causing the tree to lose its life. This has been the nature of many of the areas I've wanted to delve into — a difficulty to find the words to place them and to show what they look like. Untangling them would harm the tree as well, and so the thoughts and ideas remain intertwined and sometimes, somewhat untraceable, as I believe they should be.



Image 1.1. pencil on watercolour paper

Storm in the morning

The predawn light is
almost here, meeting
the wind head on, an
encounter borne by
black silhouettes of half-bare trees, as
winter creeps upon us.

These
crepuscular crevices
in the cycle of
a day,
turn your head a moment and
they've changed.

Now, a different light
coming through pewter clouds
swaying the trees into
becoming
their own colour.

2. A Felt Connection with Our Environment Is Essentially Aesthetic

For all that aesthetics can be marginalized by those who think of it as an optional extra we know that our encounters with art and nature go not merely wide but also deep, and moreover, go as deep as anything in our lives can go.

Colin Lyas²

As part of a well-meaning effort on the part of educators to promote environmental awareness and ecologically responsible choices, children are often given facts and information on ecosystems, life cycles, and the lives of animals. They are told of how the environment is being compromised and what species are classified as endangered. They are taught the benefits of recycling, of consuming less, and of alternate means of transport. An inspired teacher might go further, creating hands-on projects, facilitating learning through various intelligences, or taking students on an occasional field trip to study certain natural phenomena first hand. All of these endeavours are clearly well intentioned, for there is little doubt of the necessity of ecological and environmental awareness.

Yet, I feel that there is much more that can be accomplished, in a considerably more meaningful way, by an approach that emphasizes sensuous, emotive and creative *experiences* rather than an accumulation of knowledge. While information certainly contributes to awareness, I believe that true awareness is felt, rather than known.

With this in mind, we would do well to realise the personal and emotional bond that children (and all of us) feel, or, given the opportunity, can feel, for natural settings — particularly those that are close to home. These are places that we experience, or can experience, in our ordinary lives and such a bond is the very kernel from which true ecological awareness — and a sense of responsibility for environmental stewardship — will grow. We are more likely, after all, to care about and protect something we know

and love personally, than something of which we have learned facts and figures in a classroom. In my view, children need to be provided with many opportunities that not only encourage their felt connection with local environs, but allow that bond to be nurtured and strengthened through affective means.

Simply having plenty of unstructured time outdoors is certainly one way to do this. Learning about forms of life and ecological processes in local areas through repeated hands-on experience is also of great value; it is through building on children's natural sense of discovery and exploration that a genuine interest in the world around them can come about. What I would like to argue here is the importance of taking things further by involving children and youth in activities that seek to engage their senses, bodies and emotions together through creative activities that involve imagination and personal expression. Endeavours that deepen the relations between children and their natural ecologies in affective ways are at least as valuable as biological knowledge; in many respects they are even more so, for they bring about the emotional involvement that is necessary for personal and caring bonds to form.

Aesthetic engagement and artistic practices have the capacity to involve us in ways that are similar to experiences that occur when we find meaning, beauty and a sense of connectedness with nature. In recent years there has been some significant and encouraging exploration on how arts education can be a means of addressing various aspects of our relationship with environment. For example, Hilary Inwood integrates art education with environmental education to develop environmental literacy and argues that the arts have a major role to play in raising awareness of ecological crises.³ A research group on arts-based environmental education working out of Aalto University in Helsinki consists of artist educators who do ecologically-based community projects.⁴ Through a pedagogy of place within the practice of art education, Mark Graham seeks to address the sense of "rootlessness and lack of connection to communities" that many feel.⁵ Sally Gradle addresses how art education can build sustainable relationships with place through an ecological framework.⁶ And Anderson and Guyas propose an art education grounded in the ideas of deep ecology, specifically seeking to change — through art — the cultural paradigms that have caused environmental degradation.⁷



I have long felt that our capacity to feel affinity for — or to be moved by — certain phenomena stems from the same place in ourselves as our capacity for aesthetic engagement. And if being affected or moved by something we find beautiful (in all the senses of the word, the simple and incidental, and the deeper and darker ones included) is connected with our capacity to hold dear and protect that which we love, then perhaps our moral inclinations correspond integrally with our aesthetic ones. In that regard, Wittgenstein’s maxim that “Ethics and aesthetics are one and the same”⁸ holds particular resonance here. The context of his statement is an exploration of that which cannot be put into words, but must be ‘made manifest’⁹ in other ways.

Aesthetic and arts-based learning can engage students in these more spiritual ways by encouraging them to really look at the world around them, and to take the time to consciously notice what is there in ways that they ordinarily would not. Because of art’s personal and subjective qualities, any conscious creative effort and response students have to a place is a possible step toward forging a connection with it and, perhaps, making that place their own. My aim is to explore how the arts can help us develop a deeper awareness of self and surroundings, how this awareness leads to the kind of connectedness from which ecological mindfulness will likely follow, and perhaps even more meaningfully, how this awareness might foster in ourselves a sense of wholeness and belonging. Aesthetic and creative activities can include a variety of endeavours, though the main idea is that students have as their starting point, and gain inspiration from, their own authentic experience in the world out of doors.

My main focus here will be on visual art and creative writing, as these are the areas with which I am most familiar — they reflect my background and my passions. In subsequent chapters, there is more in-depth exploration of particular projects I have been involved in. Two of these have been part of my personal practice. One involves coming to better know a section of woods close to my home by doing drawings of various spots there and finding those same spots on subsequent visits over the course of a year. Another involves imagining the life of various natural forms — ferns, a cedar, a river — from within that life form, and writing about it from an imaginative, empathetic view. Following the sections where these are described are suggestions of how such

activities might be furthered with students in various contexts. While I focus on visual art and writing, I believe this type of work is possible through all the arts: the realms of drama, music, dance and film are potentially equally fertile means of connecting with the ecologies around us. Finding ways to bring such practices into a regular education may cause us to re-examine not only the everyday structure of our current model of schooling, but also certain basic approaches toward learning, living and being.

Ideas of Place and Nature

My tendency is to use terms such as ‘place’, ‘environment’ and ‘natural world’ rather generally. To clarify, what I have in mind is: in general, the surroundings (built or natural) and landscape of the place we call home, and in particular, the natural world within that — whether this is pristine wilderness, or simply a city park or lane of trees. Most specifically, by ‘natural world’ I mean the spaces relatively close to home, as best as they can be found, where one feels surrounded by natural phenomena and at least somewhat separate from urban structures and commotion. I am fortunate to live in an area where wilderness is relatively close by; I have become quite spiritually dependent on it and it has come to be an intensely meaningful part of my everyday life. The fact that it is constantly threatened and eaten away at in the name of development is part of what spurs me on to do this work. I realise that not everyone may consider having nature close by to be as essential as I do; others yet may feel they do not have the option to think that way as they live in urban communities. I suggest, however, that aspects of nature can be found anywhere — birds that flock in a city, the clouds above, planted gardens or vacant lots, clusters or lanes of trees — and that once found and connected with, can become immensely valued. And, while particular green or open spaces close to home can come to be special for us, I realise, too, that for many people, a need to be in wilder areas and to protect them is not necessarily tied to certain places but rather to a more universal love for nature and a need to be in touch with it.¹⁰

Of course, it is not only nature that we get attached to and with which we form a personal, even spiritual, bond. Neighbourhoods that we have come to know and love because they are part of our history and sense of belonging, or because they have certain characteristics of authenticity and uniqueness, are just as valuable, and can be in

as much danger of having their integrity threatened by large scale development and what is commonly called economic growth. For the most part, however, what I wish to focus on here is our connection to the natural world, in particular, the pockets of wilder and green areas that are still somewhat intact. In order for these bonds to be healthy, the meaning that certain places have for us needs to be consciously authenticated.



Image 2.1. pencil on watercolour paper

A Sense of Place

The relationship that we have with a place is not largely cognitive in nature, and certainly not simply so. If we think about a place with which we have a personal

connection, what comes to mind are not facts, information, or concepts, but rather images, memories, sensations and feelings. There is also something unnameable there. Just as one might not be able to really describe the face of a loved one, or state in easy words why they are special because the associations are personal and heartfelt, our relationship with a place — though perhaps somewhat more functional — has similar ineffable and affective qualities. Our very senses and bodies are involved — it is impossible to really know a place without physically being there and seeing, hearing, smelling and feeling it — in other words, without taking it in with our whole being. On a walk through a west coast forest I might respond, often in other than fully conscious ways, to the feel of roots or the crunch of gravel beneath my feet, to the sunlight that comes through a clearing, the moist mossy smell and, on some special occasions, the rippling call of a raven reverberating through the treetops. From the window of my home, an older house at the edge of a rural area, I am soothed by the skeletal filigree form of the enormous bare cottonwood in the middle distance, and look forward to when it begins to bear leaves in the spring, knowing that by mid-summer, those enormous leaves will flutter in the wind, turning over their white undersides. I feel this giant is a beacon rooted in the same ground that holds my home.

Because responses like these are so necessarily affective and arise from one's whole being, I feel the experience is essentially aesthetic in nature, and that a strong and meaningful connection with a physical place cannot but be so. This aesthetic character suggests that our connection with the world is worth exploring in these terms — not just as an add-on to more cognitive approaches, but as an integral and essential dimension of environmental education that runs through all learning.

Indigenous educator Gregory Cajete explains how traditional indigenous learning is based on what he calls a “Spiritual Ecology” which he describes as both a field and a process through which learning and teaching occur. One of its key aspects is an environmental foundation, based on direct interaction with the natural world, that “*connects* a tribe to their *place*, establishing a relationship to their land and the earth in their minds and hearts.”¹¹ This involvement of both heart and mind as it connects to the land that is our home has been little valued in Western formal education other than perhaps in a historical or political sense, or, as a source of materials that shape the economy. The view taken seems to have been more about facts, pragmatism and

advancement than about spiritual and personal connections. There might be the promotion of nationalism and a bond to homeland, taught variously through songs, stories and poems, yet the emphasis has perhaps remained more on the social and patriarchal aspects of one's country, rather than the ecology of a land. One can only imagine how different things might be if our own current education system comprised a foundation based on personal and aesthetic tie to the *life* within a land, of the kind Cajete describes.

Cajete continues:

To say American Indians were America's first practical ecologists is a simplification of a deep sense of ecological awareness or state of being. The environmental foundation of Tribal education reflects a deeper level of teaching and learning than simply making a living from the natural world... the natural environment *was* the essential reality, the "place of being". Nature was taught and understood *in* and *on* its own terms.¹²

Incorporating physical as well as personal and spiritual realities, an indigenous view such as this has the potential to reach a core within us that is not easily shaken, forming not just a view of the natural world, but also an integrated sense of belonging and of self.

This is not only about a relationship with what we call "environment", or about working toward the well-being of our planet and of the physical places in which we live. There is something much deeper going on here in terms of our own humanity. Caring for our places is about caring for ourselves as well, nourishing our human sense of belonging. Just as we need healthy, rich and lasting relationships with each other, we cannot hope to feel whole or to flourish without an equally rich and deeply felt connection with our physical surroundings and with the other life forms with which we co-inhabit the places we call home. The nature of such a connection can vary from the subtle noticing of something about a place that sings to us, to a deep call that pulls us to return to certain ground. There is the sense that if it were to disappear, a significant loss would be felt. Whether we think in terms of local ties or more universally about our connectedness to all living geographies and lives beyond our human existence, there is a realisation that our humanness and potential for flourishing depends upon an interconnectedness with other forms of being. David Abram puts it this way:

Today we participate almost exclusively with other humans and with our own human-made technologies. It is a precarious situation, given our age-old reciprocity with the many-voiced landscape. We still need that which is other than ourselves and our own creations... we are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human.¹³

This relationship with the world — not just the social one but the physical and more-than-human one as well — is easy to overlook or even dismiss in a society where technology and the market economy endeavour to make physical places, and our attachment to them, less and less important. It is now quite normal for us to have what we consider to be essential contact with people on the other side of the planet, yet to care comparatively little for the physical world and other life forms just outside our buildings and vehicles. With much of our time spent in this mode, our awareness pulled away from our physical and immediate surroundings, our bonds with it are all too easily diminished and dematerialised.

Contexts of Learning

Through the stages of exploring this area of arts-based approaches to forming bonds with our natural ecologies, I have at various times imagined different contexts where these modes of learning, experiencing and being might be played out. As a whole, I see this work as a challenge to current standardized forms of schooling where learning and knowing are often reduced to that which is more easily accounted for, particularly with respect to the costs to more integrated and personal sensibilities. In the best scenario, I imagine children and youth being outside for prolonged periods, often, in all weather and during various seasons and times of day. I imagine them being personally involved, discovering for themselves and engaging aesthetically with their bodies, hearts, minds and spirits over a sustained part of their development.

In a few sections, I describe where I have taken classes of children of various age groups outside to do drawings by the wooded areas surrounding their school, or in wilder areas close by. I am very aware that these are just particular examples of the many possibilities available, for there are many. I do not see it as my task here to offer prescriptive methodologies, but rather to engender a sense of what is possible, and

hopefully, of the life-giving benefits therein. The kind of work one does with students depends a great deal on one's individual imagination and personal inclinations, the characteristics of the students, and, of course, on the place itself. Doing the work outside is always ideal, yet there may also be times when it is more feasible, for practical reasons, to do the actual artwork indoors. Still, even if one takes the experience of being outside and absorbing what is there as inspiration for a project that is later done in a classroom, there can still be meaningful connections made with the natural world outside.

As with most aspects of learning that we wish to make alive and real for our students and for a younger generation, we need first for them to be alive and real for ourselves. This is most particularly true if it involves a personal shift in perspectives and practices, and a stretch in the way we ordinarily go about things. It seemed, then, that I needed to address this aspect of the problem with a more expanded scope, as a prelude to proposing how to assist others to know and be with the world. This is where the majority of my exploration has been. Because the exploration is intrinsic and tends to be personal in nature, I cannot point to specific outcomes nor lay out a strategic map with any promised destination. What I am working toward is a shift in perspective toward a more holistic, embedded and intrinsically way of being that might be applied anywhere where the life around us is considered meaningful. In that regard, this work is also a challenge to the technocratic, media-laden and market-driven economies that tend to rule our lives.

Meanings of Aesthetic

The proposal that our relationship with the physical world is essentially aesthetic likely raises some questions around the parameters and connotations of the concept of 'aesthetic.' The field of philosophical aesthetics, long dedicated largely to the appreciation of art, has now become recognised as helpful to the environmental cause. In 1970, *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* published a special issue on "The Environment and the Aesthetic Quality of Life," in which R.A. Smith and C.M. Smith argued that as a field of study, aesthetics can be of aid to environmental education, claiming that decisions involving environmental planning should have an aesthetic

dimension.¹⁴ This combination of fields has since expanded and, considering our present concerns about environmental preservation, continued development and exploration in the field of environmental aesthetics is undoubtedly beneficial. Glen Parsons, for example makes a clear argument for the value of beauty and aesthetic preservation in the face of possible environmental destruction, explaining (perhaps even conceding) that “perceptual immediacy...can be more effective in swaying people to a course of action than dry facts and abstract moral concepts.”¹⁵

Yet, due to its logical and systematic nature, I find the particular stance offered by analytic philosophy on aesthetics does not embody the kind of voice, nor the approach, that is most beneficial when it comes to connecting with our natural surroundings in a personally meaningful way. Rather than relying so heavily on the intellect, the endeavour of weaving together ecology and aesthetics can go further when it seeks to be more holistic, inviting the heart and spirit to be involved. The frustration I feel reading determinedly analytical thought is perhaps similar to what Jan Zwicky felt when, within the field of philosophy, she looked toward

an integrated perception, a picture or understanding of how something might affect us as beings with bodies and emotions as well as the ability to think logically.¹⁶

Zwicky pursues a philosophical approach that is more integrated, one that views experience itself as an ecology.¹⁷ As in her work, sound argument and philosophical approaches certainly have their place, yet they are more meaningful when complemented by an empathetic outlook informed by, and in search of, a personally lived and felt bond with our surroundings. The spirit of this endeavour is to bring us closer to the natural world itself, rather than to a particular argument or concept, no matter how convincing it may be.

In my encounters with writers of the analytic tradition such as Allen Carlson¹⁸, Glen Parsons¹⁹ and Sheila Lintott,²⁰ who have worked with the joint area of environment and aesthetics, I cannot help but find the tendency toward truth claims, categorical description, objectivity, ‘appropriateness’ and necessary and sufficient conditions for concepts to be less than helpful. I find the process of determining which category a concept belongs to, or whether something is true or false, to be reductive of the matter at

hand. The endeavour to be objective when describing the phenomena we perceive and certain types of human experiences (for example, appreciating nature versus appreciating art) can deplete them of their richness. This does not seem to be what we are after if we are working toward a much needed appreciation of, and connectedness with, the natural environment.

My sense is that any resolutely analytical approach can actually have the effect of distancing us from nature because the mode of mind used is significantly different from the one we inhabit when we are drawn into to place on physical, sensuous and emotional levels. I find a similar effect — and loss — takes place when, for example, students are taught to analyse the various components and meter of a poem before they are invited — or enticed — to enter *into* a poem: to *feel* its rhythm and to *sense* its imagery and emotional tone. Cognitive scrutiny can certainly be helpful once the felt sense of things has been embodied — then we take things further in the effort to examine, articulate and perhaps stretch certain concepts. Yet until then, there is some danger of it doing more harm than good if the aim is appreciation of the kind that affects us on deeper and subtler levels.

Aesthetic experiences are something we need to feel with our own skin. We need to pick up on, to see and hear, for ourselves the complexities of certain works of art or music, much in the same way that we might appreciate the forms, textures and quality of light in a cedar grove. In showing how philosophy can be disappointing, even bleak, to one seeking to deepen their aesthetic experiences, Colin Lyas argues that “the acquisition of an ability to perceive the features of art and nature, is a matter of practice.”²¹ To develop aesthetically, one needs repeated exposure which teaches the senses to discriminate the finer details and tone of a work or a place. And Lyas’ claim is that the role of aesthetic education is to provide conscious guidance so as to increase the kinds of understanding that bring us closer to more genuine appreciation.

We realise this on a more visceral level when working with young children, as their understanding of the world is so coloured by their senses and imagination. While as adults, we may tend toward more intellectual and abstract approaches, we are still sensuous and intuitively oriented beings — if we allow ourselves to be. For me, this is what the aesthetic comprises: it involves our emotions, senses, bodies, intellect and

intuition — the whole being. Most particularly, it is characterised by that unnameable and magical part of our experience which affects us in ways that cannot be easily explained, and can be quite powerful.

If we are to concern ourselves with how the aesthetic relates to ecology and environment, the work we do needs itself to be aesthetically embodied. In other words, it needs to *be* those elements we seek, to be aesthetic in its own right. By this, I do not mean that it has to have pristine form or somehow be of elevated status, but rather that it needs to contain much that is heartfelt, sensuously and personally integrated, expressive, and, ideally, creative. The wonderful part is that, just as in nature, where there are myriad expressions and forms of communication, we humans also have varied voices and modes of expression and conveyance — if we allow ourselves (and our children) to validate and to practice them in all their richness. These may include the visual, sculptural, poetic, narrative, philosophical, dramatic, musical or the kinetic. I argue that these are what is needed (rather than simply modes that seek to name, explain, measure and analyse) if we are to create a meaningful and lasting connection with the places we inhabit. Furthermore, in valuing our own capacities for richness and diversity in ways of taking in what we see around us and of expressing that knowledge, we are better able to see the richness and diversity in the world around us.



Image 2.2. Fireweed, ink on paper

Ways of Knowing

Besides academic learning there are forms of knowledge likely to have lasting effects on our lives and on our practices: these are garnered through lived experience

and through personal involvement. While information that is conveyed in literal or factual form certainly has its place (it is a direct and rational way to transmit things to students more easily on a larger scale and promotes literacy of a certain kind) engaging students in ways that are more affective addresses what is most humane in them. When we go further and look toward integrating the personal and aesthetic with that which is being learned, a deeper kinship with it begins to be nurtured. Michael Polanyi alerts us to how there is much in our knowing that is not reducible to words: “we can know more than we can tell;” there will also be times when we may know something quite well, but not be able to say how we know it.²² What is relied upon is a kind of felt awareness and tacit knowing, rather than translatable information. Polanyi claims that all forms of knowing, whether scientific, theoretical or practical, have a tacit dimension which imparts significant meaning. Perhaps because it is so difficult to articulate (and therefore to measure), this form of knowing receives little concerted effort in schools. Yet it gives our lives richness and deserves, I feel, to be given space, even if it cannot — and perhaps should not — be given overmuch structure. Part of Polanyi’s treatise involves the importance of the body as a sensing organism: some of the most basic and animal parts of ourselves can be sources of what is difficult to articulate, yet so powerful in our relationship to the world.

In his call for a “more inclusive rationality that joins empirical knowledge with the same emotions that make us love and sometimes fight,” environmental educator David Orr picks up on Polanyi’s concept of personal knowledge, and points the way to a “knowledge that calls forth a wider range of human perceptions, feelings, and intellectual powers than those presumed to be narrowly ‘objective.’”²³ He quotes Polanyi’s claim that personal knowledge “is not made but discovered... It commits us passionately and far beyond our comprehension, to a vision of reality... For we live in it as in the garment of our own skin.”²⁴ Polanyi views it as akin to love, a mode of knowing that calls up a sense of passion, devotion and responsibility.^a This cannot but include one’s sense of self, as the boundaries between emotions and knowledge, between thinking and feeling become blurred. One might argue, as does Stuart Richmond, that in life it is never really

^a Interestingly, shortly after, Polanyi states, “Such is the true sense of objectivity in science...” I appreciate this claim for the necessary personal aspect of scientific knowledge and research.

possible to separate thought and feeling.²⁵ One might also argue that personal knowledge of this kind is not exactly teachable by means of traditional schooling, as it depends so much on individual feeling and inclination. It also grows out of a larger sphere that includes community, heritage and upbringing: a vast tapestry of influences, all of which weave together strands of meaning over time. Education in the manner Cajete describes, where multiple aspects of place, relationships and mythologies are integrated with personal and communal ecologies, offers room for more intimate forms of knowing. Our present system does relatively little to engender more personal kinds of knowing, yet I maintain that we need to constantly validate and nurture the modes of learning that go beyond information and cognition, since they are the only thing that can truly make a difference when it comes to human connection and integration with the world around us.

Defying the heritage left us by Descartes — that of the severance between subjective and objective, between feeling and knowledge — Orr goes on to contend, “There is no good way and no good reason to separate mind and body from its ecological and emotional context.”²⁶ Along a similar vein, Bertrand Russell spoke of knowledge that is gained by acquaintance — ways of knowing that come about from personal experience and seeing how things are first-hand.²⁷ Unlike knowledge by description, whereby we gain information mediated by another source, often in literal or factual form, knowledge by acquaintance is more difficult to encapsulate or measure; it has ramifications far beyond what can be accounted for or easily described or explained. The learning gained is less abstracted, and more individually felt.^b



In the opening of *Earth in Mind*, David Orr poses some difficult questions about the direction of contemporary education, reflecting on how the overt messages of the larger society — characterized as it is by individualism and consumption — often go

^b I thank Mark Fettes, my committee member, for sharing his skepticism about bringing Russell into my argument here, cautioning that Russell is ‘such a committed rationalist’. I appreciate this, yet still find the idea of knowledge by acquaintance helpful, as it delineates in clear terms something that we easily forget in education.

directly against educating a young generation to value their natural ecologies, their communities and a sense of citizenship, peace and stability. He also challenges the “conventional wisdom [which] holds that all education is good and the more of it one has, the better,”²⁸ suggesting later that we took better care of the earth when we had less of the kind of knowledge that is synonymous with accumulating facts and figures. Considering Orr’s questions in the light of things I grapple with here, I have some of my own to add. For example, how do we impart in students the value of that which cannot easily be described or counted in a society that pushes for accountability in ways that often call for reductive practices — particularly when one focuses on a bottom line? How do we affect practices of listening to what places and the natural world might have to tell us in a society of constant chatter, outspoken opinions and incoming noise? How do we engender an appreciation for the silence required for deeper aesthetic engagement in a culture of information blips, media overload and a feverish desire for stimulation? How might we engender much needed practices of attentiveness and stillness in a society that emphasizes productivity, efficiency and an ethic of constant movement? Perhaps these are best answered with a question that is at once simpler and more complex: how can we engender these things in ourselves and find meaningful space for them in our own lives, so that we can be examples to those who we want to teach?

Information itself is something of which there seems to be little shortage at present — aided by technology, we are flooded with it. Yet other aspects of our lives are sadly neglected. The price we have paid for the progress of knowledge in this form, as Richard Louv reminds us, is a diminished life of the senses. He speaks of what he calls the “know it all state of mind,” which has become a “poor substitute for wisdom and wonder.”²⁹ One could add that another state of mind that accompanies our progress in technology is that information is ready-made and easily available — at any time. This, however, comes at the cost of knowing in a richer and deeper sense. It also has a way of sidelining the kind of embodied consciousness that relies on subtler observations and our reflections on them. Both of these take time — unhurried time. Louv’s most pointed observation is that the current generation of children is the first to grow up without meaningful contact with nature — the kind that comes from hours of free exploration and play outside, something that previous generations took for granted as a normal and

important part of childhood. In describing what he refers to as “nature-deficit disorder,” Louv speaks of the high cost of our comparative alienation from nature. Not only is our own sense of physical, emotional and spiritual well-being significantly affected, but our sense of detachment, in turn, produces some rather bleak consequences for vast areas of the earth. Much might be different if we did not turn our eyes and hearts away when planning decisions are made.

It is by involving the senses and the emotions in an embodied way that a personal understanding and bond with a place comes about. It is through constant and repeated contact of this primal kind that a sense of affinity will grow. Walking the ground with one’s own feet; smelling what is in the air; listening to sounds as a kind of narrative of life going on around one; seeing things directly and from one’s own posture and pace of movement, rather than from the window of a building or car; being able to approach things and touch them: these are the kinds of experiences that enable us to know and love a place. Whether environments are natural, built, or a combination, it is this kind of relationship that gives people a sense of community and belonging. Children in particular need experiences where their senses, emotions and bodies are engaged together, experiences they have time to process and absorb. However, in a world characterized by over-structured lifestyles and technologized media, such occasions seem increasingly rare.

When one encounters the natural world in an evocative way, words often fail to describe the experience. Similarly, when one is taken away by a work of music, moved by a novel or film, or wholly absorbed in crafting an interpretation in an image or poem of one’s own, the mind is in a place characterised by the ineffable. We *know* certain things, but the knowing has qualities that defy easy translation.

Wittgenstein proposes:

Compare knowing and saying:
How many feet high Mont Blanc is –
How the word “game” is used –
How a clarinet sounds.

If you are surprised that one can know something and not be able to say it, you are perhaps thinking of a case like the first. Certainly not of one like the third.³⁰

With the third, we rely on perception, and on our aesthetic sense. The mind that responds to this is of a different colour than one that responds to the first two. The third of these questions doesn't ask for an answer, it simply shows the way to its meaning. It allows the recipient to receive it as they will.

Perhaps rather than knowledge, we might look toward something more akin to wisdom. With regard to the idea of education as an adding on of knowledge, Jan Zwicky echoes Orr's thoughts: "It's a commonplace that wisdom is not the accumulation of information or data in the current senses of those words. Wisdom isn't just knowing more."³¹ Coupled with this thought she has a quote by poet Charles Wright, who says it more succinctly: "...for knowledge add, for wisdom, take away."³² Without an excess of words, Zwicky manages to *show* rather than inform her reader, retaining the poetic and metaphoric quality of thoughts:

...to invite someone to attend in a way that can lead to recognition.

Why not just tell them? — Understanding a proposition is not the same thing as accepting that it is true.³³

My sense is that Zwicky's and Wittgenstein's writings on the value of the ineffable are perhaps projects of retrieval — not in the sense of bringing back something from our past, but rather of reminding us, in a Socratic sense, of ways of knowing that are always with us but may be neglected in circles where more rational forms of literacy and articulateness are the modes that get one ahead. A sensitivity to resonance, to subtlety, a breathing in of atmosphere and sensing of vibration: these are modes of understanding that open us to the forms of wisdom a forest, a creek, a deer passing through a field, the stars on a clear, cold night, have to offer. They are also the forms that allow us to sense the meaning of a work of art. Both inhabit a hazy but potent sphere that defies easy explanation, one that works instead in sensations like sunlight on skin, melody beneath the sternum, a beckoning whisper behind the ear, reverberation with particularities of form, texture and tone.



While wisdom is in the way that Zwicky describes may not be the same as knowledge, perhaps it is closer to knowing. In his work “Art and Knowledge,” Elliot Eisner distinguishes between the terms ‘knowledge’, a noun, and ‘knowing’, a verb, suggesting that the latter is better suited to a kind of inquiry where things are tentative and changing according to the situation, where there is no “quest for certainty”, nor a desire for “nailed down facts.”³⁴ It is better suited, he says, to artistic modes of inquiry. My own thought is that knowing, like wisdom, is somewhat more personal in nature, not so much in the regard that it is necessarily subjective in character, but rather that one has experienced something first hand, is thereby familiar with what it looks and feels like, and has some intuitive understanding of its unspoken aspects. There is also a kind of affinity, an affective appreciation of its value. In that regard, knowing — like wisdom — can involve empathy, kinship, perhaps even love. The associations may not always be so positive, but either way, it is *felt* in a deeper way than knowledge is. There is the sense that this knowing is gained over time; it is not a simple transaction of information. Knowledge might be seen as more objective, something outside ourselves that can be more easily translated and shared, perhaps agreed upon: a set of specifics that resides ‘out there.’ Knowing, on the other hand, goes deeper.



Image 2.3. Alouette River, Horseman's Park

Aesthetics as relationship to the world

My journey through this dissertation is fuelled by a hope, and an endeavour, to find a closer connection with the world, and to explore various means to reanimate our physical surroundings so that we see them as something worth being close to. There are ideas from two different writers I would like bring in here to help illuminate the direction I'm trying to pursue.

The first is from ecological educator David Sobel, specifically his work on mapmaking with children. Generally, maps are considered in objective and mathematical terms, and their application is normally considered functional or scientific. When relating the concept of maps to children and youth, however, Sobel's approach is to focus primarily on the emotional and affective aspects a place has for us. To him, learning begins with getting a feel for something and then realising, grasping a connection between ourselves and the world. Of his work with children, Sobel says, "their maps are the weaving together of inner emotion and external forays. Maps are the

clothespins that hitch our lives to our places.”³⁵ For him, the accuracy of the portrayal of a place is, in the initial stages especially, much less important than the intimate aspects of one’s experiences of a place. The best way to foster ecological literacy, he says, is to begin from the inside — with the child’s own world and their perceptions and feelings. “Be sure to include your special places,” Sobel tells children,³⁶ stressing that the child’s personal attachment to a place is what matters most. The work resulting from these projects with children is very expressive, more like drawings in many ways than like maps, and infinitely more vivid and meaningful than a standard map where place names are mechanically inserted. Greater accuracy is worked toward only later, as understanding deepens and expands. Sobel quotes regional planner Robert Yaro: “Stewardship springs from connectedness.”³⁷ This personal connectedness is what we are after.

The other author I would like to refer to, and at some greater length, works not the fields of arts or ecology, but in psychotherapy. In a call to reanimate the world around us with a sense of soul, James Hillman proposes that we allow the things in our environs to have the same kind of subjectivity we have come to expect in ourselves. He invites us to consider that things — all things — have perceptions, memories and intentions of their own, that it is not just us who project ourselves onto the world. Other entities, like us, have capacity to suffer, to dream and communicate; their desires and demands have an impact as our own do. His proposal of *anima mundi* — the world-soul — is bold and unapologetic and (as I will later show) well-grounded in the history of our collective consciousness.

In keeping with an animistic view, Hillman observes a different meaning of the idea of aesthetic, returning to the Greek sense of *aisthesis*, which meant perception, sensation, “a breathing in or taking in of the world.” Rather than being associated with aspects of form or taste^c as we have come to know in more recent conceptions of aesthetics, *aisthesis* arose not from a cognitive or socially oriented place, but from the heart: “the heart was the organ of sensation: it was also the place of imagination... The heart’s function was aesthetic.”³⁸ The spirit of this mode of taking things in, of absorbing

^c The aesthetic tenet of ‘significant form’ is from Clive Bell; that of ‘taste’ is from David Hume. These concepts illustrating Hillman’s idea are my own additions.

with sensitivity and resonance, and feeling that the affect goes both ways, is what makes most sense to me. It is what I imagine when I say that our relationship with the world around us, with the things and more-than-human forms that surround us, is aesthetic, or more precisely, that it needs to be.

Hillman is quick to clarify that by *heart* he does not mean “sentimental subjectivism,” which he sees as marking a loss of aesthetic sensitivity. Rather, it is an awakening of the organ of perception within us; it is a move, he says, to *poesis*.³⁹ Looking into the etymology of *poesis*, or *poiesis*, from the Greek tells me its root is with the act of making, of creation, which I interpret to mean the impulse to create — something that is called upon and aroused within us in response to our aliveness with the world. Hillman also clarifies that by aesthetic response he does not mean beautifying in the sense of decoration or gallery outings. He refers rather to the awareness that beauty is inherently in everything, that things show themselves to us, each emits a soul-spark, has allure, expresses its form and *calls forth* our response: “*aisthesis* is how we know the world.”⁴⁰ It is an animalistic kind of knowing, where one develops a nose for things and trusts a sense that is more primal than ordinary cognition, one that ties us more immediately to the world. I find it stirringly apt that Wittgenstein, grappling philosophically with how we come to know the things we cannot easily describe, also concludes with the need to develop a ‘nose’ for the things that matter.⁴¹

As a metaphor, we may think of following our nose the way a wolf or a bear might: to that which is both life-sustaining and pleasurable. For us humans, however, smell is not our strongest sense, being almost negligible compared to that of these animals, or even of fish: salmon, for example, rely on their sense of smell to go home through miles of water, swimming upstream to their birthplace. In ‘educated’ circles, smell may be regarded as rather base in comparison to the ‘more refined’ and intellectually privileged senses of sight and hearing.⁴² Yet interestingly, it can bring out strong emotional responses for us: smells evoke memories as little else can; they can sometimes turn us off in ways that are powerful and beyond explanation. They also soothe us or attract us toward sources of pleasure in a way that invites surrender. Yet perhaps the metaphor of following one’s nose is powerful in its own way, as an experience that puts us in the immediacy of the here and now, guided by something

primal without second-guessing oneself, without allowing thought to get in the way. Perhaps this comes closer to what Wittgenstein and Hillman mean when they speak of the importance of developing a nose for something: we follow something that registers with a certain animal part of ourselves, rather than thinking overmuch. Perhaps it also means not relying on language, but trusting something else instead.

In the way of being proposed by Hillman, sensing the world and imagining it are closely allied — one needs to sense well in order to imagine accurately, and sincere imagination is only possible with keen sensing. A reawakening of the heart's perceptive capabilities, Hillman proposes, allows us to feel the movement of the life within things. Being affected by their state makes this an essentially empathetic response, yet also one in which we see our plight as deeply connected to theirs: Hillman insists that the soul of the world and our own soul are inseparable, affecting each other in the way that (stated in more mundane terms) we shape our environs just as they shape us. There is also the ramification that we want aspects of the world — valleys, ecosystems, individual creatures, families, neighbourhoods, the skies and oceans — to flourish for their own sake as part of an interconnected web of life, rather than for our interest or for how we might leave our mark on them. Nonetheless, there is also the appreciation that our own well-being depends on the health of these entities.

In educational terms, the valuing of aesthetic responsiveness means that we view ourselves and our students as beings not only of intellect but of sensitivity, affected — at times rather profoundly — by the physiognomy of the world around us. Hillman equates sensitivity with consciousness, stating, (as do John Dewey, Maxine Greene and Elliot Eisner)⁴³ that aesthetic insensitivity is a form of unconsciousness, a kind of “anesthetic.”⁴⁴ I will expand later on Greene's conception of aesthetic education as a form of wide-awakeness, but for now want to focus on this idea of sensitivity. To me, considering its possibilities for education means that we attend to these affective responses, and nurture with sincere intent the dialogue (verbal and otherwise) that arises from them. Aesthetic sensitivity and responsiveness, like other areas of learning,

need to be honed over time. They also need to be tended to, with care, as they arise.^d As a psychotherapist, Hillman expresses frustration with the notion in modern psychology that emotive and spiritual experience resides with us alone, rather than with the world as well. Likewise, because non-human entities are not seen as animate in the way that we are, it is supposed that they do not need similar care and tending.

Embracing the idea that there is life within things and that it calls for our attention is a view that challenges the more common Cartesian objectifying approach we know so well. Yet if we are to consider — or rather, imagine — this possibility, our relationships with various phenomena around us take on a rather different quality. While it may be a stretch for many to consider, for example, a table or perhaps even a building as having a soul, it is less of a stretch to consider that a geographical place does; indeed, if we are to consider something of soul in our own lives, the places that are closest to us cannot but be part of that. Looking deeper into what it might mean to consider non-human entities as having “that particular soul-spark, that seminal image, which offers itself through each thing in its visible form,”⁴⁵ repositions our view not only of the world, but of our role in it. What might such repositioning mean, and how might our learning practices change, or need to change? Or, considering from a different angle, what types of practices might engender the kind of sensitivity that is integral to such a view of the world?

I need to remark that while personal and individual ways of perceiving are key, for both Sobel and Hillman, our subjectivity is not a focus in and of itself, but rather a means to come closer to the physical world. *That* is what we want to know. This emphasis on knowing the world for its own sake does not, I feel, go against my proposals throughout this work that connecting with aspects of the world also helps us

^d Maria Montessori’s principle of ‘sensitive periods’ is perhaps helpful here. Montessori placed great value on the relationship between children and their learning environment, and observed distinct yet individualized periods in the lives of young children — periods of “special sensibility” where a young child is open and drawn to particular aspects of their environment in a way that shapes their unique creative and intellectual qualities. Their participation in certain activities is “inner directed” and shapes, for example, their ability to observe and “make increasingly refined sensorial discriminations.” I find that at any stage of educational development, it is essential to be aware of particular ‘periods’ where certain sensibilities shape and colour our relationship with various aspects of our environment. (The International Montessori Council, “Sensitive Periods”)

be closer to ourselves. It was once suggested to me that the term 'aesthetic' can be synonymous with that of 'relationship.' If we pull this idea further, it has significant worth. To think of aesthetic engagement in terms of relationship, in which we seek to understand, care for, relate to and possibly bond with another, somehow makes sense. Either way, while there is validation both of self and of the other for what they are, it is the relational space in between, and felt by both, where the magic happens.

Looking closely, noticing particulars

While coming from a scientific perspective, Polanyi also helps us see how aesthetic forms of knowing help us retain (and perhaps achieve) a closeness to something meaningful. He observes how a personal connection with something can be damaged when we specify, explain and make lucid certain details, essentially severing the experience as a whole:

an unbridled lucidity can destroy our understanding of complex matters. Scrutinize closely the particulars of a comprehensive entity, and their meaning is effaced, our conception of the entity is destroyed.⁴⁶

Many analytic forms of learning follow the example of examining various parts in their separateness, and while we consider ourselves to have gained a kind of depth of knowledge or a sense of specialization, our concept of a greater whole, and the personal meaning it has for us, might suffer. Polanyi's examples here are more aesthetic than scientific, referring to areas such as history, philosophy and literature which can be deadened by too much specification; he also refers to experiences where meaning, particularly expressive meaning, is created in part through bodily participation.^e Yet Polanyi's idea makes an interesting contrast to that of Hillman, who proposes that we *do* need to tend carefully to the particulars and physiognomy of what we are observing,

^e A piano player, for instance, does better to focus on the music (the meaning) rather than the specific motions of his fingers (the physiognomy and the particulars); when we speak, our meaning comes across through the expression as a whole, rather than in the composite sounds. Polanyi also speaks of entering a work of art empathetically through what he calls *indwelling* — a bodily or imaginative extension of the self into a realm of meaning, where the focus is on the meaning itself rather than the specific actions in the body.

rather than simply taking in the meaning to be read. In an aesthetic manner of tending to particulars and details, however, one goes about it as a lover, rather than a scientist, might do.

In his explanation of how we often know more than we can say, Polanyi uses the example of how we know someone's physical features and the expression within them:

We know a person's face, and can recognize it among a thousand, indeed among a million. Yet we usually cannot tell how we recognize a face we know. So most of this knowledge cannot be put into words... We recognize the moods of the human face, without being able to tell, except quite vaguely, by what signs we know it.⁴⁷

He goes on to explain that when we read a person's face and its expressions, we view the whole and derive meaning and recognition from that, while the components of that whole are seldom as noticed in their own right. In fact, we might be hard-pressed to specify or describe those particulars, for they function as the means from which we gain the meaning. If we were to focus on these details explicitly, he says, the meaning of the expression of the face as an entity would recede, and may never quite be recovered in the same way. Perhaps, it is the process of rational or analytic thought, the association with propositional language that we need to be cautious of.

Yet Polanyi's observation is very interesting to me in how it relates, for example, to the process of drawing or painting. Here, one *does* attend to certain particulars and depicts each part of an image with intention, but aims to be conscious of how it relates to all the other parts of the work. In creating an image, there is this awareness of how any particular section contributes to the piece as a whole: change one small aspect, and the entire work is likely to be affected. In art, proportions are all about how things relate to each other, as is composition, colour and space. Perhaps, then, drawing (or almost any visual art practice) is one way in which we do attend to certain particulars, but in a manner that strengthens, rather than severs, our connection with the subject matter as a whole, and ideally, with the meaning it has for us. Polanyi's example of a face and its expression, for example, works well here: if you were to portray someone in a drawing or convey a certain facial expression, you would need to attend to the shapes of the features and to the character of each line, yet with an eye to how they all relate to each

other, and most of all, with a sense of feeling. It is done with a different part of the mind than one that describes through words in a literal sense: an artist's eye sees things as they are, not for *what* they are. There is also a sense of getting lost in the process, which is one of perceiving, sensing and imagining, rather than describing and analyzing. Hillman would say that responsive aesthetic sensing is about "a sensitization to particulars"⁴⁸ rather than a "generalized adoration."⁴⁹ Yet his view takes it further: the exchange of meaning and of perception goes both ways: physical forms themselves are capable of perceiving, and of absorbing meaning, as we are.

It is also interesting that Polanyi, a scientist, has chosen for his example something particularly expressive: a face. Toward the end of *Philosophical Investigations*, in the same section where Wittgenstein speaks of developing a nose for something in order to come to know it, he has a few things to say about the expression of human feeling and how the reading of it is not something that is easily agreed upon. Rather, it relies on personal experience: "What is most difficult here is to put this indefiniteness, correctly and unfalsified, into words." And further, "The genuineness of an expression cannot be proved; one has to feel it."⁵⁰ If we are to regard various entities of the world as having soul, it makes some sense that we try to grasp something of what they express in the way we might with a facial expression. There is something to this sensing of genuineness through feeling, something to the capacity to realise the expressiveness not just of human faces but of living entities as they present themselves to us. There is something about trusting that which cannot be proven or put into words, and trusting the faculties within us that rely instead on perceptual and intuitive ways of knowing.



Relating Nature and the Aesthetic to Each Other

In the field of philosophical aesthetics, there have been endeavours to compare the aesthetic experience of appreciating art with that of appreciating nature. Perhaps it

is a valid exercise to see how these experiences may compare and inform each other.^f How, for example, does one appreciate nature the way one would appreciate art, when there is no accepted 'frame' delineating where the thing to be appreciated begins and ends, or, when there is no authorial intent or identity behind what we are contemplating? When we feel that aesthetics as it applies to works of art is the standard paradigm from which we need to position ourselves, we are constantly limited by the restrictions of a particular model. In *Everyday Aesthetics*, Yuriko Saito takes a different view, arguing that rather than trying to stretch the notion of aesthetics that seems to have been formed (at least in the Western world) around the arts, we value, in its own way, the aesthetic of common surroundings in our day-to-day lives. In other words, we consider as aesthetically significant not just our experience of objects of art or of things we consider to be of elevated status, but also the incidental, unplanned and naturally occurring phenomena that surround us and that we may otherwise easily overlook.⁵¹ Because we often give little thought to ordinary things in our surroundings, Saito says, it may appear that these are of little aesthetic impact when in fact they can "have serious ramifications: moral, social, political, or environmental."⁵² I wholeheartedly agree that the aesthetic characteristics of ordinary items, artefacts and places are far from negligible in their effects on us, and on how we further develop or care for our surroundings.

In her argument for the significance of everyday aesthetics, Saito gives much attention to our physical surroundings: "Environment, whether natural or built, surrounds us all the time, and, as such, it can never be dissociated from the everyday life."⁵³ Indeed, we are always in a *place*. I concur with Saito on the value of being attentive to what we cast our eyes on in our everyday surroundings, and of being at least somewhat aware of the depth and breadth of how these may affect us. A large part of her argument is dedicated to the natural world, most notably to the value of cherishing not only spectacular wilderness and beautiful scenery, but also more the humble, yet ecologically equally valuable, places, plants and creatures that are more likely to be part of our lives. These places need our aesthetic attentiveness, not only because they are often what affects us most over time, but also because they — more than the majestic

^f See, for example, Sheila Lintott (2004).

landscapes more typically considered aesthetically commendable — comprise our ecologies.

Saito's endeavour to contrast the aesthetic experiences we have come to expect from art appreciation with those of our environment is a lengthy one, yet unlike other writers, her feet are firmly on the ground of the everyday. Rather than trying to stretch the model of art aesthetics, she argues that in many respects it simply doesn't apply, and she puts our focus squarely onto the appreciation of the more humble things in our lives and our surroundings, which deserve to be (or inevitably are) attended to in their own way. She describes, for example, how we do not take a 'spectator mode' but rather engage with ordinary things in ways that are more visceral and physically involved, and generally far less structured. There is much in our surroundings that we simply *cannot* enjoy well by sitting still and quietly (as we would at a concert) or by viewing and not touching (as in an art gallery). There is also a far broader range of ways and modes to experience things in our surroundings, and little that is conventionally agreed upon in terms of how to do this: "Is one way more 'appropriate' or 'correct' than others in experiencing rain?"⁵⁴ She argues that what matters most is not a particular or predetermined way of appreciating, but that our experience be aesthetically meaningful.

These aspects of finding meaning, of being aesthetically engaged with everyday surroundings, with valuing the nature that characterises the landscapes in which we find ourselves, and of engaging with them personally point toward an area of experience that is in many respects a kernel of bringing art and environmental education together. In the following chapter, I would like to look further into the similarities shared by experiences of appreciating art and those of engaging with nature, most particularly at how these are valuable to education with regard to their ethical implications and the implications on our appreciation, understanding and practices in relation to environment.





Image 2.4. Kanaka Creek, Cliff Park

Doorway

Standing behind you, my arms framing
your small body as
the doorway
framed us,
we watched the glowing dusk
as it slanted on the cottonwood.

Your father called and said
it was time for bed but you,
and I too, just wanted
to stand there a time,
be with the evening
before the horizon took the glimmering away.

3. Connections between Experiences in Nature and Aesthetic Practice

Rather than compare how art and nature might be similar or different as objects of contemplation or appreciation, I would like to look at some characteristics they have in common when it comes to our experience of engaging with them, including what this engagement calls upon, and addresses, in us as participants. I think this aspect of participation is key here, as I find it more valuable to think in terms of being *engaged* with art, and *engaged* with the natural world, rather than simply viewing or appreciating. Saito does great work in making us aware of the significance of common aesthetic experiences, and the part I would like to take further concerns the relationality that, to me, is a large part of the aesthetic experience. In her work and the work of others there is certainly acknowledgement of the subjective nature of our responses and of the effects certain aesthetic experiences have on us, as well as a critical stance toward Kant's notion of disinterestedness, suggesting that we need to do more than consider formal aesthetic qualities. Yet rather than thinking primarily in terms of objects to be viewed by a perceiving subject, I am also interested in what the nature of this engagement *feels* like and in particular how the two kinds of experiences share areas of common ground. I would like to look here at the phenomenological nature of these experiences of engagement and to consider in broad — but very relevant — terms how the experiences of being in nature and being with art can complement each other, as I believe that these are immensely valuable to education.

Primacy

Perhaps most fundamental is that both the natural world and the arts have been with us since the beginning of our humanity and have shaped who we are as a species. Ellen Dissanayake observes that the arts and culture have been a necessary part of our

evolution as human beings, and that people of all ethnicities the world over have always engaged with the arts in some way. She addresses “a core human nature that was evolved to *require* aesthetic and spiritual satisfactions,”⁵⁵ and claims that because of the pleasure the arts give us, because they are so emotionally satisfying, and because the cultural connections they enable us to form have been significant to our survival, the need for our engagement with them is inherently biological. In her view, the impulse to create and ‘make special’ precedes the notion of intellect so strongly tied to texts and conceptualisation that we know today, one that itself does substantial harm to the more primal inclination to get caught up in acts of creation.

As human beings we have always required beauty and meaning; we have sought means of transformation that help us make spiritual sense of our predicaments and helps us authenticate our place in the world. In tribal cultures this was often done collectively through ritual.⁵⁶ In contemporary times, we tend to seek forms of meaning through more individual preferences and choices, given the vast array of options in urban centres and through mass media; the act of creation has also acquired strong associations with individual expression. It is worth noting that our contemporary ideas of art, often seen as decoration or objects of aesthetic beauty in an edifying sense, or as means creating a personal statement or raising awareness of social issues, are rather different from indigenous forms of art, which were integral to spiritual rituals and pertinent to the basics of life. The artefacts we know of tribal cultures were not in themselves the main focus; the care and craft that went into them was deeply connected to spiritual and transformative purposes that involved more than their maker.⁵⁷ This more primordial purpose of art corresponds, in many respects, to Hillman’s invitation to *aisthesis* as a primal response to the world. In current times, our endeavours of meaning-making through the arts look rather different from those that were around collective ritual; but whether the impulse is to enhance ourselves, our objects or experiences, to express something, to explore new perspectives, to find a form of transcendence or even just momentary escape, the desire for art seems inherent to being human.

It is also self-evident that the natural world has always been an essential part of our lives, even if it may seem much less so in recent times. Cultures evolved from the geographies and ecologies that were home to them; reciprocal relationships between

humanity and the rest of the natural world were a given.⁵⁸ Even in our current industrialised times, we are affected and shaped by the landscape that gives us home.

Beauty and Pleasure

In looking at how beauty is a kind of essential cornerstone affecting our experiences of both nature and the arts, the ideas of Immanuel Kant are helpful, and not only because they address aesthetic beauty in both these areas.⁹ Kant's concept of free beauty found that aesthetic enjoyment occurs when things are perceived in a certain way, most notably without the interference of concepts or rules. There is also his idea of disinterestedness, where we put aside self-interest, appreciating the object of our contemplation for its own sake rather than as something that might serve us. In his consideration of this notion, Stuart Richmond uses the example of viewing an old-growth forest, and how one might respond to it without concepts or self-interest in the way of Kant: allowing the eyes, mind, and imagination to roam freely, taking in the qualities of colour and form, the imagination being at free play with our other faculties.⁵⁹ This is how a child might view it, with a sensuous primacy and freshness free of conceptual filters.

In contrast, "seeing an old growth forest in terms of its botanical properties or cash value, for example,"⁶⁰ are clearly concept-governed perspectives, the latter being of self-interest and personal gain; both would rule out the possibility of free beauty on a more purely aesthetic level. Cynthia Freeland's example of Kant's disinterestedness excludes all matters instrumental or useful, even other kinds of pleasure: "If a ripe strawberry in my garden has ruby colour, texture, and odour that are so delightful that I pop it into my mouth, then the judgement of beauty has been contaminated."⁶¹ In this regard, perhaps Kant goes too far, as such a view is not particularly helpful if we consider the life of all our senses to be valuable, finding pleasure in the world in the manner of *aisthesis*. Nor is the idea of being completely concept-free always workable. Richmond describes how our experience of nature can be augmented by cognitive knowledge; indeed, a fuller appreciation often involves being able to distinguish different

⁹ Kant's ideas as expressed in *The Critique of Judgement* were initially applied to the aesthetic enjoyment of nature, though he later recognized that similar underlying grounds with regard to aesthetic response, apply also to art.

types of birds, flowers and trees, appreciating, for example how an “oak forest is different from one of pine” and that “it is a source of much delight to be able to identify such things.”⁶² My own immersion in west coast forests became more complete once I came to know: this is salmonberry, that is salal; these are licorice ferns clinging to the cliff, those hauntingly lovely hanging mosses are old man’s beard. As it is, then, Kant’s concept of free beauty can succeed “only by losing touch with life,”⁶³ as Richmond says. In the context of contemporary culture, so shot through with information, concepts and labels, and where it is difficult to escape human valuations and interpretations of everything, the idea of free beauty may seem even less viable.

Yet, perhaps for these same reasons, a focus on the more sensuous and primal aspects of perception — liberated, even if only for a brief moment, from socially formed concepts — also seems that much more important. Additionally, there is something particularly significant about the idea of disinterested pleasure as it applies to our experiences of art — and particularly to those of nature, since it can also be a realm to which we turn for our practical needs of survival. These can be experiences where beauty is appreciated for its own sake, apart from our more pragmatic and self-interested involvement with the world. Kant also proposed the notion of purposiveness without a purpose, which is particularly fitting here: a form has a look of rightness about it as if it were meant for a function, yet the rightness is actually that way in itself, rather than with an aim of utility. This is valuable if we want to appreciate things for what they are, in and of themselves. I love how Iris Murdoch puts it when she says that good art “teaches us how things can be looked at and loved, without being seized and used.”⁶⁴ While her statement here pertains to art, it can be equally so with nature; indeed she uses similar examples from the natural world. The experience of beauty is described by Richmond as “a sense of pleasure and well-being that we cannot help wanting;” he states Plato’s observation that it “is the only visible quality that inspires love.”⁶⁵ In many respects it is essential that we *do* find nature beautiful in this freer sense if we are to regard it as worthy of being close to and of protecting. Thus, the surrender to a quality that inspires love is in itself a valuable relational experience.

Kant also grappled with the intersubjective nature of beauty, believing that while there are subjective differences in judgement between individuals, there are still many things we would agree upon as beautiful. In that regard, he aimed to show that the

features of beauty go beyond mere personal taste — that they can be seen as inherent in the phenomena themselves. Thus, while beauty cannot be objective, there is something about it that is grounded in the real world.⁶⁶ To me, there has always been something heartening about this idea, even through encounters with varying and conflicting perceptions of what is considered beautiful, particularly in a culture that slips easily into relativism. I also find it particularly worthwhile when it comes to our feelings toward nature: appreciating that there are inherent qualities that might move us, albeit in different ways, seems a much more valuable ethic than the facile dismissal that while you find this beautiful, I do not. The idea of beauty, particularly in art, was treated with considerable scepticism in the twentieth century and particularly at the height of Postmodernism. An effect of these times is that beauty has, in the words of Crispen Sartwell, “become somewhat cliché-ridden.”⁶⁷ Yet both he and Richmond attest to its life-affirming qualities. Regarding this particular era of our history, Richmond, for example, finds beauty a necessary curative, “if only to bring us back into contact with what is sensual and intrinsically worthwhile after so much theorizing, conflict in the world, and technocratic obsession.”⁶⁸ If it has a way of returning us to the life within ourselves and in the world around us, its qualities are inherently relational, affecting not only the quality of the connections between things, but the health of life — all life — itself.

I would like to take a bit further, on what is perhaps a tangent, the idea of things being loved and held as special for their own sake, free of thoughts of usefulness or personal gain. In a secular society, there is not much that we agree upon as being sacred, certainly not much that would remain so across time and cultures. Yet Margaret Somerville, an ethicist in medical science, takes on an exploration of what we might regard as the “secular sacred” — a means of finding a shared ethics without relying on religious spheres. It is interesting to me how her examination of what might be meant by the secular sacred echoes somewhat the ideas around beauty I’ve been considering here, particularly with reference to Kant. That which we consider sacred, Somerville says, “must have some kind of authenticity apart from utility, personal preference, or a desire that it be such — it must have ‘a life of its own.’”⁶⁹ She speaks of intrinsic qualities, some of which may be symbolic for us, and of an inherent integrity which we agree needs to stay intact; in other words, we don’t ‘do’ things to it simply because we

can. In considering how we experience the sacred, she mentions examples to be found in the natural world and in “beautiful music and art,” then describes:

A sense of the sacred is present when we feel awe at being alive and conscious of the beauty, world, and life around us. It is no accident that we often find that experience in nature.⁷⁰

If it seems like a leap to go from the idea of beauty to that of the sacred, it may be because both these concepts, these forms of experience, have become somewhat devalued and mistrusted, overrun as they have been by the economically-driven and means-ends thinking of our time. Yet ideas of intrinsic value, appreciation of beauty and the sacred fulfill deep human needs. In indigenous societies such as those described by Cajete, there is a deep and unquestioned link between nature, the sacred and the process of creating art; so ingrained are these to the spiritual basics of life that ideas of pleasure and beauty are not the main focus, only the outcome. Not only does an approach such as this search for personal and relational meaning in greater depth, it also affirms something core within us.

As with Kant’s ideas around pure aesthetic experience, we run into difficulties if beauty is associated with the sacrosanct in the sense of being removed from the more basic and vital pleasures of life. Experiences with the arts and experiences in nature feel good — this is what most draws us to them. Dissanayake’s argument that the practice of art is inherently biological is based in large part on the idea that the arts are pleasurable and she expresses frustration that “Treatises on aesthetics rarely, if ever, mention this reality. They... explain what aesthetic experiences consist of, but not how they feel or why they should feel sensuously good rather than just edifying.”⁷¹ Colin Lyas expresses that aesthetic pleasure as we experience it with art “begins to explain its power.”⁷² Perhaps, then, this power is what connects us to something greater than ourselves in the way that the sacred can, yet while keeping us fully with the vitality of pleasure.

I often wonder whether a concern similar to the one Dissanayake raises about art is beginning to apply also to our experiences of being in nature. My fear is that with the current generation of children being accustomed to spending most of their time indoors, the idea of getting outside into an area without the constant stimulation of media and

electronics is also taking on this ‘edifying’ aspect — that being out in nature is something we ‘should’ do, because it is ‘good for’ us, when in its own essence it can be deeply freeing and gratifying. The enjoyment we find in nature seems to be one of the keys to keeping areas of wilderness intact. In this regard, if experiences of pleasure are revived to affect sensitivity to beauty that runs deeper than mere scenic appreciation, the benefits to nature, in ourselves and in the world around us, seem clear.

Here, I feel a need to bring in an important qualifying thought: recalling Hillman’s idea that *aisthesis* is not about beautification, but rather about seeing the beauty in all things — in other words, responding attentively to forms and entities whether or not they fit typical social views of what may qualify as beautiful. The heartfelt response is to the particular and unique life *within* things, rather than merely to their appearance. Here, I find an echo in something said by art educator Peter London, that authentic art is not about creating beauty, but rather about finding meaning — about forming relations with the things in the world we are addressing.⁷³ Perhaps then, rather than endeavouring to *create* beauty, the value of creating art lies in *seeing* beauty and responding to it with authenticity and care. This is what sincere art practice enables us to do: to notice, to see. If beauty is an outcome, it is the result of conscious seeing, of sincere interpretation, of sensitivity to the life within things.

Echoing Plato’s observation of beauty being the only visible quality that inspires love, Sartwell quotes Sappho who poignantly observes that one finds the most beauty in “whatever one loves.”⁷⁴ It seems to be somewhat of a cycle then: we love what we find beautiful, and also find beautiful the entities we love. What one loves, or learns to love, can be deeply personal and varied, and is a very important idea in its own right — one that I would like to converse with later. For now, I want to observe that when it comes to beauty, it is often to forms of art or to nature that we turn to fulfil this need.



Image 3.1. Trans Canada Trail, Burnaby

Sense Perception

Experiences in the natural world and engagement in art both involve our senses in such essential and necessary ways that the entire experience sources from what our senses directly take in. We are not being given facts, information or second-hand knowledge; rather, we absorb things in a much more primal, direct and subtle way, and we absorb them for ourselves. The nature of the experience is visceral and personal. Seeing or hearing something for oneself is a most immediate way of gaining knowledge, and a sense of *knowing*, as Eisner might use it, is gained from looking and listening sensitively, sometimes repeatedly, until what we see and hear is internalised, becoming our own. Trusting our senses as a form of knowing seems almost to go against the current in a context where mainstream systems of learning are becoming increasingly reliant on texts and electronic media. While it might be possible to argue that greater *quantities* of knowledge are available to us through information and through the telling of others, it is often at the expense of sensory richness and depth, and ultimately a loss to the very quality of our lived experience.⁷⁵

Peter London speaks of the importance of encountering things first hand as a means to “break through the myriad veils” of indirect learning.⁷⁶ He also remarks how artists take the life and wisdom of the senses seriously, as the senses reveal to us things that matter.⁷⁷ For an artist, this is often doubly true, occurring not only with regard to what is noticed and being depicted, but also in the rendering of qualities of form, line, colour, rhythm and tone in the work one makes. Rachel Carson, seeking to instil a life-long sense of wonder in a child through encounters with nature, emphasizes coming to know the world through open and receptive senses, valuing seeing and listening far above the ability to identify certain birds or plants. Carson feels all the senses to be valuable as means of coming to know and suggests the conscious cultivation of smell, touch and, in the example that follows, hearing.

No child should grow up unaware of the dawn chorus of the birds in spring. He will never forget the experience of a specially planned early rising and going out in the predawn darkness. The first voices are heard before daybreak. It is easy to pick out these first solitary singers... The chorus picks up volume as more and more robins join in, contributing a fierce rhythm of their own that soon becomes dominant in the wild medley of voices. In that dawn chorus one hears the throb of life itself.⁷⁸

An augmented life of the senses is essential if we want to let in the more evocative aspects of nature, and the senses need to be honed, opened and receptive if the voices and sights of nature are to affect us with some depth. Artist-educator Jan van Boeckel speaks of the need to open our senses in ways precisely such as this, citing art as a means to increase sensuous receptivity, particularly as a countermeasure to the technological overstimulation that tends to decrease children's sensitivity to the subtleties of nature.⁷⁹ While the visual arts and learning to draw, paint, take photographs, sculpt and make films can teach us to see, an education in music heightens our perception to sound in the world around us.⁸⁰ Similarly, being involved in dance can develop sensitivity to movement and kinetic interactions, including what occurs outside of human bodies.

Bringing the phenomenological work of Merleau-Ponty to bear on ecological concerns, David Abram describes how the immediacy of perception, as well as its subjective nature, brings us closer to things: "In the act of perception... I enter into a sympathetic relation with the perceived."⁸¹ We are *in* the experience, and things unfold for us "*as we spontaneously experience them*, prior to all our conceptualizations and definitions." Abram observes how Merleau-Ponty writes of "perceived things as entities, of sensible qualities as powers, and of the sensible itself as a field of animate presences."⁸² To distance ourselves from our senses, then, is to remove ourselves from relations with things; to repress sensual involvement is to become detached, in effect to "*block our perceptual reciprocity*" with other beings.⁸³

It is clear that Abram speaks here not of superficial surveillance — the kind we might do when looking for a particular answer, or when we simply glance with unseeing eyes — but rather something much more actively participatory and immersed, involving interactive openness and a willingness to surrender to what surrounding entities might emanate. It makes sense then, why it is no doubt easier to make decisions to clear forests and land when it is done from a distance, when looking mostly at facts, figures and maps with a view to achieve a human-serving plan.

While what the senses convey to us might be necessarily subjective in that they come from individual sensing bodies, they also give us a great degree of accuracy, and thus the reality they reveal to us is concrete as well as subjective. Abram reminds us, as

we know from our everyday experience, that the phenomenal world is remarkably stable and solid — there is much that we will experience similarly to others, and much that we can rely upon. Even with the subjective nature of sensing and with myriad possibilities for other ways of perceiving, it is valuable to trust the senses as revealing things that matter, things worth knowing.

Embodiment

Intelligence, emotions and forms of knowing reside not only in the mind, but also in the heart, the feet, the hands, the gut and the spine; they are within the comportment of our bodies as they manoeuvre themselves through various spaces and contexts, through the feel of various situations. We know of muscle memory as a kinesthetic term, yet the knowledge within our muscles is not merely the result of mechanically repeated positions and movements. In an article I once read where musician Tom Waites describes his song-writing process at the piano, he speaks of the fingers as being ahead of the mind in intelligence. Any form of creative engagement involves some aspects of the body: an artist relies on the hand, a singer on the breath, a dancer on muscular structures, a poet on felt emotions and a sense of rhythm. The skills and knowledge that are called upon reside in eyes and ears, in muscle and sinew, in parts of ourselves not easily located. Significant creative decisions such as how to manoeuvre the feel and tone of a work are not made altogether cognitively, but rely also upon something deeper down, often guided by an intuitive gut sense. This kind of intelligence is also brought to life when we absorb and respond to works of art. While the mind might enjoy being at ‘free play’ as Kant would say, and also make valuable personal and cognitive connections, “at least some of the intense pleasures of aesthetic experience are insistently bodily,” as Dissayake asserts, maintaining that the physicality of the experience is necessarily relevant.⁸⁴

The same occurs when we allow ourselves to be absorbed in nature. Here, our bodies are *in* it: as we move (or trudge) through a wild place, sensations are felt in our whole selves. It is the feel of sun on our skin, the crunch of gravel or the crack of sticks under our feet, the shelter of shadow, and the quiver of adrenalin through our veins at the sight of an unexpected creature crossing our paths that makes the experience what

it is. It is the aching of muscles after a long hike, the exaltation or catch deep in the breath when we behold something that takes us away from the mundane. Yet while these bodily experiences are individually felt, they are also in direct relation to that which surrounds us, to the terrain, the temperature, the light, the insects and calls in the air. In Abram's words, "The body is that mysterious and multifaceted phenomenon that seems to always accompany one's awareness and indeed to be the very location of one's awareness within the field of appearances."⁸⁵ Abram speaks of a "carnal resonance" that is necessary to phenomenal knowing, particularly as it relates to other forms of being in our ecologies. And this is why bodily engagement is significant — as a place of perception, emotion and intelligence, the sensing, feeling and knowing body is necessarily in relation to other bodies around it. In Abram's words,

To acknowledge the life of the body and to affirm our solidarity with this physical form, is to acknowledge our existence as one of the earth's animals, and so to remember and rejuvenate the organic basis of our thoughts and our intelligence.⁸⁶

It is being physically present that enables us to be *part* of the phenomenal world. This embodied relatedness is something I feel also when I'm drawing the contours of a tree, when I stand in front of a painting that calls to me, when the image in a poem feels right. There, too, the carnal resonance described by Abram is felt.

Emotion

Tolstoy claimed that the main task of an artist was to evoke and communicate feelings.⁸⁷ While there are other (notably Western) theories of art that focus more emphatically on form, or those that are more cognitively oriented toward expressing ideas or provoking social awareness,⁸⁸ many would say that ideally a work of art includes considerations of several of these, and that most especially it needs to express well what it aims to communicate. Susanne Langer claims that when we understand a work of art, it is the feeling within and behind it that we grasp, and that we often judge works on how truthfully they express that feeling.⁸⁹ Indeed, we often deem a work by the success with which it conveys a certain emotional truth: in a story, novel, film or even a painting, we allow for all kinds of physical realities not possible in our lives, yet are most

convinced and moved by emotional situations that are well portrayed or symbolised. While Langer uses the term 'feeling' in a broad sense, encompassing everything from physical sensation to "the most complex emotions, intellectual tensions or the steady feeling-tones of a conscious human life,"⁹⁰ her view is that the expression of feeling is central to art.

The arts are often the only area in a school curriculum that provides room to address the emotive aspects of our experience. Whether or not they are addressed directly, emotions are an integral part of the content in any arts program. The very involvement of the body, the senses, and the personal experience one brings to artistic inquiry invites emotional involvement. Arts education provides a context and a process in which we explore for ourselves how we feel about things, as well as find ways to communicate those feelings with attention to what feels right in terms of tone, allusion, and measures of restraint.

One might not necessarily think of involvement in the outdoors as an invitation to look into matters of emotion, in ways we may take for granted in the arts. Yet my own experience and those I have heard of from others tell me that in the natural world we are more likely to release the guards and masks we maintain in more urban environments. Somehow, nature gives us permission to be more truly ourselves, as we are released for a moment from the role-oriented messages that are inevitably part of an urban environment. During a presentation I did with colleagues on educating children in the outdoors, a teacher participant raised the concern of how to handle matters if a child's experience in the woods gave rise to strong emotional feelings. We all agreed that this was a valid concern: while we often think of retreating to nature as a balm to sooth us, the experience can also be one of things being uncovered and coming to the surface, rather than being smoothed over.

We also tend to have, as I will discuss later on, strong emotions in relation to particular places. I am heartened by David Orr's claim that we have come to a time when these emotions (notably, those of love) need to take precedence over more scientific forms of knowledge.⁹¹ In the sciences particularly, feeling and emotion have long been disregarded and viewed as suspect. Yet life and its processes are coloured by matters of feeling, and Orr's claim is that addressing these needs to be part of the

responsibility that goes with knowledge, particularly if education is to prepare one to take part in projects that affect the environment, as almost all human endeavours tend to do. I feel strongly that our awareness of nature, environment and ecology *needs* to take hold on an emotional level. Bill McGibben puts it incisively when he says that we are faced with a curious paradox:

One species, ours, has by itself in the course of a couple of generations managed to powerfully raise the temperature of an entire planet, to knock its most basic systems out of kilter. But oddly, though we know about it, we don't *know* about it. It hasn't registered in our gut; it isn't part of our culture. Where are the books? The poems? The plays? The goddamn operas? Compare it to, say, the horror of AIDS in the last two decades, which has produced a staggering outpouring of art that, in turn, has had real political effect. I mean, when people someday look back on our moment, the single most significant item will doubtless be the sudden spiking temperature. But they'll have a hell of a time figuring out what it meant to us.⁹²

McGibben wrote this in 2005; in more recent years, many artists have taken up the concern of ecological issues. It seems to me critical that our younger generation come closer to their natural ecologies in similarly affective ways. While the larger (more concerning and perhaps more frightening) issues should be reserved for more mature students, the gut-level connection that McGibben speaks of is immensely significant with younger children as well, though here it needs to be done in more positive and life-affirming ways. Innocence and love are gut-level sensations also. The arts help us encounter and address these matters, in ways that are sincere, conscious, in depth and, when appropriate, with a critical spirit. They can also be means, as I will discuss later on, of helping young people engage honestly and effectively with the daunting environmental issues they hear of too often.

Affect and Imagination

While it is naturally assumed that the arts offer us room for the subjective, the affective and for the imagination, this is perhaps a less common view in relation to learning about ecology and the natural world. In schools, studies of nature are traditionally taught within a scientific framework. Yet I would argue that the affective and

imaginative aspects offered us by the natural world are substantial and need to be explored in greater depth and breadth. Emily Brady views the imagination as a necessary compliment to scientific perspectives to environmental knowledge, even as a corrective to what might be overly cognitive approaches. She suggests that various forms of knowing need to work in complement with each other: “imagining well” — which can be done with the aid of scientific knowledge — is valuable in that it enables us to expand out from, as well as return us back to, the qualities of what we are seeing.⁹³ Saito concurs with Brady, lamenting that “the study of nature is concerned primarily with scientific education, with little emphasis on promoting aesthetic appreciation.”⁹⁴ In the context of coming to know the natural world (whether with regard to organisms and ecology or in a more personal sense), the imagination does two important things: it allows entities to come alive for us in a way that enables us to relate to them, which then puts us closer to a place of empathy.

The imagination is also very responsive to nature. The open-ended and diverse qualities of natural environments provide wonderful fodder for discovery and creativity. Louv cites several studies where children spending time in green spaces engage in play that is far richer in inventiveness, make-believe and sustained stories than those who play in built playgrounds. He cites architect Simon Nicholson, who attributes this to what he calls a theory of ‘loose-parts,’ where the various elements of the outdoors – trees, rocks, streams, engage the senses and the body in a way that can be infinitely and openly combined. There are various vantages from which to view, to smell, to listen, different places to hide, sit, and climb.⁹⁵ My experiences of taking children into fields and woods is that they interact with natural places differently than adults do: rather than hike through them, for example, they like to be ‘in’ them, seeking out places to crawl into, recalling stories of haunted and forbidden forests, imagining creatures that might live there. My son once spent part of an afternoon exploring a small creek and imagining himself in miniature in the context of its various features and topographies.

This sense of imaginative freedom in nature is on offer for all of us, not just for children. I find Brady puts it well in her description of the perspective of Kant, whose work is seminal on the aesthetic appreciation of both art and nature:

For Kant, the imagination is central in aesthetic judgements of nature. It frees the mind from the constraints of intellectual and practical interests and enables a play of associations and creative reflection in relation to nature's qualities.⁹⁶

The physical openness offered by natural places, as well as the release for a moment from urban structures and ideas of how things should be, somehow allows for the exploration of new perspectives. The idea of loose parts and that things can be combined in fresh ways would apply to the adult imagination also, bringing about the sense of play Kant speaks of in the way thought and perception come together.

Nature has also been the subject of much art and poetry throughout our history. Landscapes have been among the most common subjects for painting. For the Romantic poets, particularly Wordsworth, nature and landscape were a kind of canvas which helped bring to life the shapes and tones of human experience, a necessary space for reflection on life and its essential questions. Looking further back to the beginnings of human history, it can also be argued, as David Orr and Ellen Dissanayake have done, that our inspiration from the natural world was what brought about our desire to be expressive — to sing and dance, to create images and meaningful rituals — in the first place.⁹⁷ In contemporary times, we are familiar with the need to take a walk or find a serene place outside to make room to reflect on our situations, to imagine and make sense of them in our own way. This process itself brings us closer to the frame of mind most open to creativity.

Impediments

Before I go further, there is another important aspect shared by conscious involvement with the natural world and with aesthetic engagement, and that is that these experiences can be impeded, and even dismissed, by the same facets of experience — facets all too common for most of us. The fast pace of our daily lives, the pressures to accomplish much within a certain time, the demands of social expectation, preoccupation with various cares and with the instrumental bottom line of many endeavours: all of these can lead to a general lack of being present and attentive to the world around us, and also within us. If we too often find ourselves in a constant state of

fast-forward, there is much in our lives we miss out on, including the ability to be creative.⁹⁸ Time pressures and lack of presence also impede any deeper sense of aesthetic involvement. Perhaps this points to one of the most substantial values of aesthetic education and of time spent with the natural world: the acts of slowing down and of taking notice, of being present enough to observe nuance and take seriously the affective dimensions of things around us, of taking time to absorb and reflect, of stilling the self and being free for a time of pressures and preoccupations — these have ethical ramifications of no small significance.



Image 3.2. Rock Ridge, Maple Ridge

Arts and Ecology in Education

When a child or youth is given the opportunity of moments of silence to attentively absorb particular features of a place, and then to render an interpretation of what they perceive through expressive means, they are invited to *feel* a place, and to

make something of it for themselves. If they are drawing outside, it is not only the shapes of trees and rocks, or the various shades of green in sun and in shadow that they notice. There will be smells too — depending on the weather, as well as on the movement and temperature of air — which they become aware of, even if only on a peripheral sense. Overhead, a crow might comment on their presence; underfoot, ants may create movement and give hint of an entirely different kind of existence. Sounds will be characteristic of the energy of the place, will carry according to its layout, and vary with the amounts of moisture in the air. Even the sounds of familiar voices close by will take on different qualities, simply for being in an unbuilt milieu that has its own life. A child will feel the sun on their skin, or a breeze at the back of their neck, reminding them that they are *in* this world and part of it, rather than simply studying it.

The personal and visceral modes that are called upon when we engage aesthetically do not have much play elsewhere in the course of an ordinary school day. They deserve an eminent place in a student's overall education, and — most of all — to be explored and dealt with in ways that are as subtle and irreducible as they themselves are. I would like to explore here some areas of common ground shared by aesthetic experiences of both art and nature that are of value to education, particularly when taken to more in-depth forms of involvement.

Variation

David Abram remarks how the various aspects of natural life bring our senses into a perpetual dance that is attuned to subtle variations in a realm full of recurrence.⁹⁹ While nature is constantly engaged in a never-ending reiteration of similar forms, no form is ever quite the same as another. There will be multitudes of fir trees, of alder leaves, of sightings of crows and squirrels, and of partly cloudy skies, each similar but with unique characteristics. The seasons turn and return, the dormancy of winter evolves into new growth in the spring, but with different qualities and echoes each time. The light of a particular time of day, or of a certain season, never has exactly the same feeling about it no matter how many times it is experienced. Abram contrasts this with the mass-produced sameness of our gadgets, which tire our senses and cause us to be perpetually on the lookout for their next iteration. Abram's analogy brings to mind for me a larger scope which the arts and nature have in common, and which contrast with many

other aspects of our everyday experience. Unlike the move toward uniformity and standardization so widespread in our human spheres and institutions, or the gradual — but steady — reduction of diversity in many built structures and environments, particularly in ever-growing suburban areas (not to mention the moulded sameness of manufactured products), the arts and the natural world are both characterised by an infinite richness of variety. It is up to us to find the patterns of life within that richness, and we need to give it our attention to do so. Attending in this way calls for an appreciation of greater subtlety than what is called forth by screens, strip malls, and consumer products.

Variations in the tone and mood of particular aesthetic experience — or in a collection or series of works of art — are often a source of life-giving fascination for artists and for those drawn to the arts. Monet, for example, painted numerous haystacks and scenes of his lily pond, Cezanne many versions of his beloved Mont St. Victoire. Lawren Harris painted reiterated versions of certain northern Ontario scenes and how they changed over time; while Emily Carr was fascinated for with forest interiors before moving onto renditions of skies as they appeared from the vantage of cut forests, each period of interest resulting in many images of the subject. Over a period of more than a decade, I returned constantly in my own work to the format of 14.5cm by 17 cm water-colour paper as the beginning place for drawings and collages: something about this set of dimensions, about the texture of the paper continually suggested the sense of groundedness I sought to explore. With every new work, a different way of viewing and rendering is found, a different state of mind informs the moment, and a deeper appreciation of the form and its content are gained. Artists often return repeatedly to similar themes and materials, for there remains more to be discovered, not only about the subject matter itself, but about our own relationship with it.

A slight shift in perspective — either physical or emotional — can bring about a very different form. B.C. artist Takao Tanabe has a graphite drawing titled “Portrait of a Cedar, Irony Creek” that I find particularly evocative. The branches create a flurry of movement while at the same time suggesting a profound serenity; the very marks on the paper, and most of all, something about the particular moment in time that occurred between Tanabe and the tree, are all very alive. I love how it is titled as a ‘portrait’, for that is what it is — a portrayal that is profoundly sincere and accurate, and yet telling of

the author's perceptive at the time and place in which it was done. I have often returned to this drawing and marvelled at how, had he stood at a slightly different angle to the tree, or had he returned to the exact same location a day later, the portrait would have been different, something entirely its own once again. Had he made the portrait in coloured acrylics instead of graphite, it would have a substantially different life about it.



Image 3.3. Takao Tanabe, *Portrait of a Cedar, Irony Creek*, 1995

A frequent challenge for artists is to find fresh ways to do (and to view) things, to explore different possibilities, even when it was thought that most viable possibilities had been exhausted. Turning our attention to something through creative means spurs us to see, feel, and understand in ways we hadn't before. Not only does this process allow for things that were before unnoticed to become more meaningful and intimately known, it also allows things that we considered familiar — and perhaps thereby uninteresting — to become enlivened, simply through perceiving them with greater, or different, attention, and through interpreting them with the perception of that particular day. In Nick Bantock's intricately illustrated story, *The Forgetting Room*, the main character finds

himself uninspired by the geographic scenes of the town he is in, having seen postcard images which robbed him of “the ability to see it through [his] own eyes.” Then, he hears the voice of his deceased artist grandfather: “If it’s too familiar, draw it.” And he does. Through the drawing, the place reveals itself to him more genuine ways, breathing life into his connection with it and ridding his eye of the “prepackaged version.”¹⁰⁰

Moral Implications

In my experience as an artist and as a teacher, I have found that the practice of painting, drawing, photographing or otherwise rendering something does lead us to become more sensuously aware, and more discerning, of particulars in our surroundings, and that this perceptiveness lingers even after the creative work is done. Elsewhere in the world we become attuned to variations of the things on which we have been focusing, as our eyes pick them out more easily. The experience of rendering, close up, the veins of a cottonwood leaf leads me to notice similar patterns in the chard leaves I prepare for dinner. The curves of the tree roots making their way gracefully down through a nurse stump catch my attention for a drawing, and thereafter I become aware of many such stumps nursing young trees in the woods I’ve walked many times before, but with eyes that had, until then, been less attuned to these magnificent stumps.

In her work on the moral value of aesthetic education, Maxine Greene centres on these very themes: how the arts encourage us to notice what there is to be noticed in the world around us, and, to explore alternate visions and possibilities of what might be.¹⁰¹ It is this kind of perceptual awareness, she says, that connects children and youth with an internal moral consciousness, allowing them to better trust and develop their own thoughts and feelings, which then act as pilot in situations that call for ethical judgement. If our senses are alive and receptive they reach also something real in ourselves, which then gives us agency to move in directions that sympathise with our own moral compass. Time in close contact with nature does something similar. In the final chapter I will look in closer detail at how nature can provide a valuable place for ethical rumination. While negotiating one’s way morally through social realms remains vitally important, time spent with the more-than-human world can offer valuable perspective, and be a means of returning to a part of the self which informs and enriches our moral sensibilities.



Image 3.4. cottonwood leaf, thread, pencil, watercolour paper

Experiences in the arts and in nature also have a way of removing us for a time from the instrumental rationality^h, the means-ends state of mind, which we tend to fall back on for a large part of our functional lives. Rather than focus on specific results, aesthetic engagement is, by nature, intrinsic and process-oriented. While efficiency and

^h The term 'instrumental rationality', used by Charles Taylor in his *Malaises of Modernity*, implies finding the quickest means to an end, the emphasis being on efficiency (often economic efficiency) rather than on intrinsic or moral values.

achieving practical goals are necessary for many things in life, we often run the risk of overemphasizing these in our decision-making, to the neglect of ethical and intrinsic value. Cultural critic Terry Eagleton observes that questions of morality have become difficult in our era not only because of multiple social views and the complexity they entail, but because “modern history makes it especially hard to think in non-instrumental terms,” causing our moral thinking to become “infected” by the instrumental model like everything else.¹⁰² Indeed, this instrumental rationality, or means-ends thinking, is part of what has led to our current ecological crisis.¹⁰³

In his work on the value of the arts to education, Eisner pursues a similar vein of thought, remarking that most of the seeing we do is largely instrumental — more a form of recognition than of real observation, serving only to spur us on to the next task at hand. Engaging in artistic visual practices, he says, grants us permission to slow down and actually look, to *relate* to what we see in an affective and more fulsome way.¹⁰⁴ Eisner also reminds us that efficiency is normally something we reserve for tasks we wish to be done with, rather than for those that are truly meaningful to us. The act of slowing down to observe, to listen, and to absorb, has ethical value in that we have a chance to reflect and absorb nuance, to connect with ourselves and with our surroundings, and to have our hearts and minds present in the moment rather than thinking of the next goal.

As I’ve mentioned, immersion in nature has a way of inviting us to attend to aspects of ourselves that are less constructed, less manipulated, than those through which we normally participate in more organised society. Mark Fettes has observed that many places where we turn in our urban and social environments seem, at some level, to tell us who to be; in the natural world, we tend to feel this much less.¹⁰⁵ My own experience, particularly in difficult times, has been that the woods are where I feel most encouraged to remove the masks that various roles in my life demand, and where I can best return to myself in a way that offers a sense of release, as well as of revitalization. Absorption in both art and nature invites us, sometimes despite ourselves, to turn to the authentic aspects of life.



Image 3.5. Trans Canada Trail, Burnaby

Mystery

Recently I attended a reading by poet Jeff Derksen at SFU. The audience members were mostly faculty and graduate students from the department of English, and in a discussion afterward about the process of putting together one of the poems, a

respondent observed, “The poem doesn’t really work if the writer knows what’s going on.”

Unlike the pragmatics of daily life, where a measure of certainty and predictability is expected, the arts offer a facet of experience which gives room for, even welcomes, the uncertain and the unpredictable. We get caught up in a story because we don’t know what will happen and are intrigued to find out. The quality of originality, associates with the experience of finding something unexpected, an exploration of otherwise uncharted ground. I once heard writer Cynthia Ozick relate in an interview the difference between writing an essay and writing a work of fiction; she describes the latter as a journey without a map where one might find oneself unexpectedly beside a perilous cliff. It is interesting that the metaphor she uses is one of adventure and voyage on the land, specifically in an area outside the human safety zone.

Besides the lack of certainty, there is also a sense that part of things is left open for our own imagination to complete, that a definitive understanding is not what we are after. Maxine Greene writes of “the power of incompleteness” in art, observing how certain works invite us to open ourselves to the unknown dimensions of life.¹⁰⁶ In poetry, music and the visual arts, things are not spelled out for us — rather, we have the sense there is more to be discovered, more behind the work that we might never fully understand. Colin Lyas intimates that the mysteries behind the power that art has over us are not really meant to be cracked; we love certain films, novels and works of music for reasons we cannot easily explain.¹⁰⁷ I would say that there is a certain pleasure in being subject to that power, even if — or perhaps because — it cannot be fully understood. Through their evocative qualities, the arts have a way of celebrating the mysteries of life rather than explaining them. Through this sense of wonder of things unsolved, they put us in touch the sense of something greater than ourselves — of the sacred — I spoke of earlier.

Experiences of nature can offer us a similar appreciation of mystery. While science has worked to ‘solve’ much by answering many questions about the workings of

natureⁱ, what makes our experiences special is not so much about knowing answers but also the things we wonder about. Our relationship with nature in recent decades has been a dubious one: the focus has been more on how we can manage and control it, rather than how it can affect and have power over us. Furthermore, tightly filled schedules and goal-oriented thinking make little allowance for surrender and being affected by the nature's enigmatic qualities. Yet there can be something special about the things we cannot easily explain, by the stars in a deep sky on a clear cold evening, or even by the minute details beneath our feet. Rachel Carson describes the experience of going out at night to look for the source of various insect sounds with a flashlight — a game she played with her young nephew:

Most haunting of all is the one I call the fairy bell ringer. I have never found him. I'm not sure I want to. His voice — and surely he himself, are so ethereal, so delicate, so otherworldly, that he should remain invisible, as he has through all the nights I have searched for him. It is exactly the sound that should come from a bell held in the hand of the tiniest elf, inexpressibly clear and silvery, so faint, so barely-to-be-heard that you hold your breath as you bend closer to the green glades from which the fairy chiming comes.¹⁰⁸

One reason why I want to consider these qualities of the unfathomable in our relationships with both art and nature is because of their moral ramifications. Somerville suggests that practices of being open and attentive to the uncertain, the mysterious and the complex put us in a better position when it comes to ethical decisions. We are more likely to make ethical mistakes, she says, when we insist on being certain, rather than when we grow comfortable with not always knowing.¹⁰⁹ There is a sense of humility in accepting that matters can be incomplete, that other possibilities are always just beyond our immediate perception and understanding. Intimate contact with the natural world and involvement in the arts both engender the appreciation that, while we can come to understand more profoundly, there is much that is left open. Our involvement in these

ⁱ I am thinking here of Wittgenstein's statement toward the end of his *Tractatus*, "We feel that even when all *possible* scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched." (6.521). It must be conceded, however, that at their best, the natural life sciences are driven by a sense of wonder (as shown by Carson) and curiosity about the stories behind the life forms being studied.

areas can flourish only if we remain open to new possibilities — these might be observations of subtle nuance or entirely overturned understandings.

Imaginative empathy

Both art and nature prompt in us a sense of play, of forgetting ourselves and the pressures of life for a moment. Opportunity is given to put aside worldly worries for a time, or at least to consider them from a different, somehow more humane, perspective. In the state of becoming thus absorbed, there may be glimpses of other ways of being in the world. The effort of going into a work of art involves imagining and seeing the world as someone else might, and it takes more than cursory appreciation to get the fullness of this imagining. Colin Lyas puts it this way: “If a work embodies a certain perspective, then to engage fully with it, I have to make the effort to see it from that perspective, too.”¹¹⁰ To me, this is one of the most evocative and captivating aspects of seeing a film, reading a novel, or viewing a work of art. Imagine going about life *this way*, the work tells us. And with that, my own life and approach to it are somehow viewed anew, at times even challenged into trying on different perspectives, knowing that a single one cannot be the only one that is right.

Something similar might occur when such feelings come into play outside the human world. One who is inclined to enter different perspectives, or has acquired the habit of doing so through allowing themselves to be pulled into the intricacies of various forms of art, is more likely to feel sympathy toward forms of life different from their own. The process of letting go of oneself in order to imagine inhabiting another body and living a different reality is not dissimilar from extending one’s senses and emotions to feel the predicament of another mammal as she seeks to protect her young, or of a chickadee struggling to find shelter and food in the depths of winter. I am thinking here of the kinds of emotion that arise from authentic experience, where the heart cannot but be involved. One who shares the grief of the protagonist in a novel or opera is more likely to be sensitive to the fragility of a particular ecosystem threatened by encroaching development. One who feels a sense of deep serenity from a melody or from the composition of a painting may be prone to a similar sense of rightness when beside a river or in the midst of wilderness. Being moved by the work of a composer or a passage of verse involves similar kind of sensitivity as being affected by the energy and

resonance of a particular place. As I will endeavour to show later on, the process of creating art involves the kind of imaginative empathy that can also lead us to better understand, and be closer to, life forms that are different from our own.

Perhaps one of the most intriguing things that the arts and the natural world have in common — a sensation felt both by lovers of the arts and of wilderness — is that something *alive* is there, something authentic and real. This in turn resonates with something alive and authentic within us. Langer remarks on the “quality of ‘livingness’ in all successful works.”¹¹¹ Like the entities we find in the natural world, works of art are not merely ‘things’. It takes the time and willingness, however, to extend ourselves and see in a feeling way, to feel that sense of life.



Image 3.6. cottonwood leaf, thread, pencil, watercolour paper



Earlier, I said that the pleasure we find in nature is essentially an aesthetic one. I mean this in all senses of the idea of pleasure: our creaturely interests, fodder for the heart, mind and spirit, our fundamental needs, and, a sense of joy. We are in an affective, relational kind of state when we find these — one that understands when things are not laid out in ordinary language. There are also other complexities to be found in relationships, including thoughts of identity, longing and loss. These, too, have

strong connections with our sense of aesthetic, and can characterise our relationship with a place.

The overlaps I have been trying to observe here between the arts and the natural world are not anything new, really. As human beings, we have interacted with both of these since our very beginnings; both have been part of our evolution and have provided us with a kind of lifeline. My endeavour has been to retrieve — and interweave — the fundamental connections between these two forms of experience.

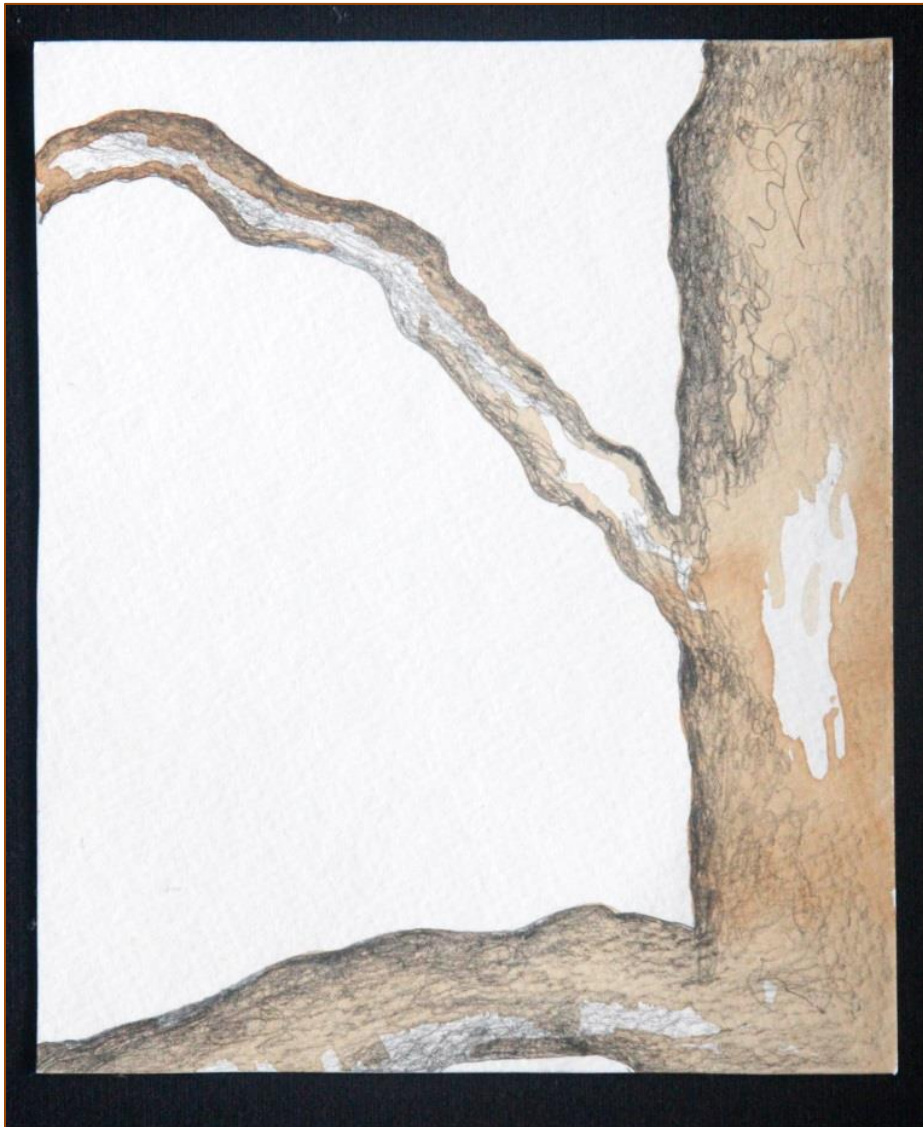


Image 3.7. pencil and tea on watercolour paper

Pause

In August heat so determined it stills the wind
I read Erica's philosophy on how to see, while
from the stillness of the neighbourhood faint echoes of
a song call to me through the open window
over subdivision blocks, reverberating
between houses and over grass.

A hum, deep melody of a distant voice from
somewhere in the past, perhaps an old radio,
a call I knew only from something heard long ago
across eastern mountains. Beckoning a loved one,
a voice from my mother's history I'm not sure
includes me, but I want to be part of.

A home land not in the sense of familiar and secure
but of a shared journey before mine, with mysteries
untold but sung, unstated but felt, found only
in the shadows at twilight, created by sheltering forms
giving uneasy refuge, promising resonance with no name.

Pages, Trees and Sinews

This no longer tells me anything of beauty
or anything for which there is room inside.

Words on a page fill my head, my
eyes, like a pattern that would
rather be a walk, slow paced,
steady rhythms that make sound
in the surrounding silence.

The crunch of gravel under feet
talks to the colours it passes by:
green blades, yellow skunky blooms, oversized,
towering a contrast to the delicate petal cushions
in fuschian miniature hovering close to the ground.

Feet and arms need knowledge too,
long to have theirs complemented, to
be surrounded by uneven ground, unpredictable and new,
yet with its own course of coherence
the wisdom of which
rises far above the ground, in me, and
in the surrounding space,
that breathes robust
with a text more subtle, more intricate.

4. Symbolic Languages: Ways of Absorbing the World and Communicating What We Know

*Two birds, one thought, one feeling
Cling to the tree of the body
Don't ask me to choose between them
Susan McCaslin¹¹²*

Natural Inclinations, Form and Content

In the opening of his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein writes of the difficulty, at times futility, of attempting to mould one's ideas to fit with a convention — in his case, the welding of a series of disparate thoughts into a logical sequence — while maintaining their integrity. “My thoughts were soon crippled,” he says, “if I tried to force them on in any single direction against their natural inclination.”¹¹³ I find this idea of natural inclination a particularly potent one, as it pertains not only to the nature, tone and subject matter of our thoughts, but also by the manner in which we feel we are able to express them — the form they take when communicated. It is not generally common that such individual inclinations have room to be honoured and explored. Considering the range of means through which it is possible to express what one knows or is seeking to know, the area that is normally focused on in school is particularly narrow. It is true that conventions of systematic language and consistent formats for writing, for example, allow for a kind of proficiency and ease of common understanding across diverse contexts. Yet many other possibilities — especially affective ones — are not honoured in the way they could be.

Considering Wittgenstein's struggle, is it possible, then, that many thoughts (and thereby many ways of perceiving, knowing and expressing) are being crippled, being forced into a conventional framework? Are broad possibilities of meaning being compromised — or completely dismissed — because they are not easily encompassed

within our standard means of communication? Might we find means to better honour and to explore not only individual inclinations, but also other traditions of communicating? What I would like to explore here is how we might turn to what Veà Vecchi, a Reggio Emilia teacher, calls the symbolic languages¹¹⁴ — the arts — to allow for a richer variety of literacies and ways of knowing, ways that cannot easily be expressed in words.

Loris Malaguzzi, founder of the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education, expresses beautifully the idea of myriad languages in his poem, 'The Hundred Languages':

No way. The hundred is there

The child
is made of one hundred.
The child has
a hundred languages
a hundred hands
a hundred thoughts a
a hundred ways of thinking
of playing, of speaking.
A hundred, always a hundred
ways of listening
of marvelling of loving
a hundred joys
for singing and understanding
a hundred worlds
to discover
a hundred worlds
to invent
a hundred worlds
to dream.

The child has
a hundred languages
(and a hundred hundred hundred more)
but they steal ninety-nine
The school and the culture
separate the head from the body.
They tell the child:
to think without hands
to do without head
to listen and not to speak
to understand without joy
to love and to marvel
only at Easter and Christmas.

They tell the child:
that work and play
reality and fantasy
science and imagination
sky and earth
reason and dream
are things
that do not belong together.

And thus they tell the child
that the hundred is not there.
The child says:
No way. The hundred *is* there.¹¹⁵

While Malaguzzi is thinking here of young children and of a time in a child's life when more languages seem possible, I believe the spirit of the poem is to *keep* these languages possible through mature life. There is much, after all, that simply cannot be expressed through the kind of language we most commonly use. And if the "hundred ways of thinking / of playing, of speaking" are not nurtured and given room to grow, or the encouragement to develop, they can slowly fade away. Yet more than simple encouragement is required. I have often imagined what it might be like if the visual (through art), the auditory (through music), the kinetic (through dance) and other ways of imagining through drama and poetry were given the kind of attention that we give to the relatively limited literacy emphasis of reading, writing and arithmetic. What aspects of ourselves might develop further? What ways of relating to the world? When these symbolic and affective ways of communicating are marginalised, the visual, auditory, kinetic, poetic and imaginative aspects of ourselves are equally sidelined, and the ways of relating to the world that depend on them —that I would argue we need and that are often most meaningful for their connective power — are also diminished.

While it may not be possible to be fluent in all of these symbolic languages, I strongly feel it is a child's right to be able to find his way comfortably through at least a few of them, putting their love and focus into a selected one or two as they mature, becoming versed in the traditions, skills and expressive possibilities of that particular art form. Even within that, there will be multiple possibilities for communication and expression, as each has its own genres and traditions. These can be a part of one's life into adulthood; I don't believe aspects of talent or natural aptitude need to be deciding

factors or hindrances any more than we expect them to be for the regular language arts. The main idea is that natural inclinations and personal choice be followed with these multiple languages, and that the impetus to absorb and to communicate in poetic and symbolic ways of knowing be valued no less than communicating in rational language. To me, cherishing the ways in which we most resonate with the world (and thereby care for it) involves taking seriously these diverse forms of listening and of expression.

As we know with our pursuits of mainstream literacy, development of fluency takes time and practice: sustained effort and exploration are needed, as are encouraging, consistent and inspired tutelage. Developing familiarity and skills — and acquiring a sense of proficiency and confidence — need more than occasional dabbling if they are to come to fruition. Learning about techniques, becoming versed in the tradition and developing a repertoire are what lead to the kind of fluency that enables students to express their thoughts and ideas with complexity and subtlety. Considering the valuable ways of knowing that are possible outside traditional verbal literacy, a committed education in the arts ideally needs to begin at an early age and continue in practice far beyond early childhood. The arts speak to us, and allow us to express ourselves, at any point in life. What I am imagining here is an ideal as well as a general direction where the arts are considered far more valuable as a sustained and developing practice in education than they are now. One would work within an immediate culture where the traditions behind particular forms of art are honoured as an integrated and meaningful part of curriculum and of personal growth. Yet even in a less than ideal world, arts activities and forms of aesthetic engagement can be meaningful and memorable when they occur in small increments as part of the larger picture of learning.

Considering the possibilities of multiple resonant languages, we realise also the myriad languages that a place, and that nature itself, embodies. In the more-than-human world, there are no words, at least not of the kind we are most familiar with. There are sounds, sensations, smells, patterns, forms, desires, calls, textures, silences, colours, angles and qualities of light, feelings, echoes, scurries, tracks, instincts, temperatures, seasons and various kinds of motion and energy. It is difficult to even conceive, really, of all that there is in terms of possibilities of meaning and forms of communication. How might our own inclinations, then, considering the potential of multiple languages, inhabit some of the various forms and meanings to be found in the

natural world, and, in a larger sense, in the world around us? Rather than speak to us in prose, nature *shows* us what it is about, shows us that it is there — if we are willing to listen and to look. I mean this in more than the visual sense of showing, as it can be done through movement, rhythm, sounds, scents and behaviours of all kinds. My quest here is somewhat similar to that of Jan Zwicky, who looks toward “a wholeness with the world that, as language-users, we cannot sustain.”¹¹⁶ There will be intervals and moments for seeking a deeper *closeness* with places, people and things, when it helps to look beyond — or beneath — the prosaic aspects of language and toward means of conveyance that embody poetry and metaphor, image and movement.

In his earlier work, the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein talks of the difference between saying and showing, pointing out how certain concepts cannot be expressed in conventional language, needing instead to be shown in other ways: “There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical.”¹¹⁷ It is easy for me to understand this statement in an intuitive sense, more difficult to describe what it means. I feel a sense of appreciation, even relief, that Wittgenstein addresses areas of life that offer a deep sense of meaning: things that are *felt*, which we have little desire to explain but somehow still wish to be understood.

What I see here is an echo with what the arts, in many ways, are about: when we feel able to *show* the character of our thoughts and perceptions in a variety of ways, rather than merely say what they are about, the forms through which they are shown can often bring us closer to the very things being expressed. Many of the forms of knowing that affect us most deeply have emotional and enigmatic (or, as Wittgenstein might say, mystical) qualities. To communicate these evocatively, it helps to be familiar and comfortable with means of expression other than the more systematised forms of language. In contexts of education and of research, the aesthetic qualities of a work — the feel of it, the shape it takes, and the way in which it is put together and transmitted into something understandable — all affect the content. It makes sense, then, that these qualities need to complement the spirit and the subject matter of that work, and also involve the aesthetic responsiveness of its author. Rather than simply saying what something is, we *show* what it is in every facet of its representation. Echoing Wittgenstein, Stuart Richmond proposes, “Saying and showing have close affinities with content and form in art; and all of life, it should be remembered has its variations of

form.”¹¹⁸ The form a work takes affects the way in which it is understood, absorbed and integrated into life. Like Wittgenstein, Zwicky, for example, finds it necessary to match the form of her writing to sympathize with the nature of the thoughts it expresses. Her book *Wisdom and Metaphor* is a work rather than merely a text, for its very objectness and form are part of the experience of taking in the meaning, the quality, of the thoughts. Because the pages contain more space than they do writing, we pause in between each thought, breathe, see connections without an excess of words.

Richmond speaks of the necessity of subjectivity in education and in the communication of knowledge: “The subjective thinker,” he says, “responds to the world with intellect, feeling, imagination, and intuition intact... What is required in subjective expression is truth to life.”¹¹⁹ Making room for this in education, he says, gives meaning to educating the whole person: it is the involvement of one’s life and personal perspective that makes teaching and learning imaginative and memorable. In a somewhat similar vein, Peter London points out how a question characteristic of a scientific approach is “What is that?” whereas an artist asks, “What is that *to me*?” While scientific inquiry may seek to explain the nature of the world, art, says London, “is interested in the nature of the world *as it impinges upon the experienced state of being in the world.*”¹²⁰ I do not take this to mean being selfishly absorbed in one’s own take on things, but rather attending in the fuller subjective sense Richmond speaks of — to the particulars that there are to be noticed, both in our experiences of life and in the physical world. It also means deeming as valid what our imagination brings us. Most of all, it requires that we take the time to pause, reflect, and involve ourselves meaningfully in our experiences.



Modes of Learning, and of Expressing What we Know

Frequent opportunities to explore and to use non-literal means of learning and of communicating what has been learned are needed by all of us, and by children in particular. Rational and standardised forms of knowing characterise only a fragment of the whole of our relations with the world; they also involve only a part of our own faculties. Yet, in school, the dominant focus often falls on them. While literal, factual

and methodical forms of thought are important, other ways of knowing are equally so. When delved into, they enrich our lives immensely. Elliot Eisner describes how artistic means of exploration are essential to the development of the mind and indeed of the whole person. “It is literalism,” he says, “that suppresses the almost natural tendency to use language poetically, as very young children often do.”¹²¹ He speaks of subtler forms of understanding that rely instead on simile and invention, and how these are in themselves a form of articulacy connected with the act of conscious seeing as a way of making sense of the world. Eisner goes on to insist that children need much more than the occasional opportunity to communicate — and to explore the world — in ways that are lyrical or organic. In this regard, the kind of learning children do has transformative and far-reaching consequences:

the kind of deliberately assigned tasks student are offered in school help define the kind of thinking they will learn to do. The kind of thinking students learn to do will influence what they come to know and the kind of cognitive skills they acquire... curriculum is a mind-altering device.¹²²

If it is part of our natural tendency — as I believe it is — to experience many aspects of the world through affective and perceptive means, we deserve to be able to express that knowledge in that way as well. It is part of our inherent make-up to be sensitive to the qualitative and sensory aspects of our environment — for centuries, our survival depended on that. While we are born with that potential, it needs to be carefully nurtured in order to develop its possible fullness. In a time when we do not depend on it as we did in generations past, this kind of perceptual sensitivity may appear less than necessary: sensuousness can begin to acquire an air of extravagance or even the kind of simplicity that is reserved for when the workday is done. Yet the quality of our lives and of the connections we have with the phenomenal world are greatly affected by our ability to consciously see, and to sense, the subtleties and complexities in the forms of things. And, as Eisner argues, so is the formation of our minds.

In an exploration of alternative forms of research, Eisner speaks of the importance of a written work’s form fitting the matter behind it: “form and content cannot be disengaged: how one writes shapes what one says.”¹²³ I take this also in a broader sense, in a way that applies to more than writing — that the means, form, tone and texture of one’s communication shape what is conveyed. I would add that it also allows

what needs saying to be said more sincerely. The same is true for learning — the method and medium through which we learn shapes what we *come* to know. It also informs *how* we know, and substantiates the qualities and subtleties of our understanding. Much of Eisner’s work centres around raising awareness of the manner of learning and representing what is assimilated, and, of the bearing that has on who we become. “We tend to seek out what we are able to represent,”¹²⁴ he says, and, “the works we create speak back to us.”¹²⁵ I agree that the shape and tone of the communication affects everything; something below one’s immediate consciousness is able to relate to the topic at hand, bringing it forth in ways that are ineffable and affective.

Working with the idea of diverse languages, with a kind of epistemological multilingualism, there is the complex question of whether one can ‘translate’ various forms of content from one to another. Similar themes, in the broad sense, can be danced, sung, painted or enacted — can be expressed in different forms and creative modes. Yet the idea of translation doesn’t really work because the theme itself becomes coloured, even formed, by the kind of qualities it takes on in a particular mode of expression.

Rather than simply lending themselves to communicating something through different means, a particular form of expression is connected to the very source of thought: in many respects, it *is* the content of the communication itself. In an interview she gave after the publication of one of her early books of poetry, Margaret Atwood was asked if she can say what she wants to say in poetry better than she can in prose. She insisted that poetry is not a translation of what she might write in prose, but that it is different altogether. Poetry, she says, is a form of thought. It is not separate from what is being expressed.¹²⁶ And in a somewhat different context but along similar veins, painter Gerhard Richter, known for being reluctant to talk about his work, has said that language is only capable of expressing what language can express. “Painting,” he says, “has nothing to do with that.”¹²⁷ It comes, then, from a different place, from an entirely different way of relating to the world, and to our experience in it.



Echoing Atwood and Richter, Peter London feels the necessity to retain the 'original structure' of the form in which he 'hears' his ideas come together. And, resonating with Wittgenstein, he feels that "converting them into a single format" would cause something of their clarity and essence to be lost.¹²⁸ Many of us often wish we had greater abilities to express thoughts and perceptions in the structures and forms through which we originally have them come to us. Ideally, if something comes to mind as an image, a poem, a song, or a play, then that would be the right form in which to communicate it — provided these forms of thought have not departed us through the imposition of more conventionally explicit ones. Going with Eisner's idea that we tend to seek out the things we know how to represent, we come to realise how much richer our relations with the world can be when we not only receive these ideas in diverse forms, but also feel able to express them as such. For many of us, schooling has indoctrinated the literal and commensurable as means through which we demonstrate what has been learned. Yet, to convert a poetic, visual, or otherwise organic thought into a standardised format is not only to diminish the nature of the inspiration itself, but to negate the potential fertility of our own modes of expression.

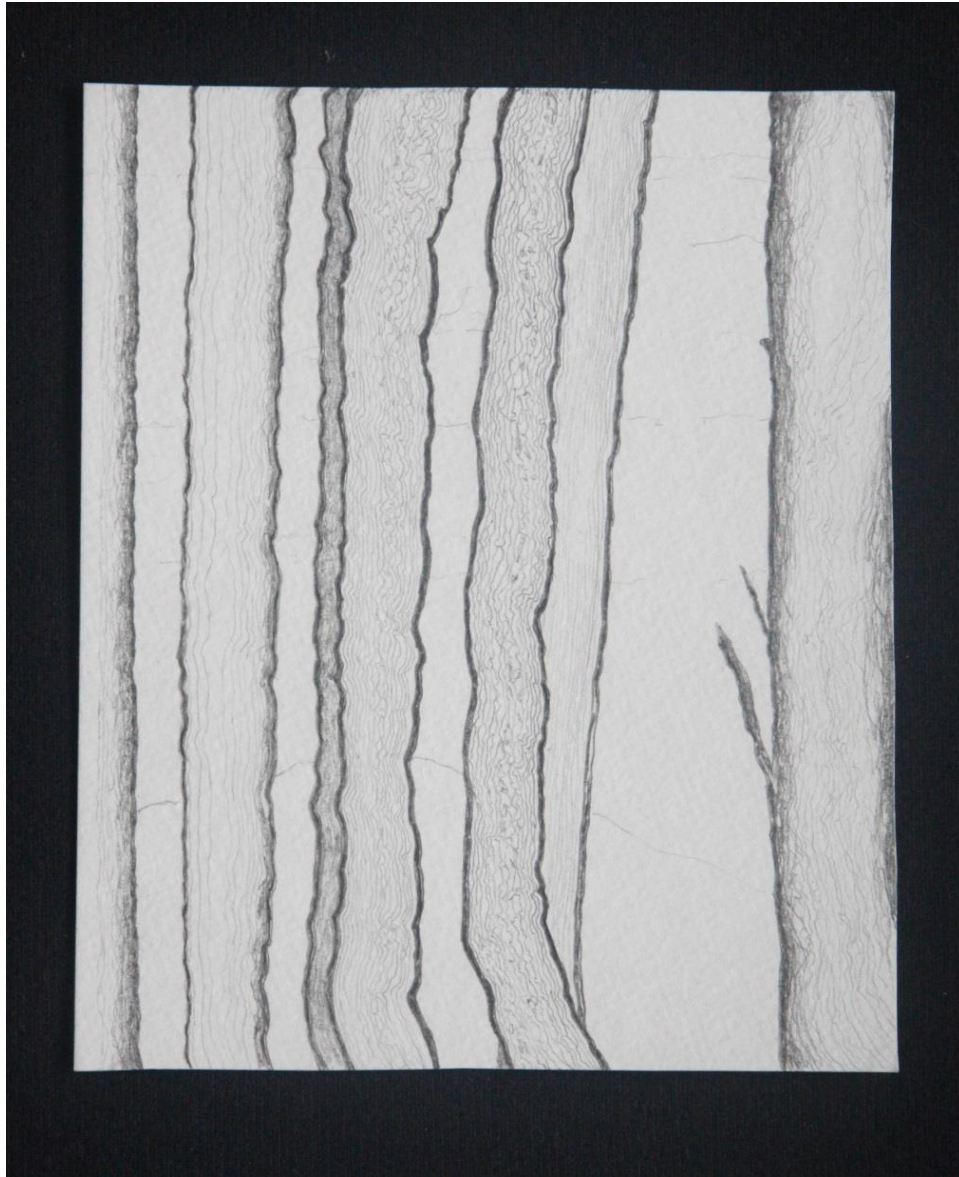


Image 4.1. pencil on watercolour paper



One of the ways to think of the arts is in terms of representation, and the effort to represent what we have experienced is a way of transforming our capacity to envision — both what is, and what might yet be. In a more generalised sense, Jerome Bruner sees learning itself as connected to one's capability to represent what one encounters in the

world. He emphasizes the importance of the qualitative aspects of representation, and of having a rich palette from which to choose:

I am convinced that we shall do better to conceive of growth as an empowering of the individual by multiple means for representing his world, multiple means that often conflict and create the dilemmas that stimulate growth.¹²⁹

The idea of representing is rather different from explaining, measuring, analyzing, or even describing. If taken in a way that combines thought and feeling, representation can mean a sensitive kind of sincerity to the subject matter, informed by a mind with a life behind it. If the task of representation is taken seriously, it calls upon a genuine sense of understanding, one that looks beyond personal bias toward a qualitative and honest portrayal. It is not only a means of conveying something to others, but also of making sense of things, of coming to know things, for oneself. And, it is immensely enriching to have the capacity for languages that represent and portray with different qualities, and in different ways. Remembering Eisner's powerful idea that we seek out what we are able to represent, what we are able to see in the world can be intimately connected with the modes of depiction with which we are familiar. The more we are conversant with various modes of representing, the more we are able to encounter and to absorb.

If we are to value the development of the arts and of symbolic languages, we need to take seriously their curricular implementation as well as the education of teachers who will have the passion to carry them through. The skills and repertoire of the arts take time and practice, skills and knowledge, as well as dedication to develop. They need to be seen as more than a means for creativity and expression in an organic and 'freeing' sense: just as we take the time to give students the fundamentals of language, reading and writing, taking the time to help them feel comfortable and conversant with various media, traditions and techniques will expand their scope and give them the means for enhanced expressive capabilities. Those who have experienced different cultures and are conversant in more than one language know that their horizons are substantially broader, their understanding of themselves and the world fuller, than if they had only been familiar with one. I believe something quite similar applies to symbolic and creative forms of communication.



The Spirit that Moves us

Gregory Cajete emphasizes that “Indigenous education, at its innermost core, is education about the life and nature of the spirit that moves us.”¹³⁰ This entails that we be aware of the various forms of living energy around us — and attentive to what we might be moved by. It also means that we *allow* ourselves, our spirits, to be stirred by both powerful and subtler things in the process of relating to the world, and of learning. We may be familiar with being moved by a touching moment between people, by a good story, a potent piece of news or a work of music. We may also be moved to act on the behalf of someone or something we care about. Yet going further, if we are to look more closely at the “nature of the spirit that moves us,” I feel we need also to look to the shapes things take in the physical and living world around us, to listen to things which may speak to us in quieter ways: perhaps a shift of light as the day moves, the song of a morning thrush, the wind bringing news from the west.

My concern is that, with the way children are currently often overloaded — with information, expectations, time pressures, schedules, and multiple forms of media and technology — and the way in which a large part of their day is regimented for them, their subtler inclinations and instincts become diminished. The moments of stillness where interesting or subtle observations might take place might be regarded instead as moments of emptiness or boredom. The pressures and norms of contemporary life that inundate children take hold even more fully in our adult lives, making us less likely, I find, to be ‘called’ by the small (or not so small) things that might move us — the beckoning of fresh snow, the invitation of sunlight on dew-soaked grass, the magic of that hour of twilight, the fluttering of wings overhead, the sound of rain whispering reclusion. It becomes rather easy to learn, in unconscious ways, to silence the call of the things that may potentially move them, perhaps not even to hear it. It takes conscious effort and a particular kind of learning environment — one that itself has room and ears open to subtleties — to keep alive a sense of wonder and with that, the propensity to see and to feel.

There is also the valuing of particular forms of thought and outlook. While the critical reasoning skills much emphasised in recent years clearly have value, I think it is important to be cautious when we start to see the encouragement of scepticism over openness and surrender, of analytic thought over reflective contemplation (or simply being awed by something and allowing ourselves to be taken in). We are told in educational contexts of the highest order not to take things on faith. Yet, I feel there are times when taking things on faith has its rightful place, as it coincides with being moved by things that bring us a sense of meaning.

Faith need not be without curiosity. Being in touch with the spirit that tugs at us – whether gently or less so — can pull us in rich directions, deepening our encounters with things — with our physical surroundings, our relationships with each other and with ourselves. It substantiates the communication we have with them. Finding the means to articulate our perceptions and internal sways is, after all, the essence of expression. If our thought and modes of communication lean toward an objectifying rationality, toward categorising in order to define and organize things, the effect is often that we feel a need to be in command of the matter at hand. This is then how we come to perceive the world around us: as something from which we detach ourselves in order to gain the upper hand. Robert Bringham has this to say about our more typical thoughts regarding nature and the wild, and our resistance to surrender:

The wild disappears from view when we place ourselves in charge.

...As soon as you think your way out of the wild — as soon as depression or arrogance or some other form of exaggerated self-concern leads you to see yourself and distinct from it — the wild looks like a *thing*.¹³¹

In his essay 'Wild Language', Bringham asks, "Is language always a domesticated creature, or is, or can it be, wild? And if so, in what sense?"¹³² Bringham finds that thought and its modes of communication need to be informed by, even dwell within, the wild: the more we try to tame its elements and creatures and the thought process around them, the less they have to teach us.¹³³ In the process of making our forms of communication commensurable to fit within the realm of human progress, much is lost.

Mainstream schooling has fragmented what could otherwise be holistic and spiritually connected means of knowing and living, arriving instead at a reduced form of

education that detaches us from the spirit of things and how our own spirits connect with them. With children, the effects can go deep: a kind of template becomes ingrained in their very manner of perception. Forms of thought and epistemologies that fit with the modern structures of achieving what is quantifiable and getting ahead materially are overemphasized, while those that dwell in the spiritual — in a sense of reciprocity and empathy with larger ecologies — are relatively neglected. There is much to be said for some things having power over us, rather than the other way around. This does not mean a lack of agency on our part, it means that we participate in things with a sense of reciprocity rather than detaching so as to be in control. Just as we allow ourselves to be moved by stories, by moments of relationship between humans, we can allow ourselves to be moved, as Cajete suggests, by matters of spirit, by the movements, intentions and forces of nature as they move in, around and through us.¹³⁴



Bringhurst intimates that thought and language are not separate from these matters, that nature is indeed their source. For Cajete, matters of language and spirit are what connect people to a place, thus in a way they can be seen coming full circle: our languages both begin with and return us to the world. My thought is that language — like various forms of literacy — is so much more than a construct, more than a convention or tool through which we communicate: it stems from our very need to understand and to express how we relate to our surroundings, to each other, and to ourselves. It both expresses and moulds who we are, and informs how our spiritual and existential selves connect with everything else. The more we have available to us with respect to subtler and more immediate modes of communication, the more appropriately we can use what best responds to, and takes as its source, the spirit of a particular situation. An expression of personal voice, as well as of the lore that binds and characterises our culture, our faculty of communication both fuels, and is fuelled by, every stage of our learning. And it speaks to me most poignantly when Cajete says that “Learning is always a creative act... the most complex of our natural traits.”¹³⁵

Symbolic and poetic forms of language are more difficult to delineate, to pin down, and to transcribe. It is for this reason that they don't fit so easily into modern schooling. While they are very purposeful, they refuse to be associated with mechanical

utility. Their richness and meaning dwells instead in matters of the spirit while being in full embrace of the concrete. Like matters of the ineffable, they know the impossibility of endeavouring to be understood in the same way by everyone at any given time. They vary greatly between individuals both in their subtleties of form and their intricacies of meaning. They refuse consistency of manner and shun uniformity, reflecting instead the intricacies of a particular moment and a particular voice, as it lives within the awareness of greater time.

Thus, too, are the languages and literacies of nature. It is for this reason that we need a richer variety of literacies that speak and sing us back to the living entities of the world, themselves near-infinite in their variation. Such literacies enable and encourage forms of communication that integrate the soul of things, and these in turn affect how we perceive the themes we address. I think one of our most important endeavours as educators is to impart an array of ways of knowing and of expressing, to seek out and encourage those that feel most meaningful and sincere to each individual with respect to their situations, their particular relations with the world. This is particularly valuable in the face of much commercial culture which itself moulds minds more than we would like to think. It is also particularly important when, despite its promise of increased means of communication and creative form, technology — particularly our constant immersion amidst its gadgets and terminals — also reduces our engagement with physical and living form.

Cajete finds that, at its best, education “recognizes the power of thought and language to create the worlds we live in” and that it “honours each person’s way of being, doing, and understanding.”¹³⁶ The challenge, then, is the creation of an educational culture that honours, welcomes and engages with expressive forms of communication, that connects us to the living world and the ground beneath our feet, one that builds the foundations of aesthetic engagement in the realization that *how* things are conveyed — the spirit and tone they embody — matters as much, perhaps even more, than *what* is conveyed.



More than we can say

First Nations educator Eber Hampton writes of an educational approach that focuses on the human connection with the world around us, with its history and primeval forces, and the various pulls that the earth, nature, and the seasons, have upon us. He proposes how education might grow from what is referred to as the six directions, which include north, east, south, west, earth and spirit, each respectively characterised by winter, spring, summer and fall, and also as the spiritual and societal motivations that these call forth in us. Included are the symbolic, as well as the felt, meanings held by various times of day: dawn, midday, sunset and night, “so that seasonal and temporal as well as spatial concepts are evoked.” Each direction connotes a “complex set of meanings, feelings, relationships, and movements.”¹³⁷ Time is regarded as cyclical rather than linear, natural inclinations and sensibilities are at the root of learning, and focus is on intimate interactions with the natural world and with the community. Encompassing aspects of culture, place, identity, affiliation and spirituality, this addresses, in a deeply intuitive way, our most primal human needs.

Hampton’s work is driven by a concern that the structure of North American schools is hostile to Native cultures. For example, it follows “clock time instead of personal, social and natural time,”¹³⁸ emphasizes learning by telling and questioning rather than observation and example, and encourages convergent thinking. I cannot help but think that these characteristics affect all children, not only those of First Nations heritage, in ways that impoverishes a felt and integrated sense of meaning. We then grow into these ways as adults, accepting certain conventions as norms that we force ourselves to adapt to.

Concerned about reactions to his view of education, Hampton reveals that he is working from a paradigm that doesn’t assume us to be the centre of things:

My...remaining qualm is that I will be misunderstood as using the six directions as a model rather than allowing it to direct me. This way of thinking is sacred in the sense that it is bigger than anything I might say. It helps me to understand in that it stimulates my thoughts and feelings rather than being contained in my words.¹³⁹

This basic acknowledgment that there are forces than cannot be defined verbally and that pull us — are *meant* to pull us — in meaningful and powerful ways, gives me pause. How do we respond to the things that call us? How might it feel when we allow ourselves to be pulled by something greater than we are? We might begin by acknowledging that the pull, whether it comes from within or from something in our surroundings, is real and good. Being affected by forces greater than ourselves does not render us helpless or without a sense of purpose; rather, their power animates us as we move with it. Encouraging children and young people in this regard empowers them: they come to know that the voice inside is worthy, and that what it calls forth is a connection to the world around us.



One evening, early summer, in a loud school gymnasium — loud not with the cries of children but with blaring music from a Samba class — I am drawn by the sight of a streak of sunlight, shining through the tall cedars and making luminous shapes on the soft dark ground just outside the double doors leading out back. I had pried one of those doors open earlier, and stopped it with a bench because there was a bad smell in there, something like molten plastic, something that couldn't have been good for the children in the daytime, and wasn't pleasant for us.

My partner is not one I like doing these steps with; he fumbles, then I in turn fumble, and he then teases me in a way that I'm too exhausted to laugh at. We do the prescribed routines, and there it is again. My eye is drawn to that small space outside in the courtyard, and to this sliver of evening sunlight that streaks through. Despite the patch of bark-covered ground being on the northeast side of the building, this streak of evening sunlight has found its way there, crescent-shaped, like the curve of a low branch right beside it. It calls me, tugs at my heart.

We do the routine once more, better this time, partly because we decide to do it separately first. When one of us misses a half-step, though, it all goes wrong; at least that's how it feels to me. I'm told by the instructor not to worry about that, to just follow him, let him lead, but it seems I'm not good at being led, not by this person anyway.

It's time for the class to be over, and though the instructor has not yet wrapped up, I feel a need to go. I say goodnight, and instead of heading for the front door, I go out the back.

The streak of sunlight has gone. The moment is over. Still, I stand there, stand with the tall trees, looking up, breathing them in. The one that towers directly over me begins its branches only halfway up, a good fifteen feet above me. Those branches would embrace me, reach into me, if only I were taller. As it is, they reach into open space, having gathered the last of the sun for today. I stand with the cedars for a spell longer, looking up.

Then, someone else comes outside for the fresh air, and the space, the moment, changes.



Looking for meaning

Some modes of mind call for a particular kind of approach, one that complements what they are, and accompanies them faithfully. In winter, for example, our energy is lower, our spirits look inward, our minds and bodies are more reclusive than in the full-blown spring, when energy is high and things are in full bloom, botanically and otherwise. To ask one in midwinter to do something that calls upon the quality of energy that the spring or summer provide, for example, might go not only against nature as we see it outside, but also against our own natures. It also wouldn't bring the best qualities to the task. The tone of a particular day, a particular moment, is going to have an effect regardless of pre-laid plans, and in any meaningful endeavor, it is more fruitful to listen to that tone than to push it aside. The feeling and energy of evening is vastly different from that of early morning, different from that of midday. Depending on the season, the light and atmosphere of early evening, which is just the end of the afternoon, might be different from that of the moment of sunset, which in turn is different from twilight, when shadows have begun to cloak things.

If students practice a range of means of expressing and communicating what is being explored, and are given opportunities to follow intuition in deciding the form of their communication, it makes sense that a similar intuitive guidance might respond also to the disposition of a particular moment, season, time of day. And the soul of a certain focus of exploration, of a time and place, can be better observed and followed if we have a range of intuitive and expressive means in our repertoire. Creating room for this kind of self-guidance and for a sense of agency is what helps bring about the personal connections that are necessary if one's work is to have intrinsic qualities. This may seem unrealistic and indeed contrary to traditional ideas of schooling, which tell us that we need to keep on task (the task having been pre-determined and assigned by someone else) and keep on schedule (one determined by administration). It is a worthwhile question to ask: where in the scheme of getting schoolwork done, do students have opportunity to follow their natural propensities and their emotions, to hear the call of something that might move them, to find out how to build on these in a meaningful and even productive way?ⁱ

Certainly, there are practical realities we need to work with; there are also some parameters that need to be set in place. It is here that the confusion often lies about the arts being an area free of boundaries where one can do whatever one wants, that its essence is self-expression in an unlimited sense. As with any form of literacy, there are skills to be learned, techniques to become proficient with, and an array of traditions that one can come to know and build upon. In creative projects, it is also important to have constraints to push against, guidelines that shine the light in the general direction of an endeavour. Often creativity is mistaken as a free-for-all, yet the idea that one can do 'anything they want' can simply lead to students feeling lost, and that the direction and outcome of their work doesn't particularly matter. In setting out creative projects, I find the challenge is in creating a balance between allowing students to follow their own inclinations while establishing a framework for their own expressive decisions. Professional visual artists often set boundaries for themselves within which to work, creating a particular field into which they can dig deep with their exploration. For

ⁱ One might argue, as for example John Taylor Gatto has, that one of the purposes — certainly, one of the effects — of schooling has been to redirect natural inclinations, to silence whatever may call from outside the classroom.

students, then, the teacher's task is to create the framework that will best allow their intuitive explorations to come through.¹⁴⁰ With younger students the parameters need to be clearer, the direction of their exploration suited to their stages of development and emotional sensibilities. As creative foundations develop, more room begins to grow for the kind of personal exploration that is particularly satisfying because one has the know-how to negotiate their way through, both in terms of technique as well as with the development of ideas. In my experience with university level students, it is those who have some familiarity in an art form and have some acquisition of its language who feel most comfortable finding their own means of form and content. Rather than simply 'thinking outside the box', creativity is about finding one's own path and voice within a particular context.



Aesthetic modes of knowing and of pursuing certain tasks have a role in all of life, not just in the arts. The process of attending to particulars, of noticing and carefully observing, of being present with one's heart and being guided by intuition, of crafting, and putting oneself into a work — these bring a human and personal ethic to the work we do. It is in this light that we might consider Wittgenstein's idea of aesthetics and ethics being one and the same.¹⁴¹ And it applies particularly to the work we consider most meaningful in our lives. As Eisner puts it,

any practice whatsoever can have aesthetic or artistic qualities. This includes three-year olds building castles in the sand as well as surgeons engaged in a life-sustaining operation. What is aesthetic depends at least in part on the way some feature of the phenomenal world is addressed... efforts become increasingly more sophisticated, sensitive, imaginative, and skilled. This is no small task, and no minor achievement when realized.¹⁴²

There is far more involved then, than simple execution, a satisfactory end result, or a mechanical series of steps or motions. Something of one's spirit is there. And it is this kind of ethic that we most need when dealing with tasks involving environmental stewardship: when we are personally involved with the work we do — not in the sense of being self-serving, but rather in the awareness that our efforts are deeply connected to something beyond ourselves.

In contemplating the elusive concept of meaning and how it might be described, my sense is that we have meaningful experience when something sincere within us connects with something valuable — and equally authentic — in the world itself. While this can be on a large scale, like the lifelong pursuit of a loved cause or activity, or a close relationship, it is often built on many smaller moments. Normally, we also associate meaning with a kind of depth, even through finding it in our common activities and occurrences. I feel that these personal connections are as important in our academic work — at all age levels — as they are outside of it.

Sincerity in thought and modes of communication to the world around us corresponds also to how we relate to ourselves. In her exploration of how we might address issues from an ethical standpoint and how we might connect with a sense of shared ethics between differing points of view, Margaret Somerville finds that we best develop a sense of ethical responsibility when we acknowledge something of the innate authenticity in each involved individual. The same would apply when we try to reach — and draw out — the ethical inclinations in others. We need to acknowledge — and, I would say, invite students to express — their own authenticity. Somerville refers to Soren Kierkegaard, who writes of our moral responsibility to protect in every person the power to become fully themselves.¹⁴³ We might also consider, then, that we have a responsibility to encourage students to find and to follow their individual strengths, inclinations and more natural ways of learning and of expressing their knowledge. In this respect, it is a kind of moral pursuit to foster in our children and youth a rich range of means to communicate their knowing with fluency and confidence. The idea here is that sincerity to the self is deeply integrated with sincerity to others and with matters of moral concern beyond ourselves. If one is encouraged to address matters of ethical concern in a voice that is their own and authentic to who they are, chances are that ethical inclinations will develop in a way that feels genuine, rather than imposed.



Being Understood

Like the process of learning, our showing what we have learned and articulating our discoveries is a form of communication. It depends upon the presence of an

understanding audience — and is affected by the larger culture in which we find ourselves. Being surrounded by forms of language that are not sufficiently nuanced to express our observations with genuineness of feeling can result in a sense of disconnectedness. To be given examples that are reductive or euphemistic, to feel that our particular take on things has no welcome place to go, is very disheartening. Yet finding others who are conversant in expressive and affective forms of language is not always easy. Arts-based researcher Carl Leggo writes of this need to be with others who in the contexts academia who understand the subjective subtleties of his work. In a poem titled “SOS”, he speaks of his writing as a kind of call for help.

I have stories
to tell
and language

for telling them
but still not enough

I need others

who know
the language
otherwise why

tell the stories
at all
when I can

live them
except in telling stories
I hope to weave

my stories
with the stories
of others lining

a text together
a textile sufficiently
close woven

to warm reality
to let real light
through/in/out

my writing is always an SOS
fear of desertion

alone frantic
for rescue
connection human

foot prints in the sand
wanting the search(ers)
to return¹⁴⁴

Working with creative forms of writing inquiry, Leggo suggests that research can be a way of piecing things together in the form of a story that interweaves our own lives with those around us. “Research is akin to Sherlock Holmes’ concocting a story out of a few traces,” he says, “but instead of Holmes’ deductive logic, I want to read the traces with the heart.”¹⁴⁵ While Leggo speaks here of research at the post-secondary level, I find this way of piecing together with the heart and with personal voice can bring things alive with any age group. A similar example might be that of Cajete, who speaks of using story “as a way to root a perspective that unfolds through the special use of language,” stressing the value of various forms of metaphor, personal experience, myth and parable as powerful avenues for learning.¹⁴⁶

I like these ways of reading traces with the heart, and of calling upon symbolism and metaphor. Stories, like other expressive forms of communication, *invite* us into a point of view rather than just presenting us with facts or propositions, or worse, presenting us with an imperative. We feel drawn in, rather than imposed upon. For most people, stories perhaps are a little easier to be invited into than other forms of art because they use a form of language with which we are familiar. Yet other forms can be equally inviting if we become familiar with their traditions, and most importantly, if we allow ourselves to be tempted in.



Aug 60

Image 4.2. Fern, Black Mountain, ink on paper

The Ear of Language

I have struggled here with the notion of language, indeed struggled with the very language with which to name the elusive: forms of thought and perception and the powerful ways in which they can be expressed. I confess I am still uncertain about thinking of the various arts as languages, as the idea of language is normally so strongly connected to human linguistic conventions, understood in particular ways. There is hesitancy too, in thinking about how language — in all its variations — occurs in nature, as communication there takes forms that are often well outside of our limited human concept. In my readings I have come across those who feel a need to distinguish

human language from the kinds of communication that occurs in nature, and others who feel that language is inherently in nature itself. Clearly the term is limited and intangible, but I am willing to accept that and to play with it: to be pushed to look beyond its limits to other means, to use it loosely and openly rather than try to force more within these limits.

I have spoken here of how various symbolic forms of communication can better enable us to voice the diversity that is both within nature itself as well as within us. What I sense most profoundly from writers who address this issue, however, is the call for a kind of language that does not stem from a separateness from the natural world, does not seek to define, categorise, objectify and otherwise order or 'manage' the wildness of nature, but rather to feel and observe it, to breathe and move with it, to participate in its mysteries, to imagine. Might it be possible for our children's education to include ways of communicating that follow the wilder nature in *us*, and allow it to resonate with other forms of life?

Language is inherent to our human evolution, as are the arts. All of these have rich traditions, inherently cultural, varying with time, place, ethnicity and social mores. Yet they also have roots in the land and the ecologies from which these cultures spring. We are ineluctably connected with these ecologies, as we are with each other, and while finding personal connections within our culture is essential, finding the same with the land around us is equally valuable, even vital, if we want the wilder aspects of life to flourish. Getting the feel and shape of such a connection inevitably involves looking closely at the shape of the thoughts from which our language stems, as well as the place from which they take their view. Where, in other words, does language begin, and what are its effects?

Australian poet Les Murray's poem, "The Meaning of Existence" seems to see language as outside of, perhaps even an impediment to, an embodied connection with the world:

Everything except language
knows the meaning of existence
Trees, planets, rivers, time
know nothing else. They express it
moment by moment as the universe.

Even this fool of a body
lives it in part, and would
have full dignity within it
but for the ignorant freedom
of my talking mind.¹⁴⁷

I sense here a longing to search beyond language, a search that is similar, but only in some ways, to that of Zwicky's. Robert Bringhurst shares this strong connection with the land through his poetry, yet sees language a little differently from Murray. He acknowledges that when removed from its wilder roots, language can become "placeless, sanitary prose."¹⁴⁸ Yet perhaps most revelatory is his suggestion that "meaning doesn't originate with us,"¹⁴⁹ that meaning — and therefore language — it is *out there* and thus not merely a human endeavour.

The ear of language rests
on the breast of the world,
unable to know and unable to care
whether it listens inward or outward.

The world startles it at times.
And so do we. It is the world's ear
more than it is yours or mine or ours. Your

Speech, of course, is yours. It is another's
even so. So is your skin. So are your bones.
So are your fingerprints, your hair.
The wig of words we wear is no one's

and blows off in half a breeze.
And so do we. The fact
remains. When we are actually
speaking, what we say is not man-made.¹⁵⁰

In describing his childhood, Bringhurst intimates that the experience of learning to read the landscape was not distinct from that of learning to read text, or from his propensity to learn multiple human languages. In this regard, he insists that it is to 'wild language' that we need to turn for meaning.

Poet Tim Lilburn seems to concur, though his thoughts seem more specific to poetry, rather than language as a whole. To him, "poetry, like science, is a way of finding out, of trying to state perceptively, clearly, what is going on."¹⁵¹ It is also a way of

participating in the poetry that is already out there — in the creation of the wind and the waves, in the very thought of the world itself:

Words are for shining, like apple blossoms, like stars, giving a sign that life is lived here too, among the human beings, just as it is in the forest, the oceans, the mountains where no humans are around.¹⁵²

Culture, asserts Lilburn, is not unique to humans. Thought, learning, pattern and creation occur everywhere: “the culture of humans is not man-made; it is just the human part of the culture of the whole.”¹⁵³ I like this relinquishing of the notion that language and culture belong only us humans; it is rightly humbling. I appreciate and have myself known the frustration expressed by Murray when certain forms of language — and thereby thought — feel restricted, and restricting, when it comes to ‘being with’ life outside human spheres. Yet Bringhurst and Lilburn’s views seem helpful if we are to think connectively. Either way, essential to the integration of thought and language is how their qualities — their feel and tone — bring us to a particular *kind* of meaning. Within Lilburn’s statement there is a sense of being taken in and guided by phenomena that are greater than we are, but of which we are also a part. There is a sense of participation — of listening, of allowing oneself to be guided, of being aware of the flow a certain situation has for itself. This is very different than trying to impose direction.



This idea of participation is inherent in many artistic processes. An earnest creative practice involves listening to the movement of life around us and within us; there is also a need to listen to the medium being used — its flow, its ethos, the feel of paint or clay, the rhythm of a verse, the character of an instrument being played — and the life and characteristics of the work itself. Poet Dennis Lee expresses this beautifully when he says that “a poem thinks by the way it moves.”¹⁵⁴ One needs to trust that a work can have a life of its own, just as a place does. The experience is not about exerting one’s will: rather than managing or directing, there is respect and trust in the life within each thing. This is what forms of language need to do if we are to inhabit the same realm as other forms of life on equal and respectful terms. We are more likely to feel a sense of wonder with something that has its own volition.

And a large part of the creative process involves active and sensitive listening — listening to inner voices, to what the work needs or is asking for, to the voices of the potential audience, to the inspiration from which the work stemmed.¹⁵⁵ The quest is to shape things and hone them, but this comes about through observation and working with the material, rather than through managing a pre-determined outcome or imposing one's will. There is an ethic of letting things flow, of attending closely to how they evolve, listening to what is asking to be heard, and to be said. Imposition is a way of distancing ourselves from the matter at hand, as we are then no longer listening to what *it* has to say. We need to allow for guidance and direction from the work itself. Painter Robert Motherwell puts it this way:

The painting has as much to say as you have. Most bad painting — outside of boredom or indifference on the part of the maker — is when the maker is trying to impose too much of his will on the object in the same way as a very authoritarian personality imposes his will on another human being.¹⁵⁶

I see shades of this kind of authoritarianism when 'thinking skills' that are characterised by instrumental motives are made part of a curriculum, when they are preferred over natural inclinations of thought that vary between individuals, and that may be more intrinsic in quality. In Motherwell's view, as a form of communication and of expressing thought, painting does well when it works from the kind humility embodied by the poets I have mentioned here.^k Julia Cameron says something similar of artistic process, valuing the act of stepping aside: "Get out of the way, let *it* work through *you*."¹⁵⁷ In the last chapters, I will explore in greater depth the idea of listening, yet for now, I want to hold on to Bringham's idea that the ear of language, the creation of meaning, needn't be within the human world only. In attending to the world as it is and expressing what we learn from it through artistic and symbolic means, we listen, as Lilburn would say, to the thinking and singing of the world.



^k I do not mean to turn a blind eye here to the fact that the practice of many well-known artists is not exactly one of humility. The advent of modernism brought with it its own particularities in art, including the desire for a distinctive signature style which in some cases became linked with forms of arrogance and monetary desire; these are issues in their own right.

Finding one's way

I feel the ethical implications of involving ourselves subjectively in all our work are considerable, since we allow matters of personal spirit to come into play while endeavouring at the same time to understand various situations clearly. In *The Malaise of Modernity*, Charles Taylor proposes what he calls the ethic of authenticity: when we search and articulate in a way that is true to the self, we also bring ourselves closer to the larger issues of the world we share with others.¹⁵⁸ We look within to find that the matters of genuine importance to us are often those that also matter beyond our own lives. To Taylor, in a modern society characterised by shifting morals and a sense of helplessness against greater forces, an essential aspect of agency is finding one's own unique way to enact valuable change. Though the issues that affect us all may already be held in common, the possibility of individual choice is most valuable when we find what he calls a 'subtler language' — our own personal, poetic way of finding a sense of purpose. In other words, while the *matter* to which we devote ourselves is held in common with others, the *manner* in which we go about it is something we must arrive at ourselves. In this regard, says Taylor, the course of finding one's way — of coming to a sincerely felt sense of self — is very much like the artistic process itself.

Big Sky

This wind forces away the debris of our quotidian craziness and
leaves the sky cold clear.

The vastness of open space between the mountains and me,
over flat cranberry fields, dry midwinter bushes trembling with that wind.

And I, want to be a sail in that expanse

against the blue, the sunny eeriness of light coming sideways, midwinter slanted

coming through a windshield indifferent to angles of light.

My car as I drive provides warmth and too much safety

moves through the landscape too quickly,

defying with metal and engine power this magnificent sky blue wind,

the one

I would rather be with.

5. On Relations with Nature

The wood that washes up on the shores of the Fraser River is remembered in our bones... we are all connected.

Carl Leggo¹⁵⁹

Connectedness with Place

Many of our basic human needs are characterized by a sense of connectedness and belonging. The bonds we have with loved ones and those who play fulfilling roles in our lives, a feeling of contentment in the physical place where we live, perhaps a loved activity and a sense of purpose — these are the building blocks of a good life. Among these, the sense that the ground underfoot will hold us, keep us safe and be home to us is of no small significance: we thrive when we feel kinship with our surroundings. Part of this connection is our personal history with a place, a feeling that it is a part of us, and we a part of it; Richard Louv observes that “the land shapes us more than we shape the land.”¹⁶⁰ Children, and the rest of us too, deeply need a sense that home is much more than an address. It may be a familiar building with contents and possessions, shared by the people to whom we are close; but it is also the immediacy of the geographic topography we inhabit, and all the other physical and life forms — human and non-human alike — that inhabit this place with us.

Much is said, in many areas — education, business, psychology, parenting, even urban planning — about the importance of relationships. Generally, it is our relationships with people we speak of most; it is less often that we hear about the value of relationships with place. One might even argue that the current focus on globalization, electronic communication, wireless technologies, efficient transportation of all kinds and multi-national enterprises does much to minimize the value of physical place in our lives; adherence to a physical place can even seem to be an obstacle to be overcome. We have become accustomed to increasingly frequent travel, skimming from place to place over land that can be little more than a blur from a car or airplane window.

The real estate market, while venturing to refer to the buildings and properties it sells as 'homes' and 'land,' stresses the importance of investment and market flow, treating the very places that contain our lives as replaceable product. It also does not help that the school curriculum makes little room for time outdoors and children spend the better part of their day shut up inside.

These common practices have the subtle but powerful effect of negating the meaning of place, and our connection to it. It can also be difficult to form an emotional bond with a place when one knows that at any time it can be taken away or radically altered by forces beyond our control. 'Development' is generally viewed as essential to economic growth — something inevitable that we need to just accept. In family law, interfering with attached relationships is viewed as an act of violation, yet no such law — that I know of — exists to protect the relationships we have with a place. This may partly be because a place is not seen as a living entity with a right of its own to exist and flourish, nor do we consider its — and our own — sensitivity to rapid change. In many North American indigenous mythologies, however, the features of a place, the place itself, are seen as part of one's greater family, and as a sacred part of existence. There are situations when these connections are treated with enough respect by those in power that the places are preserved. In Canada, the First Nations issue of land claims receives its own particular merit and the environmental consultation that occurs prior to changes that are imposed on a tract of land often seek to address First Nations concerns. Yet whether or not one is native, one's bond to a place are potent and in this light I appreciate Kay Milton's statement:

Why should not a white Canadian citizen feel able to state publicly that this mountain, which has been part of his world for as long as he can remember, is sacred to him, part of his identity, part of what gives his life meaning?¹⁶¹

Attachments with places can be as meaningful as those we have with people. Sometimes, even more so. When I lived in Prague for a year, I found myself with an intense longing for the wilder west coast of British Columbia. I had imagined I might miss certain people, but less expected was that I felt land and geography call to me loud and clear. I also missed certain neighbourhoods in Victoria, the town I had left behind, and had a recurring dream where I descended upon it in a low flight, landing gently on

my feet by the Johnson Street Bridge. I arrived at a pre-dawn hour, when there was enough light to see everything by, but when no one else was around and I could have the place to myself. I wanted to be in it, feel it, without anyone else there.

While my heart longed for certain places, my senses did too, and in a large urban centre they had to make some sharp adjustments. My eyes felt almost physically pained at having their vision obstructed by buildings everywhere I turned: looking out of a window, often the farthest my view was able to reach was the building across the street. Walking the streets on a sunny day, I was in constant shadow from the surrounding buildings. I craved to stand on the west coast of Vancouver Island and feel the open space and wildness of the ocean, exposed to all the elements and letting my eyes gaze restfully into the distance with no hindrances to their view.

I am certain these types of experiences are not uncommon. When so much in my life and social circles had changed, it was geographic places that represented a much-needed sense of constancy, a sense of being grounded. More than simply being creatures who prefer that to which we are accustomed, we form attachments to things, and places bond us in life-giving relationships. Neil Evernden writes of the self as a field, as not contained within the boundaries of one's physical body. He quotes William Barrett: "My Being is not something that takes place inside my skin ... ; my Being, rather, is spread over a field or region which is the world of its care and concern."¹⁶² What strikes me is how such a 'field' tends to exist as a whole; our experiences, which become part of our selfhood, necessarily *take place* somewhere. Our physical environment, then, is part of who we are. With the geography that had long been part of my world so far away from me, I felt incomplete, ungrounded.

Relationship with Place

Working with the idea that what we become in our lifetime is a result of how we engage with our environment, Kay Milton observes that many social scientists have posited that our environment is essentially human society. She, however, argues against this idea:

...it is not the whole story; in fact, it misses a very important point. The environment of most human beings may be predominantly social, but to say that it is *essentially* social is to say that human beings can only pick up information from other human beings or in contexts of human creation, and not from the non-human things in their environment. Clearly this is not the case... Throughout our lives, we learn from our whole environment, not just from other human beings and their products (culture).¹⁶³

It makes sense, then, that the particularities and unique qualities of the environment we call home matter a great deal, as does its health and wellbeing. And if places affect us this much, it makes sense that we open ourselves to them, and care for them accordingly.

Perhaps there is as much to learn from the places that ground and characterize our lives as there is from the human world. Milton's argument emphasizes the emotional connection we have with places, something often seen as 'irrational' by those against the environmental movement: emotional and spiritual connections "cannot easily be expressed in a scientific idiom" and therefore lie "outside capitalist rationality."¹⁶⁴ It is for this reason, she says, that they have little or no room in the legal process of public decision making, other than if voiced by native peoples. Yet, we are all emotional beings and emotions play a role in our decisions about places, particularly if the state of these places affects our lives. Milton believes, as I do, that we may get further by working from this commonality than with an insistence on objectivity and scientific paradigm. Echoing somewhat the thoughts of Polanyi, she claims that any commitment to a project (for example, whether to develop an area or to preserve it) is emotionally based: "without emotion there is no commitment, no motivation, no action."¹⁶⁵

In *Care of the Soul*, Thomas Moore's thinking is along a similar vein with regards to the mistaken idea that meaningful relationships are with people only. "We assume," he says, "that our loneliness is from other people, but it also comes from our estrangement from a world that we have depersonalized by our philosophies."¹⁶⁶ The things and places around us are, after all, part of our home (and perhaps therefore part of our family) as much as our fellow humans. Like Milton, he reminds us of the greater value of personal attachment and attentiveness when it comes to our surroundings:

It also seems possible to love the earth intellectually without feeling the emotional relationship; a real relationship with nature has to be fostered by spending time with it, observing it, and being open to its teachings. Any true relationship requires time, a certain vulnerability, and openness to being affected and changed.¹⁶⁷

It may seem strange to think of having a relationship with places and things when we are accustomed, in our relationships with people, to having relatively easily understood, familiar and generally verbal communication, and a certain kind of give and take. Rather than try to qualify a relationship we have with a place by comparing it to the kind we have with fellow humans, it may be better to consider and attend to the connections we do have with our surroundings, and nurture their own special qualities. I like Moore's suggestions for how we might go about this: by spending time, observing and being open. These are not superficial luxuries — our connection to the world is, in many ways, a connection to ourselves. To take Moore's suggestions further, it is worthwhile to ask how the practices of spending time, observing and being open might be engendered, in the spirit of soulful relationship. The more common educational tendencies of transmitting information, problem-solving and evaluating would very much go against the spirit of what we are trying to do; an approach of open-ended inquiry, imaginative engagement, curiosity, wonder and interpretive response is more helpful.

Close to Home

A felt, embodied connection with place and with our home environments is particularly of great value for children: the feeling that the land upon which they walk is home, that it is theirs to explore, is physically, spiritually and emotionally nourishing. We depend on our environment in so many respects. In the reciprocal logic of relationship, the natural world also depends also on us: the ways in which we relate to it matter hugely. Louv describes how the future well-being of the environment very much depends on the intimate and immediate affinity we have with places, observing that the benevolence of children and young people is particularly important.¹⁶⁸ For this, an emotional attachment needs to be present, and strong. Systematic knowledge does little to bring about such a connection, says Louv; rather, hands-on and personally involved experiences are critical in the formative years if a child is to grow into an adult who cares

about the environment. Such a connection benefits both nature and the child. He draws a parallel with attachment theory, commonly known among parents in their interest in child development:

the creation of a deep bond between child and parent is a complex psychological, biological and spiritual process, without this attachment, the child is lost, vulnerable to all manner of later pathologies. I believe that a similar process can bind adults to a place and give them belonging and meaning. Without a deep attachment to place, an adult can also feel lost.¹⁶⁹

How, then, might we nurture a sense of attachment with the places we inhabit? This question is particularly poignant with the current generation of children, who, because of our current social structures, are generally less likely to spend much time with the land. How, then, might we expect that a young generation will protect something that they do not know and love?

In order for a place to become intimately known, we need to become familiar with its particularities and special characteristics, with its nuances and silent messages. Only plentiful time in nature can offer this. It is not uncommon for a young child to learn at school about the Amazon basin and the forms of life endangered there (as my own did), while knowing little about the ecologies of the woods and fields of their neighbourhood and their own unique challenges. Yet ultimately, knowledge of distant places, no matter how grand, will mean little without meaningful experience of places close to home. Naturalist Robert Michael Pyle puts it well when he asks, what is “the extinction of a condor to the child who has never seen a wren?”¹⁷⁰

It is a love for the local, perhaps more humble, wren-like things that builds a love for ecological learning. In his mapmaking work with children Sobel emphasizes an inside-out approach that begins with the child’s inner world and known surroundings: it is the bond between these that he wants to authenticate for the child. Through discovering for themselves the special features of places close to home, children make them part of their own lives in meaningful ways. Sobel emphasises that a focus on the accessible and the familiar — on local environments — is the place to start; this ‘small world’ approach is particularly valuable with younger children. He criticises pedagogies that imply that the ‘faraway’ is somehow more esteemed, as when local maps are

disregarded in favour of maps of whole continents or of the world. Global knowledge is valuable, he says, but becomes more so when a child is developmentally ready for it, and has already grown into a more personal sense of geography.¹⁷¹ The idea is that familiar things — no matter how humble — are important because of their immediacy in our lives.

Saito's work on everyday aesthetics speaks to similar concerns with her focus on the common and modest things in our everyday environment. It has been a North American tendency, she says, to revere the majestic and well-known features in our landscapes while overlooking the more humble ones that may be closer to home.¹⁷² This aesthetic that attracts us to the distant and the spectacular has been harmful to the environment: we may go to great lengths to protect geographic areas that are spectacular, yet think little of developing land that appears relatively ordinary because it does not fit with conventional ideas of scenic beauty. These less acclaimed areas, however, are still complex living ecosystems with a unique beauty of their own. Native plants, common insects, and scrubby undergrowth can be sources of wonder when viewed with appreciative eyes and with a spirit that finds richness in the ordinary things of life.

I find a connection here to the ideas of Moore, Louv and Sobel with the emphasis on places and phenomena that are near our homes and interwoven with our lives, even if they are seemingly mundane. Becoming close to the things in our own backyard is an act of valuing our bond with the world. And I think that this is where our part of a reciprocal relationship with nature can come in. For while we may not engage with the nature around us through the kind of communication we have with other humans, our part of the dialogue can be to observe, to appreciate, to learn from and to care for the natural world. There has always been, and needs to be, a practical dimension to our relationship with the environment in that we rely on it for our sustenance and way of life. Yet perhaps this dimension would be less coloured by a need for material plenty if the aesthetic one were richer and more foundational.

There is another special aspect to appreciating things in nature we might consider ordinary. Rather than taking them as a given, one could receive them as gifts. Chickasaw poet Linda Hogan expresses this in a way that I think speaks for itself.

Walking up the damp hill in the hot sun, there were signs of recent heavy rains. The land smelled fresh, shaded plants still held moisture in their green clustered leaves, and fresh deer tracks pointed uphill like arrows in the dark, moist soil.

Along our way, my friend and I stopped at a cluster of large boulders to drink fresh rain collected in a hollow bowl that had been worn into stone over slow centuries. Bending over the stone, smelling earth up close, we drank sky off the surface of water. Mosses and ancient lichens lived there. And swimming in another stone cup were slender orange newts, alive and vibrant with the rains.

Drinking the water, I thought how earth and sky are generous with their gifts, and how good it is to receive them. Most of us are taught, somehow, about giving and accepting human gifts, but not about opening ourselves and our bodies to welcome the sun, the land, the visions of sky and dreaming, not about standing in the rain ecstatic with what is offered.¹⁷³



Image 5.1. leaf and pencil on watercolour paper

Aesthetics as Wide-awakeness

I have mentioned several things that detract from a connected relationship with the local environment. One that is of particular concern for me is the feeling many of us

have, that what happens to the places surrounding our homes is largely out of our control. Decisions are made by developers, municipal and provincial governments around which we feel we have no notable input. Depending on where one lives, it may not be unusual to look up one day to see a row of new houses being constructed in what not long ago was an old orchard where children explored and small creatures flourished. I live in a town that is part suburb and part rural area, a place that is changing rapidly. There have been times when I've caught my breath at the sight of a beautiful meadow, wooded hill, or sheltered creek, only to have the next thought be, 'how long, before this, too, is destroyed?' With such occurrences, there is certainly reluctance to become attached to a place and to open one's heart to it.

Of course, it is possible for this kind of loss of attachment to occur in built spaces as well, where large franchises take over what were once smaller, locally-owned businesses that had social ties with the community. In England, the movement and foundation Common Ground, founded in the early 1980's by Sue Clifford and Angela King, aims to promote what they call 'local distinctiveness.'¹⁷⁴ Looking toward a renewed awareness of the special characteristics of individual places, the aim is to encourage the preservation and vitality of the characteristic features of a place, those which make it unique. These would include landscape, architecture, nature, local foods, and social webs. At a time when mass blanket change is being felt everywhere, the proponents insist that they are not trying to keep with the past, but rather to find life-affirming ways of living with both the old and the new. In the words of Clifford and King, local distinctiveness "demands a poetic quest" with regard to the relationship that we have with places, and is about "accepting that places mean more to us than we are able to say." They address the effects of the kind of development I have mentioned:

The crude sacrifices made by large scale and rapid change demean us...
The forces of homogenisation rob us of visible and invisible things which have meaning to us, they devalue our longitudinal wisdom and erase the fragments from which to piece together the stories of nature and history through which our humanity is fed. They stunt our sensibilities and starve our imagination.¹⁷⁵

The often elusive qualities of local distinctiveness can make it difficult to speak up for, particularly in the face of what may seem indomitable forces. In my own town of Maple

Ridge, my sense is that many feel the mass changes to be inevitable, almost laughing at the notion of mere individuals having any power to stop it. Local distinctiveness is also fragile and easily lost. My feeling is that true familiarity and aesthetic connection with local places — especially when they begin at a young age and are shared in one's circle — can be strong foundation for the kind of caring that gives courage to stand up for the special features of a place.



Over the past years, I have been involved in a variety of arts-based projects with my students that stem directly from a place of their choosing. The idea, above all, is to explore what the place means to them personally, and this usually comes about through paying attention to features they had not noticed before, or otherwise re-familiarising themselves with aspects that they had. The effect is often that they gain an enriched sense of the place — its feel, shapes, stories and imaginative possibilities. Choices are open as to what kind place can be chosen, but remarkably, students often choose natural settings of some kind. When I have taught at SFU's Burnaby campus, the places focused on have included Deer Lake, Rocky Point Park, Stanley Park, Burnaby Mountain Park, Burnaby Lake, and Lafarge Park. For students in courses taught at the Surrey Campus, preferred areas were ones like Boundary Bay, Bear Creek Park, Tynehead Park and Burns Bog. I find it heartening that even though the two campuses are in a largely continuous urban area, the students' choices are informed by where they live; even a small geographic distance makes a difference — a reminder that place informs our choices and practices in subtle but important ways. Many also turn their attention to smaller neighbourhood parks and schoolyards — places of refuge or nostalgia. In the reflective written component that accompanies the project, students often remark on how the process allowed them to see characteristics of the area that had before eluded them. They often close with how the experience revived memories, or otherwise authenticated for them the meaning the place holds for them personally.

Once, when visiting with a Master's class in Kelowna, I was taken by what a moving experience this project had been for many of them. A small group of mature students working together in a supportive environment, they were able to share openly what the process brought out in them. Another memorable example was the work of a

young woman for an art project on 'Reflections of Self'. An international student from China, she returned yearly to her home city of Shanghai to find that well-loved and familiar places had been all but eradicated. The community that had been her home during her elementary school years was unrecognizable; the route she had walked to school was now blocked by a shopping mall; and the playground which had held her memories of enjoyable times with her friends was nowhere to be found. Experiencing loneliness, confusion and considerable sadness, she stated, "I am feeling I am losing my sense of belongingness." Sadly, she, too, felt pressure to just accept and 'keep up' with the times.¹⁷⁶ Her work was dark and evocative.



Sincere aesthetic engagement requires conscious participation. It takes time. Maxine Greene points out that merely glancing at things in superficial or time-pressed ways is not enough — the ability "to notice what there is to be noticed" in a poem, work of music or play cannot be assumed to develop on its own, without a certain output of energy, and without thoughtful guidance where students are involved. Aesthetic experiences of some depth are not a matter of merely recognising, of being familiar with names, terms and concepts; the participatory aspect is essential: "Knowing 'about,' even in the most formal academic manner, is entirely different from constituting a fictive world imaginatively and entering it perceptively, affectively and cognitively."¹⁷⁷ I have heard writers and musicians speak of being *in* a book, a song, of entering into them. I think similar things can be true if we are 'in' a place, not just physically, but with the affective and imaginative qualities Greene describes. Certainly, this can become more so when aesthetic engagement is active and conscious.

Greene alludes to Dewey's observation that the opposite of 'aesthetic' is 'anaesthetic', and points out that "we might think of aesthetic education as an education for wide-awakeness — for a more active, responsible, ardent mode of pursuing our human quests."¹⁷⁸ This seems to me a very worthwhile approach to take with the things that matter to us. It also seems a fertile path when we want to make them matter more, as when young people are to be awakened to the world around them in ways that are affective and encouraging of forming bonds and a sense of responsiveness. If we are to come closer to resonating with our surroundings, we need first to open ourselves to

them, and do this wholly, attentively. The wide-awakeness that follows will make passivity less likely when it comes to the well-being of places we are connected to.

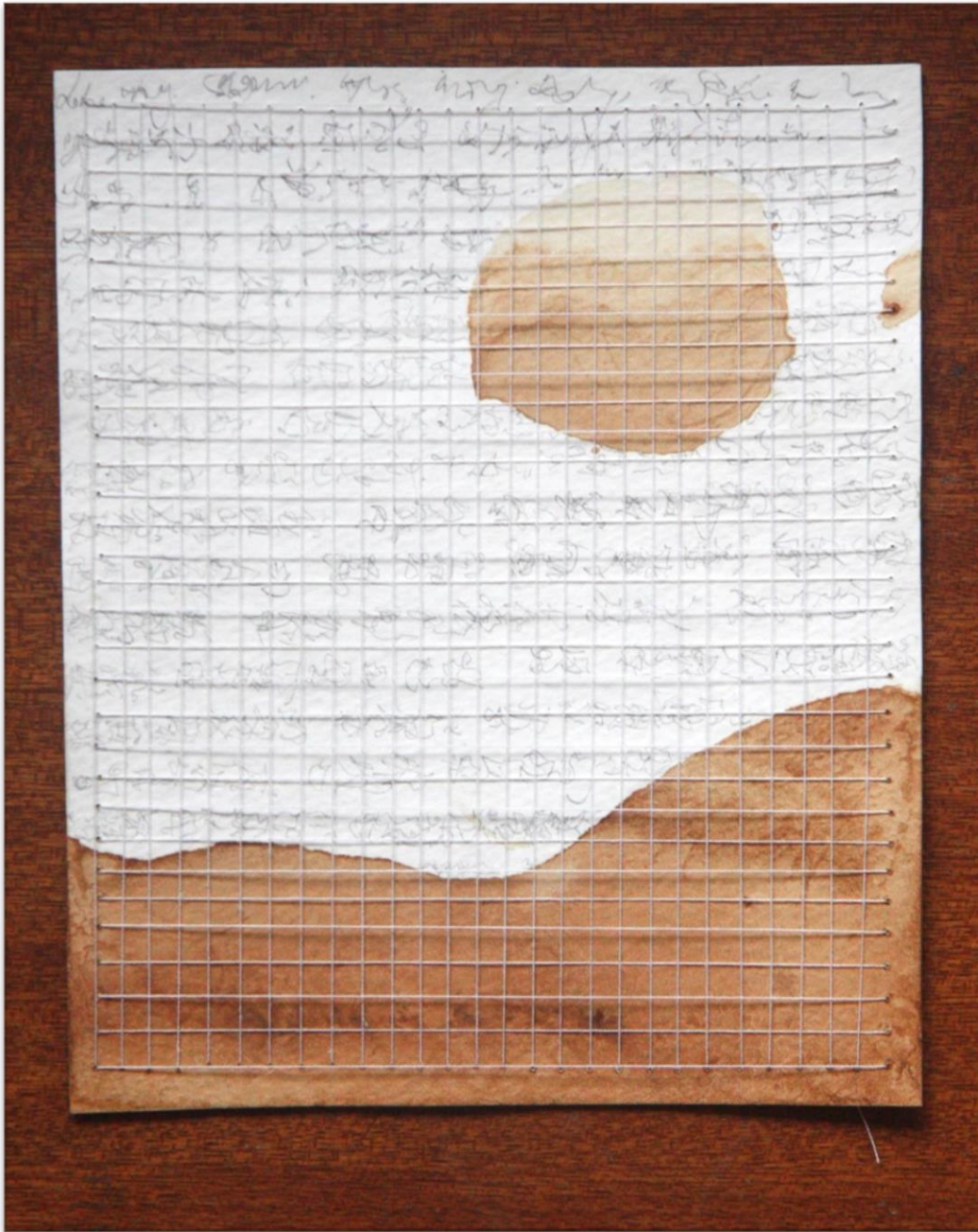


Image 5.2. pencil, tea, thread and watercolour paper



It has been an unseasonably sunny fall, very unlike the west coast. The early part of the fall was warm, a whisper of the changing climate that everyone hears about but no one really listens to with their own ears. And now, in November, the frost has come in the night, leaving the ground covered in white when Miro and I walk to school in the morning.

On the way back, the sun at a sharp angle from the east lights glistens through the frost on the scrubby growth by the road, shining crystals anointing what is otherwise humble plainness. When I turn onto our street, I notice a small Japanese maple losing its leaves; I can see them falling. Not one, and then another, but falling in a continuous unending stream, slowly and just a second after each other, as if someone were timing their dispersal evenly. Below, a red carpet is already forming, lush and growing deeper by the moment. I stand there amazed at the resoluteness of this tree to uncloth itself completely all in one morning. Warm weather has kept all the leaves on until now, turning them a rich, dark red, and I realise that because this past night saw the first true frost, the leaves stems are surrendering once the sun hits them as it rises, thawing out what had been frozen, letting it go. The eastern side of the tree was shedding more, the western catching up, slowly. And there, they kept fluttering, in such even and continuous timing it was like rainfall.

When I went back that way in the afternoon to pick Miro up from school, the delicate maple was all but bare, the carpet beneath thick and mountainous. I had been the only one to see the disrobing.



Ecological awareness

Ecological awareness is often considered to mean being versed in the facts and processes of certain ecosystems; the concept of “ecology” is generally viewed as scientific in character. I believe we also need a more poetic term to acknowledge another kind of knowing — something more soulful, an awareness that results from intimate understanding, relatedness and attachment. It is certainly valuable to be able to distinguish various species of trees and to know their biological processes. Yet it is also

something feel the sway of wind through the tree in a bodily sense, to sense its limbs and life correspond to our own, to wonder at its power and rooted strength, to know that it has endured many seasons and witnessed what they have brought. Carson spoke of the importance of an aesthetic sense of wonder, particularly for a child who is coming to know the natural world:

...it is not half so important to *know* as to *feel*. If facts are the seeds that later produce knowledge and wisdom, then the emotions and the impressions of the senses are the fertile soil in which the seeds must grow... Once the emotions have been aroused — a sense of the beautiful, the excitement of the new and the unknown, a feeling of sympathy, pity, admiration or love — then we wish for knowledge about the object of our emotional response.¹⁷⁹

Carson's strength of vision in her contributions to marine biology and as a pioneer in the environmental movement was no doubt fueled by this poetic sensibility.

There are also other important characteristics to these different meanings of ecological awareness. The term 'ecology' derives from the Greek *oikos*, meaning 'house', which became the Late Latin *oeco*, meaning 'household'.¹⁸⁰ Both refer to home, the place one inhabits — with implications of belonging, shelter, and the interrelationships therein. There are also implications of care and management. This management aspect has in recent times unfortunately manifested itself in control-oriented and disembedded — and disenchanting — stances. When things become reduced to their functions, they are no longer alive for us: Hillman, Moore and Bringham echo this theme repeatedly. Yet, we know that a true sense of home is only partly about how well it is managed — it is the love and spirit in a place, the sense of hearth and goodwill that makes it a home and pulls us to return. We also know that this sense of home comes about when its members value this place and tend its hearth, rather than spreading themselves further afield and having their main concerns be elsewhere.

If we can think of ecology as not so much about earth science but about home, we return to its more poetic meanings. In the words of Moore, a soulful ecology is not about scientific knowledge but is "rooted in the feeling that this world is our home and that our responsibility to it comes not from obligation or logic but from true affection."¹⁸¹ Our surroundings are more than simply physical spaces in which we go about our daily

tasks and from which we take our resources. They affect our lives in much deeper ways — they inform who we become, characterize our day-to-day, and most of all, they give us a sense of belonging.

Integral to the Spiritual Ecology described by Gregory Cajete that I mentioned earlier is an environmental foundation, and in this view, connections with the land have a profound spiritual dimension. The relational characteristic of the idea of ecology is integral, and is essentially what gives it meaning. Here, ecology refers only partially to what we would call the biosphere; it also includes humans, their lore, visions, practices and relationships with each other. And the natural world is always a part of that; it is not separate: “Life and Nature are always relationships in process.”¹⁸² Unlike our more common Western view dominated by science and economics, indigenous teachings of ecology revolve around “issues that are essentially ethical, religious, and sacred.”¹⁸³ Cajete speaks of an intimate connection with the land that he describes as ‘ensoulment’ — an identification that is so strong as to affect the deeper core of who one is; a loss of this connection is, essentially, a loss of soul. In this regard, abuse of the land is directly connected with abuse in the human world. It is interesting that Moore, while working from a rather different cultural and religious background, but interested in aspects of spirituality and care of the soul as is Cajete, says much the same when he speaks of the pathologies that befall us when this connection is lost. If an ecology, then, is a field of relationships, being ecologically aware would ideally mean taking care of those relationships and holding them dear; it would mean knowing that a soulful life depends upon this.

Taking this further, it could also mean being involved in practices that observe and explore the meanings of these bonds and nurture them in ways that are personally involving and expressive. It would also have a spiritual aspect — not in a religious way, but in the sense that we are part of something greater than ourselves. Many cultural rituals the world over are about *observing* certain natural phenomena: a change of season, a rite of passage in one’s life, the provision of our sustenance by nature’s bounty. While we have little left in our society of common social rituals that connect us to the processes and seasons of nature, we can turn more to individual practices.

This is where arts education has a role to play, through endeavours and projects that create room for receptivity and expressiveness. These can still be socially connecting when they are done and shared in a group. Creative projects that honour our need for individual expression and that are then shared with others can observe — and question — our own relations with aspects of the world around us. Such activities can be immensely satisfying both personally and socially. Taught and executed with care and with a spirit of connection and discovery, these projects can include photography, drawing, painting, writing stories, poems and narratives, making sculptures and constructions, writing songs and making music, shooting video, or creating a dramatic or dance performance around the features of places close to home.

Memory and Identity

Because our environment gives us a place to *be* as we go through our experiences, it can hold and keep our histories. In this way, the locations we inhabit reflect our lives back to us. Places hold our memories: this is the part of the yard where my son fell when he was very small, it was on this street corner that I was once met by someone special, this is where I watched the cottonwood fluff spin around the day my mind churned with that life-altering news. This is the rock in the river on which we had a pizza picnic that sweltering summer day. Were I to lose contact with these places, I would no longer be reminded of these experiences, and my life would lose some of its character. In more ways than we realize, our environments affect our sense of identity. Though we may not have the grounded intimacy with the land in the way our ancestors did, our environments always *situate* our lives and give our experiences their particular characteristics. As David Orr put it, “Knowledge of a place — where you are and where you come from — is intertwined with knowledge of who you are. Landscape, in other words, shapes mindscape.”¹⁸⁴ It is for this reason, too, that the particularities of a place matter. With the homogenization created by corporate development, we are in danger of losing the richness not only of our landscape but of something inside ourselves as well.

Because the process of making art involves working with and through the mindset, perceptions and emotions of a particular time, the creative experience can itself be a way of forging memories. The process of figuring out how to render something and

seeing how it comes to fruition can sometimes be deeply internal. When I look through my work of the past, it inevitably evokes recollections of the outlooks, concerns and interests I had at the time particular pieces were made. I find that memories which have an emotional quality stay with us longer. Experiences that are heightened in feeling, or that give room to explore and consider emotions in a fruitive way are more likely to retain their meaning over time.



A few thoughts on love and other elusive things

Generally speaking, it is from the things we are exposed to and become familiar with as children and over the course of time — from the pleasing and repeated experiences we have, that we develop our interests, passions, and practices as adults. It is difficult for anyone to directly teach us to love or feel affinity for something, yet it is from continual connections — and from the significant adults who offer them — that children gain their sense of what is important, normal and desirable in life. In an exploration of what generally gives our lives a sense of meaning, philosopher Susan Wolf observes that, more than for reasons of self-interest or of morality, we find a sense of meaning when we act out of love for something outside ourselves that we deem valuable. Wolf remarks, “proneness to [thus] being moved...is at the core of our ability to live meaningful lives.”¹⁸⁵ And asking ourselves what is worthy of this love is an important task, involving more than subjective interests and inclinations: it must be valuable and good independent of our particular thoughts about it. In other words, it must be “recognized from a point of view other than one’s own.”¹⁸⁶ A partial reason why this is so, Wolf claims, is our desire not to feel alone.

Wolf’s exploration of meaning is in many respects similar to Taylor’s quest for authenticity. Taylor, too, addresses our need for recognition from others, in particular significant others with whom we engage dialogically when it comes to finding our place of identity in the world. Yet there is something noteworthy to me about Wolf’s observation of our not wanting to be alone: due to our social natures, she says, we are drawn toward things others consider worthy also. She does not claim that the satisfaction or admiration of others is enough for a truer sense of meaning; indeed her

emphasis is on fulfilling interactions with the phenomena to which we give our loving attention. Yet her point about the view others points to the effect and influence of the surrounding culture on what is considered valuable — particularly, I think, for young people.

How does one, say, continue to love wooded areas and being in them, when all around they see the destruction of wooded areas as a socially condoned practice for the sake of development? (Imagine, too, the flashy advertising for ostentatious new houses to accompany the destruction.) For a young person in particular, this can be rather hard. Not only are they likely to feel quite alone and frustrated in their love for something, they might also feel mildly odd in the context of what seems to be the status quo. Shutting away one's own emotions may seem tempting as a protective social measure; furthermore, it will only hurt to get attached to something likely to be destroyed. The culture in which we find ourselves, then, matters a great deal. This is where I believe the arts, together with intimate contact with the natural world can both do so much. Creative and aesthetic engagement encourages us to consider for ourselves what we find valuable, in the way that Greene and Taylor suggest, to orient ourselves by an inner compass rather than the one pushed on us by the seemingly larger forces of consumer society, market media and economic coercion. If emphasis on such exploration is part of one's learning, it can create a milieu (and a kind of culture of its own) where one feels supported to pursue explorations of meaning and authenticity.

Terry Eagleton has said that social change is the re-education of desire. A cultural critic who thinks in broad terms and makes no apologies for strong, sweeping statements, he argues that in the West, human desire has been manipulated beyond recognition by capitalism.¹⁸⁷ Yet if we take this idea of guiding desire in an educational — and therefore, hopefully benevolent and ethical — context, the meaning I take is not only that what we attach our desires to has far-reaching consequences, but also that as educators, we have considerable responsibility in this regard. While it can be involuntary, desire is often socially formed. Over the course of their education, children are taught — largely in indirect ways, to be drawn to and deem important some things and not others. It is our sources of attachment — the phenomena and aspects of the social and physical world to which we are drawn — that form our values and shape our practices. To me, this has enormous ramifications on personal, social and ethical levels

— the choices of which desires we deem valuable are worth considering with a lot of care and consciousness. Not only that, the ways in which we go about teaching them matter perhaps even more. While actually igniting certain desires may be out of our hands, there is much that we do, and that we can do, to lay the ground.

Hopefully it is clear that what I am trying to get at is that learning about ecology is of scant value if the learning is mostly intellectual. More of our being needs to be involved — not just the mind, but the heart, body, senses and spirit as well. Once we start dealing with things subjective and emotive, the nature and pervasiveness of desire comes more naturally into play. The arts have the potential to involve all of these, and in a way that allows students to discover for themselves. They call upon these aspects of our being and make them alive and more responsive to the things in the world around us. The arts also have a way of encouraging us to be mindful and aware, to examine our desires more closely, to explore for ourselves where we really find meaning, rather than accepting socially condoned norms.

At the opening of the thesis, I cited Stephen J Gould's claim that "we will not fight to save what we do not love."¹⁸⁸ If we put this idea in an educational context, particularly one of traditional schooling, it suddenly seems quite subversive — not only because of the political implications but also because it involves that hazy and deep-water realm of personal feelings. The themes of love, attachment, and desire can be rather dicey ones in a classroom. There are many possible reasons for this: engendering affection for something doesn't fit easily into the more routine aspects of transmitting knowledge and skills, personal commitment is difficult to account for and to measure, and beyond the very early grades, it all seems too soft (and perhaps too big) to fit into the institution of school. Due to the instrumental rationality that necessarily informs institutions, teachers often feel a need to maintain a neutral — perhaps even objective — stance in a realm that calls for accountability, and in a class of almost thirty students there may seem to be little room for the development of personal and individual affections. Engendering a sense of what is worth loving and desiring is sacred business and not to be taken lightly; perhaps it is even akin, in the minds of many, to imposing one's religious or political beliefs on others. Furthermore, one needs to wonder whether love and attachment are really teachable. That does not mean, however, that they are not relevant to a child's learning.

In considering the things that, consciously or otherwise, we are teaching children to be drawn to and to seek out, one of the things worth pondering is what we are teaching them to love if we insist that they spend the better part of their day inside a classroom, learning in ways that are largely dissociated from the physical world outside. In a study on the formative influences of people who have committed themselves in some way to the cause of environmental preservation, the most frequently cited influence was large amounts of time spent in natural, wild and rural settings.¹⁸⁹



Image 5.3. pencil, tea, thread and watercolour paper

Because of the affective and elusive nature of things like love and attachment, any teaching in this area needs to be done with subtlety and sensitivity. Children don't need to be told about the value of ecology to be able to feel it; what they need is experiences that facilitate this feeling. It is not so much the methodology of teaching that counts here, but rather the imagination and passion of the teacher. In many respects,

the instruction matters less than the practices, examples and metaphors a child is surrounded by, and the caring spirit of those around them. In this regard, we go further by *showing* the way, rather than telling. This connects to the allusive facet of the arts I mentioned earlier: through their use of imagery, symbolism and form, they have a way of inciting us to consider something from a particular perspective, of empathising with another possible way of being. Rather than imposing an imperative or simply presenting information, stories, poems, images and pieces of music *invite* us in, they *show* us perspectives to experience with our own spirit.



Changing Paradigms

My endeavour here has been to show how, when we engage in the arts, we access a similar mode of being — in some ways, a similar ontology — as when we relate to the natural world in empathetic, embedded and respectful ways. Thinker Gregory Bateson sought to reorient our epistemology to find beauty in the nests of relationships that connect: for example, “the crab to the lobster and the primrose to the orchid, and all of them to me, and me to you.”¹⁹⁰ Filmmaker Nora Bateson produced a documentary titled *An Ecology of Mind* on her father’s work, and speaks of his interest in art this way:

Expression through the arts was considered by Gregory to be the most honest and pure form of human communication. It’s easy to forget that when we find meaning in a story or enjoy the beauty of a piece of music, we are engaging in the realm of thinking that is most in sync with nature. Metaphor is the language of relationships, the language of natural systems, in which there is room to communicate in spectrums of possibility, instead of tightly defined cul-de-sacs.¹⁹¹

Bateson felt that connective and relational awareness — seeing patterns, beauty, aesthetic qualities — is all-important if our thinking is to come closer to the way that nature works. And, he insisted, our thinking does need to change from a view that severs these connective patterns by dividing things into parts, to one that focuses on relationships within the whole.

While there may be many modes through which it is possible to build connections with the natural world, an aesthetic mode of engagement is fundamental to revitalising our relationship with it. This speaks not only to the well-being of our ecologies, but to our own as well. We are all aesthetic beings with a desire to explore things creatively, to express ourselves and use our imaginations; we also have a deep need to find beauty and wonder in the world around us. It is this primal part of ourselves that I see as equally needing an authentic connection with nature. As Peter London puts it, “Nature appears beautiful to us because we too are Nature, and what we take to be beauty is only like meeting like and celebrating the congruence.”¹⁹² And though I talk of primal aspects, I don’t wish to imply that we need somehow to go back in our path of civilization, but rather to acknowledge, elicit and nurture parts of our being that have always been there, but that may currently tend to receive little practice and cultivation. I think of this in the Aristotelian sense of lighting an already-existing spark, rather than the more modern image of filling an empty vessel.

While as individuals we experience works of art in unique ways, the arts are also vehicles of culture, affecting minds and hearts on a broader scale. And as I have mentioned, the wider social culture plays a significant role. This is clearly the case when it comes to our relations with the environment as well. Anderson and Guyas propose that because environmental degradation is caused largely by people and is thus a socio-cultural issue, the paradigms of how we relate to the earth need most to be addressed. Their argument is that art education has a role to play here, as the arts can shift the metaphors that guide us, reshaping paradigms to make possible a deeper relatedness with the earth — a process which involves challenging the messages fed to us by commercial media.¹⁹³

This is something worth addressing in its own right, as the images we are currently most exposed to are those of a commercial economy seeking to profit from and augment our consumerism, affecting moral inclinations and sense of self in the process. If nothing else, the making of art allows students to create images and art forms of their own (some of which may be in response to mainstream or commercial media), with the realisation that their sensibilities and orientations needn’t align with publicly-condoned stock. Yet the arts can do much more: they encourage us to work with symbols and metaphors and to carefully examine the connotations behind images and forms. They

have a way of teaching us to rely on our own perceptions rather than on preconceived, socially accepted or 'correct' answers, to raise questions and explore our own meanings. Perhaps most of all, they have subtle yet powerful ways of reminding us of what it is we really value.

Anderson and Guyas suggest that "art is exploration, inquiry, experience, and communication among human beings about things that count."¹⁹⁴ The worthwhile question would then follow: what counts, right now? This makes for valuable artistic inquiry on an individual basis (what matters most to me?); it can also be explored with regard to societal and greater spheres. Sharon Daloz-Parks addresses this latter concern in her essay "How, Now, Must We Live?" Parks' work is about ethical leadership and asks how we might imagine a holistic ecological relationship in a time that pulls us in other directions. She turns here to the way in which artists think and work, observing their tendency to "worry the gap" between what is, and what is needed, in our society.¹⁹⁵ Rather than accepting things as they are, she says, artists have a tendency to think in terms of other — often more holistically favourable — possibilities.

The question of how the arts address the great concerns of what is not right in our world has also been explored by Maxine Greene and Robert Bringham. In a deeply conscientious essay that proposes the role of poetry is to show the world in all its states, not to glorify the poet, Bringham sees the role of the artist as that of shining an illuminating, discerning and even stark light on the way things are, rather than on the way they should be:

All the poets of all times can only say one thing. They can say that what-is is. When he sees his people destroying the world, the poet can say, 'we're destroying the world.' But he cannot lie, as a poet, and offer himself as the savior... He cannot finally say anything more than the world has told him.¹⁹⁶

He is clearly critical of certain current social practices, as is Maxine Greene. Yet her thinking goes in a somewhat different direction. Greene's eloquent and extensive arguments on the arts' capacity for social change propose that artistic practices lead us to imagine alternative possibilities from what is, and to consider alternate ways of being.

She affirms that the arts do, and need to, push us out of seeing only what is, and she is not afraid to suggest utopian quests:

What I am describing here is a mode of utopian thinking: thinking that refuses mere compliance, that looks down roads not yet taken to the shapes of a more fulfilling social order, to more vibrant ways of being in the world.¹⁹⁷

Greene speaks of the importance of not giving in to apathy and not going along with things as we find them simply because it is easier.

Admittedly, being in a state of refusal to accept the status quo is not always easy, as I have often found, and as Parks' phrase "worrying the gap" suggests. I particularly like her way of framing the issue as it suggests being aware at once of both places — both the 'what is' as well as the 'what could, or should, be.' The term worrying implies a kind of going back and forth, as well as concern; it also brings in the kind of tension that often creates dynamic creative work, and that pushes us on toward other ways of imagining. The ground between the two seemingly different places is often very fertile, ground which can be particularly meaningful in artistic endeavours.

In education, however, we need to consider where students are in terms of their development. Working with such tensions can certainly be appropriate and interesting for older children, youth and adults. Yet when it comes to younger children, I believe it is valuable to stay more firmly with a sense of hope and affirmation, as it coincides with their needs and their views of the world. Such an approach also enables them to shape and to authenticate what they hold dear. I do not mean that we should evade the darker and more worrying aspects of ecological realities, only to be very careful where the emphasis is placed, and how things are portrayed. A sense of hopelessness and gloom can work against a sense of agency. I believe that for all of us, no matter what age and despite everything else, it is valuable to find the beautiful, the hopeful and the life-affirming among the what-is of the world. For younger children especially, this is essential. And for the rest of us, it can work alongside the more critical view of 'worrying the gap'.

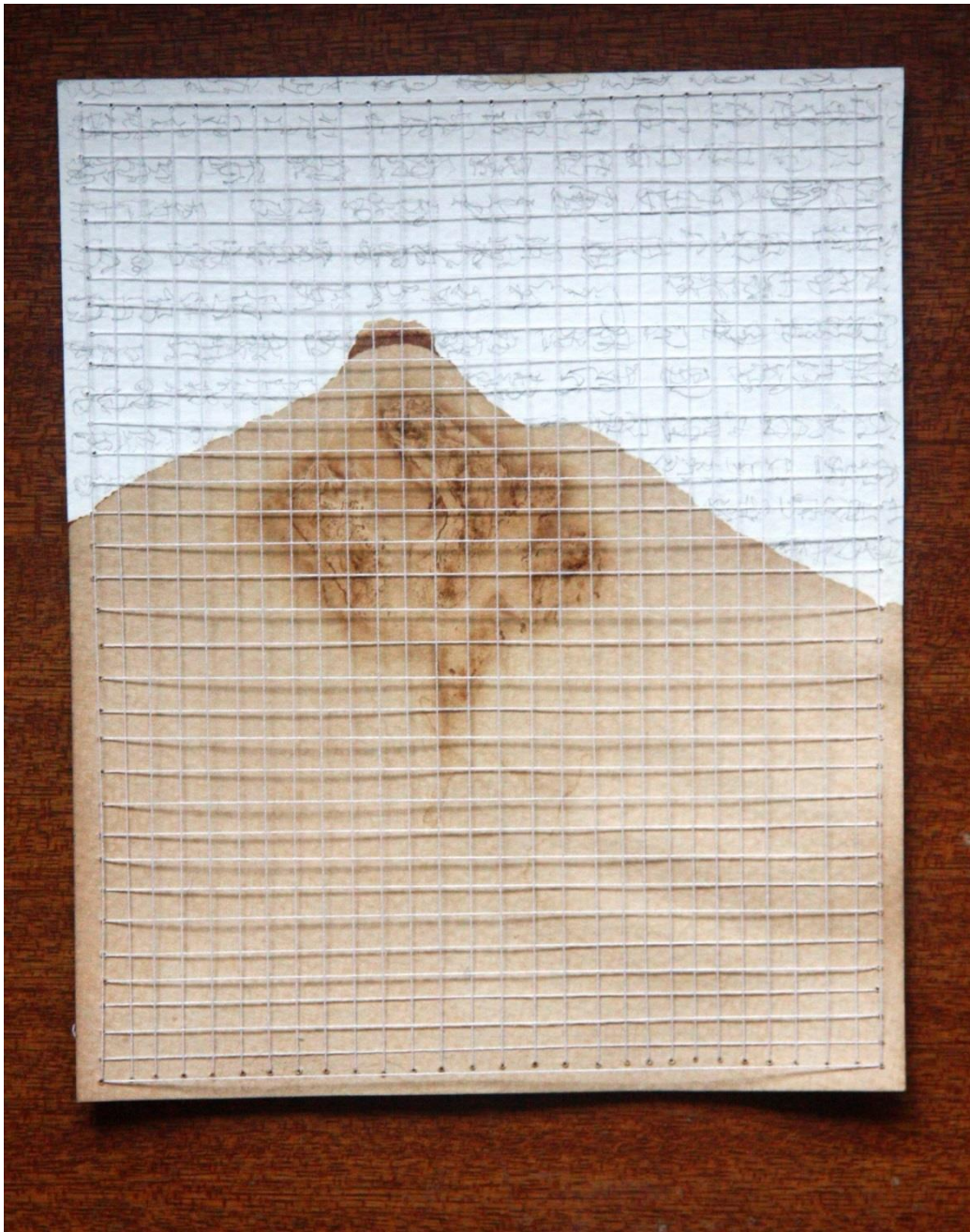


Image 5.4. pencil, tea, thread and watercolour paper

Richard Louv and David Sobel explain that in an effort to be 'environmentally correct' and instil a sense of responsibility, teachers often tell children about the challenges faced by certain species and geographic areas due to human abuse. Yet this may have the opposite effect, creating instead a sense of fear and disassociation in children and youth, distancing them from the world of nature rather than bringing them

closer to it.¹⁹⁸ I saw a bit of this in my son, whose well-meaning teacher versed her students on the dwindling number of tigers in the world, as well as of other animals in peril. This news stayed with him for a long time. Then, once when he was watching a program on endangered animals, I heard the tone of resignation in his voice when he said of yet another in the list of animals, “Oh no, they are endangered too?” Animals are wonderful phenomena to learn about in their own right, particularly when one looks at their characteristics and imagines life from their perspective. The fact that a species is endangered and the statistics associated with that need not be what most colours a child’s conception of that animal. Tigers, for example, have particular characteristics that appeal to imagination — their ferocity, grace, means of camouflage, size and strength. When combined with awareness of their need for large and interconnected areas to support their prey needs, stories of their challenges to survive in the face of human encroachment make their plight and their lives as a whole much more vivid. The same can be true of the creation of images that allows a child to *sense* what inhabiting a tiger’s body and spirit may be like. Yet perhaps most valuable of all are children’s experiences of their own in nature — hands-on experiences that are characterised by joy and wonder and they will want to repeat.

Jan Van Boeckel raises similar concerns regarding heavier environmental issues, finding that the copious information on things like species extinction, environmental degradation and global warming often has the effect of psychic numbing on children and youth; they seem to encounter it everywhere. He proposes arts-based activities as a way to open and awake the senses and to increase — rather than reduce — emotional responsiveness to the natural world, even though its prospects may sometimes appear frightening. He sees the arts as fundamental here: “Art is not an added quality, the icing on the cake; it is rather the point of departure in the effort to find ways in which children can connect to nature.”¹⁹⁹ Van Boeckel’s argument is that when, as teachers, we are active in hope-inspiring ways, we do more to help the situation than by focussing on crises. My sense is that he would agree with Greene about the role of educators to help children imagine more promising alternatives to current difficult situations.

One suggestion I am particularly fond of is an activity done by his colleague Meri-Helga Mantere, where children were asked to go out into nature to find three objects, one representing ‘birth’, another ‘living’ and a third, ‘death’. Upon sharing these objects

with each other, their project was to create a painting or poem on their findings. An activity like this sets children up to create some lovely metaphors. For me, the magical part is that children find their own symbolic ways to represent and relate to the place they are in, yet through concrete things that can be shared with others. They reflect both on the meanings of the things they have found and on how these connect to their own experiences and conceptions, all the while relating to a greater sphere that encompasses many forms of life. Whether they are tangible objects (such as these natural forms representing various stages of life) or anecdotal illustrations of meaning, metaphors have always been potent forms of understanding in that they put a focus, among other often ineffable things, on emotional significance. The arts can be particularly helpful here, through the creation of metaphors that resonate and help represent and reshape our sense of place and relatedness with other forms of life.

Anderson and Guyas advocate working with metaphors that promote “self-realisation as interbeing, an awareness that enables one to reconstruct an interdependent holistic relationship with the world,” suggesting that these supplant “older metaphors of material plenty as a measure of perceived happiness.”²⁰⁰ These proposals of how the arts might refocus and perhaps reorient the lens through which we view what is desirable have significant potential, and I concur with the necessity, especially from an educator’s point of view, to critically question the dominant paradigms. Certainly we want to instil a sense of critical thinking in our children. Yet I think this needs to be done with subtlety and care, and perhaps with emphasis on what we want, rather than on what we don’t want — especially when it comes to younger kids. I certainly agree with working toward a values change and paradigm shift that will help us live in a more ecologically empathetic, less destructive, way. Yet I am less certain I share Anderson and Guyas’ vehement insistence on using art in a strategic manner to attain ecological ends. Perhaps one needs to work more subtly and more sensitively to affect deep change. Personal values cannot be imposed on others and working with a moralistic imperative may backfire.

My thought is rather that the arts can be very helpful in simply bringing us back to — and reminding us of — the things we *do* value in a more authentic sense. In its own right, art works in the opposite direction of the kind of pre-made, standard and hype-filled imagery and slogans that pervades consumer culture. Though it can be critical of these

things and incorporate them for this purpose, generally, art-making spurs us to look toward a more genuine relationship with the world. It also has a way of making us slow down, take notice, and appreciate the particularities of things around us, which in itself is substantial ethical progress. Ideally, it can engender a sense of wonder in the search to figure things out for ourselves. The practices of creating and rendering that come from our own witnessing, of looking closely and discovering for ourselves, of creating new imagery — these are themselves powerful ways to shift us toward metaphors and paradigms that work in a more holistic direction. As Greene puts it,

At the very least, participatory involvement with the many forms of art can enable us to *see* more in our experience, to *hear* more on normally unheard frequencies, to *become conscious* of what daily routines have obscured, what habit and convention have suppressed.²⁰¹

This experience of seeing more and hearing more, Greene says, takes us out of the familiar and taken-for-granted in ways that enable us to become aware of alternate possibilities, empowering us to take the initiative where moral change may be necessary. Anderson and Guyas insist that looking toward utopian ideals does not mean that criticality is left behind. Greene would agree. What might be some further examples, then, of paradigm changes worth looking towards?

Alternate Perspectives

In “Reflecting the Pacific,” an essay inspired by walking beside this immense body of water, Wolfgang Welsch contemplates what we can learn from it, and, from our relationship with it. He criticizes the prevalent paradigm of considering our surroundings from a largely urban point of view — particularly when this is taken as the only valid perspective. Welsch expresses hope that future generations will break away from the urban/Platonic paradigm of human existence — based on Plato’s belief that people in a town setting comprised the only worthy source of knowledge — that has shaped the last 2000 years of Western culture. He calls, instead, for a paradigm that “allows our world-connectedness and our relatedness with other beings to flourish.”²⁰² Stating that the typical modern, Western world-view assumes humans as “primordially autonomous and opposed to the world, not connected with it,” he brings up the Cartesian notions of *res cogitans* (“thinking things”, the place of thought, the mind) and *res extensa* (“extended

things”, bodies), which have long been seen as distinct from each other, the former being viewed as dominant and more worthy. What is interesting to me is that this separation of body and mind, a dichotomy we often hear of in Western culture, coincides with our separation from other bodily, physical things — with earthly and animal bodies. Welsch views the notion of the thinking human as “against” the world around us, as fundamentally misguided:

Even cognition is misconstrued when it is omitted that all our cognitive and linguistic reference to objects thrives on a prelinguistic disclosure and acquaintance with things, one deriving from primordial world-connectedness, that for its part stems from our being evolutionary products of the same processes in which the things we have contact with came into being.²⁰³

In other words, it is our relatedness to the physical and cosmic realms that underlies our capacity for thought and language. It seems to follow, then, that the more connected we are — in a visceral sense — to the physical stuff of the world around us, the richer our thought process and language are likely to become. And conversely, our detachment from the physical world — and, our intellectualization of it — impoverishes the quality of our language. The thing to remember is that this connection is what matters; sometimes it is easy to get caught up instead in the concepts and verbiage that can mediate our sensory participation with it.

David Orr makes rather similar observations of our primordial connections with the natural world and their importance in the very formation of our intelligence and language. Interestingly, he also prefaces these with a serious questioning of Descartes’ legacy. “Could it be,” he asks, “that the ‘integrity, stability, and beauty’ of nature is the wellspring of human intelligence?” And later,

We have good reason to believe that human intelligence could not have evolved in a lunar landscape, devoid of biological diversity. We also have good reason to believe that the sense of awe toward the creation had a great deal to do with the origin of language and why protohumans *wanted* to talk, sing, and write poetry in the first place. Elemental things like flowing water, wind, trees, clouds, rain, mist, mountains, landscape, animal behavior, changing seasons, the night sky, and the mysteries of the life cycle gave birth to thought and language. For this reason I think it is not possible to unravel the creation without undermining human creation as well.²⁰⁴

Throughout Orr's essay on intelligence from which this is quoted runs the idea that human intelligence, in its healthy form, involves a deep caring for other life forms and that intelligent thought and action share a strong moral sense. This includes a sense of responsibility to think ahead to the consequences of our cleverness no matter how scientific, advanced or impressive it may seem. (He views cleverness as being concerned with the short term, rather than the long term, as intelligence can be.) Orr sees intelligence as more akin to human wisdom, which is based on truthfulness, compassion, and an understanding — relating back to the fundamentals of everyday living — that all beings deserve to live well.²⁰⁵ Vancouver poet Robin Blazer would agree, I think, putting it this way: "I don't think intelligence exists without love. Love is intelligence. What kind of intelligence would you have without love?"²⁰⁶ What I particularly appreciate in both these writers is that the idea that intelligence is not something to be aspired to or admired in its own right, but is a way of *relating* to things and to others.

Perhaps we need to seriously wonder what kind of intelligence we have been fostering and following when, in Gregory Cajete's words, "Western culture... disconnected itself from the natural world in order to conquer it."²⁰⁷ Can intelligence be about conquering? In response to this question I cannot but return to Orr's notion that by undermining and dominating the life around us — that which we need to work with, and relate to — we actually undermine ourselves, and, ironically, our own intelligence. Cajete, indeed, goes on to argue that this disconnection is also a rupture of what he calls "the symbolic unity between the inner and outer dimensions of the human psyche" — our internal world and how it relates to the communities around us, human and non-human alike. It seems to be a cycle: the more we disrupt our connection with other living entities, the more we sever and compromise something of ourselves, which in turn leads to more practices that objectify nature so that it might be controlled and exploited.

This unity between inner and outer realms enables a reciprocal and empathetic approach to our environs. Welsch, however, observes our tendency to assume, mistakenly, that any relationship with the world is established from our side alone, and that it is the mind, the '*res cogitans*', which enables it. Yet our bodily aspects are something rather fundamental that we share with the other life forms, including other humans. Because we sense the world and feel emotions through the body, it is what

enables us to imagine what another may be experiencing, and this embodied imagining is what makes empathy possible. My sense of all this is that the way in which we relate to the natural world also directly affects the way in which we relate to each other, that our understanding of other life forms is not unlike the empathy we may have for our fellow humans. In this regard, the kind of impetus that spurs us on toward forms of social justice shares common ground with the empathetic need to protect and speak up for life forms in our ecologies.



Aesthetics, Ethics, Looking Within

Absorbing the world aesthetically needs to involve much more than admiring the appearance of things. Going with the spirit and integrity of the approach described by Cajete, rather than viewing natural phenomena as objects to be perceived we can approach them as living entities that have their own capacities to perceive and sense. Peter London suggests that there is a ‘within’ to nature that is revealed to us only when we open ourselves to it, actively listen, and seek to make contact. Through the making of art in dialogue with the natural world, we work toward a deeper kind of knowing: “The creative process,” he says, “is at root a procedure that the human mind employs to establish relationships and to elevate entities out of their ordinariness, revealing their essence.”²⁰⁸ Tim Lilburn says something similar about the nature and process of poetry and its unapologetic yearning for essence:

Around everything is an epidermis of narrative, a layer of hypotheses, orders, causal grids by which the world is rendered intelligible. Poetry’s fundamental appetite is ecstatic; its curiosity yearns beyond this barrier of intelligibility to know the withinness of things...The knowledge poetry seeks is the most intimate... Poetry leans into the world and back to this state when the mind bespoke the souls of things...²⁰⁹

I love the sense of yearning expressed here to know, to connect, to lean in and look into the depth of things, not to explain the mysteries of their withinness, but simply to come closer to them. This is a search for knowing in a way that wants to relate to, rather than to expose. It knows there is ever more to find, if we are open to seeing, to looking beyond what is visible.

If we think of this as a dialogue, a kind of conversation, it looks and feels very different than the problem-solving, mystery-unraveling approach we are accustomed to in so many other areas of education and society. Important and helpful as problem solving might be as a life skill, it is not the approach to everything. Observance and conscious attending, simply looking and listening with patience and care, do more to bring us closer to things, to respect them.



Wittgenstein's maxim, "aesthetics and ethics are one and the same"²¹⁰ has haunted me in varying ways over the years. Whenever I return to it I understand it differently, and find that much depends on where one enters this thought — whether through the frame of aesthetics, or that of ethics. I doubt I will have it pinned down any time soon, and perhaps that reflects some of its power. Woven through the idea is a search for some kind of rightness, something both morally and sensuously satisfying. But it is an elusive kind of rightness: it is slippery, changeable, and knows it cannot be the only one. Like Kant's notion of purposiveness without a purpose,²¹¹ this is a rightness that knows it isn't *always* right, and that its essence depends on the light of the particular day, the dynamics of a particular situation. Quite simply, it depends on particularities, on what gives things their special colour, nuance and character, on what is being breathed in at a particular moment. It has more to do with depth than with correctness, and that, perhaps, is what makes it meaningful for us. Essence cannot be fixed, reduced or pinned down.

But to consider Wittgenstein's maxim from a perhaps simpler view, one can say that our aesthetic experience of something — be it of a fellow human being, the leaning sway of a willow, the gregarious rush of a creek — invites us to care about it. And, conversely, things become aesthetically inviting because we care about them. Another way to consider this is that something can only be aesthetically right if it has an ethical rightness about it as well, and vice versa. Aesthetic engagement — if we allow it to continue for more than a fleeting moment — becomes characterized by empathy. Eagleton reminds us that moral choices are most often about the bodily and spiritual protection of those we care about, that it is through our mortal bodies that we in turn can sympathize with others.²¹² I believe this can apply also to more-than-human forms of

life. Yet such attentiveness requires us to slow down, to appreciate subtleties, to breathe with things, and to listen to what may at first seem like silence.

Dialogues with our Surroundings, our Situations

Maxine Greene describes how the imagination, capable of being released through various arts, can open our minds not only to the world itself but to its many less obvious possibilities. As Greene notes, this process is much more than the virtual reality and “predigested concepts and images in fixed frameworks” offered by commercially produced media, where “dreams are caught in the meshes of the saleable.”²¹³ The effect of those images, she says, is to stultify our imaginations and sense of morality. Arts and aesthetic education can put students in the active role of *creating* images and suggesting metaphors that convey critically and with some depth the ideas and things we find to be valuable, rather than passively consuming and coopting images that are fed by seemingly higher social powers. Like Greene, I have long felt that one of our key responsibilities as educators is not just to teach media literacy, but to enable students to inhabit more fully *other* literacies and forms of knowing that see *past* and *through* the mighty force of modern media — forms of knowing that can be stronger and more compelling once we put our trust in them. This can be done by conscious aesthetic participation, enabling individuals “to look through their own eyes, to find their own voices, to avoid the formulations devised by official others.”²¹⁴ Let’s face it, though being ‘green’ may be considered cool among media-savvy youth, actually being absorbed in nature and in forms of life outside the human and social realm is not often so. This may be because the natural world is very slow, still and subtle compared to the flashiness and pace of any media screen. It is also has a rawness to it, compared to the slickness of screen media.

I have mentioned before London’s emphasis on the great importance of experiencing the world directly, of seeing things first hand, for ourselves, rather than allowing others to mediate them for us. His idea of ‘others’ is meant in the broadest sense, whether they be self-serving marketing schemes, or well-intentioned teachers. It is important not to mistake these ‘secondhand’ vicarious experiences, he says, for direct encounters and witnessing of our own.

When so much of the world comes to us through the media, we imperceptibly come to believe that we are still living in the world of people, places, things, and events, when in fact we are living in a virtual world composed of words and pictures, newspapers, electronic blips of light and sound. Like the denizens of the cave described in Plato's *Republic*, we have taken the shadows on the wall for the objects that cast them... while the actual world glides unobtrusively by.²¹⁵

London's argument is that direct witnessing and experiencing things for oneself is not only part of an authentic life: it is also the key to making compelling art. One needs to trust one's own part in this direct dialogue with the world, without looking constantly to the interpretations and renditions of others.

Elsewhere, London writes of the impossibility of 'capturing life', dispelling the myth that art is about the reproduction or imitation of beautiful moments and things. What we need to seek instead, he says, is to encounter things sincerely, to engage in relationship with them and look beyond mere form and beauty to "the life force residing in all form."²¹⁶ London views a dialogue with nature through the making of art as a kind of sacred conversation. In this first-hand and reciprocal way of creating art, the place itself becomes the real teacher, and the artistic response a way of inquiring and coming to know. In this sense, the process of making, and nature itself, are what allows for transformation. Yet Moore and Hillman say that the beauty and form of things are what invite us into this relationship in the first place, that our open response to the shape of things is what reanimates them. I don't find that this contradicts London's idea that in the dialogue with nature we look beyond formal beauty to the withinness of things; our response to beauty is an important invitation, and the emphasis remains on coming to know, on relating to particular characteristics. Similarly, the careful crafting of work is an essential part of creative process, yet while the product and perhaps its eventual recognition are certainly encouraging and satisfying, at times even beautiful testaments of experience, they are not what most counts. Perhaps the real beauty, then, is in this complex relational process, and in what it evokes. If we are concerned with successful work, this is what it needs to embody.



Environmental artist Andy Goldsworthy creates site-specific works often informed entirely by the natural settings in which he produces them. Rather than imposing on the place by implementing a pre-determined plan, he observes the life that is there, and looks to understanding the processes of nature. He listens, attends, and allows the place itself to guide the work. A completed work is comprised only of materials found on the site. Goldsworthy's pieces are often subtle and ephemeral — a string of leaves or stones arranged in gradations of colour, a sculptural drawing done with long grass stalks attached meticulously to a tree trunk with thorns, small ice sheets from a frozen river arranged in sculptural form on a rock, welded together with water. They are a response to the place, the seasons and weather, and to the natural materials he finds there. He particularly enjoys the moments, he says, when he is suddenly able to see something in the landscape that was there all along, but that he had before been blind to.²¹⁷

To me, this process of cultivating openness to the situation, of surrendering and being present, of moving slowly and adapting oneself, of understanding that nature is always in a state of change and that no part of it exists independently of its surroundings, has tremendous ethical implications — not just for the making of art, but for life itself. As the poetic titles of Goldsworthy's works imply, this ethic is in the perception, engagement, and response to the properties of the moment, and most of all, in allowing oneself to be guided by the situation at hand.



Drawing Outside

Maxine Greene emphasizes how education in the arts is a means to encourage students to notice what there is to be noticed. From my own experience, both from teaching and from personal practice, we *do* notice, when we draw a tree in the woods, for example, that its trunk does not consist of two straight lines, but is intricately contoured. Knots rise here and there, with ridges in the bark and scars where branches came off long ago. We notice that this branch is covered with a soft, fuzzy moss, and that another protrudes at an odd angle. We take in the play of light and notice how, when there is a clearing at some distance ahead, the branches and trunks close to us are almost stark silhouettes compared to the ones further ahead which fade into the

softer light. We absorb how, when viewed from a distance, the leaves become a playful mass of fine pattern, fluttering in the breeze. We become aware of how these various bodies occupy space, and how we, too, are bodies part of that space.



In the courtyard of my children's elementary school, I'm standing with my son's class of grade ones and twos, and their teacher, Madame H  l  ne. I am here as a parent volunteer, doing an art project with the children, thankful that the threat of rain that has hovered over us the past few days has gone, and that the sun is determinedly out. The children stand with their packages of markers and pencil crayons in their hands. In the courtyard is a wonderful variety of trees: a dogwood in full bloom, a Japanese maple, an oak, and two pines with wonderfully twisted trunks that Madame H  l  ne says she and a colleague planted eighteen years ago. Toward the back stands a grove of cedars, giants that loom up into the sky, casting shadow on all beneath. There's also a young spruce that looks as if it may have been someone's Christmas tree a decade or so ago.

The children put their markers and pencils down, and we make shapes with our bodies corresponding to the various trees — tall on tiptoe with arms high up for the cedars, leaning slightly sideways to make the wayward trunk of the oak, creating spikes with our fingers to depict the sharp needles of the spruce. After a while, I ask the children, "If the trees could talk, and we could understand their language, what would they say?" Hands shoot up and two boys, almost in unison, say, "Don't cut me down!" They have been studying the Amazon rainforest, and are somewhat versed in the dangers that threaten life there. I don't mention, at this point, that the woods in the hills just a few kilometres away are also in danger of being levelled, that logging practices affect our own home as well. Other children pipe in: "Feed me!" "Water me!" "Let me stay with my friends."

An interesting thing happens when you allow, invite, encourage, children to imagine that plant forms can talk. Given the human attribute of speech, the trees become more like us in their basic life needs; they are no longer anonymous objects, but beings that deserve to survive and flourish as we do. We give them our empathy. There

are two aspects to this, however: not only are these other forms of life speaking; more importantly, we are listening, and doing our best to understand.

In old stories, folktales and myths, animals retain their biological and allegorical characteristics (the fox, for example, is sly, the lion courageous, the sparrow humble), yet they are often given the power of speech.¹ My sense of this is not just that the animals are given attributes that make them more like humans, or that they are credited with intelligence and emotion. There is also clearly a need for us to somehow connect with them — for them to communicate with us, and for us to be able to understand their language. This ability to comprehend is in itself a great power — one that not all humans possess. In the stories, it is often the disbelievers in these communicative powers who, in their ignorance, are unable to hear.

When children conceive of the trees as being able to speak, and of themselves as having the power (also exerting the effort) to understand, a sense of connection is engendered, and their perceptions are heightened.

¹ This is unlike many stories in popular children's culture today, where animals not only have the presumption of speech, but are often so anthropomorphised as to lose almost all their natural characteristics, habits, and ways of life — promoting a great sense of ignorance in children about the real lives of animals. This is dealt with further in the later chapter on listening.



Image 5.5. Miro Burgess, age 6

They create drawings that are not typical 'pretty pictures', but that result from careful and felt observation. They notice, for example, that the trunk of the pine has a bit of a rusty colour to it, depicted by some in orange; that the bark of the cedars is stripy and textured; that the branches of the spruce jut straight out; and that one particular root from a large cedar has grown above the ground and, if you put your head down close, you can see light show through. They notice that the trunks of many trees are not straight lines, but have varying curves, and that the Japanese maple is purplish red. Everyone's drawing is different. They also include things that they do not see, necessarily, but that they know to be possible — squirrels, bird nests, a raccoon. Fed by their rich observation, their imaginations are actively at work.



Imagination and Real Contexts

Iris Murdoch stated that we “use our imagination not to escape the world, but to join it.”²¹⁸ Her idea here is very ethically charged, not only because it presents us with an imperative but also because it reminds us of situations where this necessarily occurs. For children especially, and I think for the rest of us too, there are many circumstances where coming to know the reality of a situation involves imagining our way into it. I believe the ethical question is in how we do this, and in the effort we take to see various aspects of the world on its own terms. Murdoch speaks of a “just and loving gaze,”²¹⁹ one that surveys situations with goodwill and understanding, and contrasts this with self-absorbed fantasy that veils our perception and detracts from a clear-minded, attentive, and observant relationship with the situations and environs in which we find ourselves.

Children have a wonderful capacity to inhabit physical realms in very sensuous ways — their eyes and ears often notice things that may have become mundane to adults, and they revel in the feel of various spaces and textures, in the very atmosphere of a place. Yet while they can be very present in the here and now, children also have imaginations capable of going almost anywhere, forming rich and intricate worlds — alternate or completely reworked versions of realms they experience either firsthand or through various forms of stories and images. I believe there is something special that occurs when they bring their imaginative interpretations to that which is right before them, or, when their direct experience — perceived through heightened senses — propels their minds to other rich spheres. In other words, when what is absorbed of the physical world through our senses is interwoven with that which we see in the mind’s eye or feel internally. What comes together is a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. Abram, writing in the phenomenological tradition, views it this way:

That which we call imagination is from the first an attribute of the senses themselves; imagination is not a separate mental faculty (as we so often assume) but is rather the way the senses themselves have of throwing themselves beyond what is immediately given, in order to make tentative contact with the other sides of that we do not sense directly, with the hidden or invisible aspects of the sensible.²²⁰

Thus, our senses take us (and children especially) to other realms; at the same time, imagination brings us closer to what we see before us, enriching it in magical ways. It

grasps the resonances in a space between what is real and not quite real, between what we know and what we have yet to know. This is also why first-hand experience is so essential; when our senses and perceptions take things in for themselves, they feed the imagination in a way that is richer, clearer, more personal and meaningful than when we merely receive experiences mediated through someone else's description.

The imagination also seems to connect to that elusive space within us that we call the soul. In the opening of her weighty tome on the subject, Eva Brann gives us what I think is a beautiful description of what she means by the imagination: "It is placed centrally between the faculties and intermediately between soul and world. Thus it both holds the soul together within and connects it to the objects without."²²¹ Thomas Moore, in turn, opens *Care of the Soul* with a similar connection: "It is impossible to define precisely what soul is. Definition is an intellectual enterprise anyway; the soul prefers to imagine."²²² And, perhaps more succinctly than both, Warren Heiti states in his essay on ethics: "By 'soul' I mean the organ of imagination, where imagination is defined as sensitivity to resonance."²²³

All of these ways of putting it are sympathetic to what I hope to convey. For now, however, I am fond of Brann's description, for it is a wonderful creative acknowledgment of the union of the real and the idealised, as well as of the connection between inner and outer worlds. Always in contact with what the senses bring in, the imagination actively participates in realms that are uncertain, yet powerful and rich. Two pervasive themes I have found in Greene's work are that involvement in the arts enables us to be awake to what there is to be noticed, and that it allows us to envision new possibilities in contexts that require them. When brought into active participation, the imagination does both. Applying this principle to the context of our natural environment heightens both our personal appreciation of its current state, as well as our sense of ethical responsibility for its future.

End

If I master all this,
will it come to fruition, to
some envisioned end?

All my efforts at order, my
attempts to keep clear, do away
with the unwanted, the debris that dregs up
life, space, the corners of categorized time.

Cook three meals a day and discipline children.
Become
efficient.

If I master all this,
will I still notice the light at dusk,
that imperfect but glowing haze,
as one beam shines radiant through the cottonwood tree?

Will I still find it beautiful, be
beguiled by moments like this,
or will they be wasted on me then,
as I think of more important things
to do?

Calling in the Air

I can hear the weather changing, the
air shifting what is on the
ground, the ground itself.
Calling from far away, where
things are different, coming
to change things here.

In this current is a signal,
a tune that calls voluminous
silence through the noise of
traffic, TV sets, and radios
the noise of presses churning out printed matter, the
pounding of hearts that
don't even hear themselves.

I can hear it sometimes.
Once we all could.
The animals can still.



Image 5.6. Rock Ridge, Maple Ridge

6. Walking and Drawing in the Woods

For a number of years now, I've been visiting a wooded area on a hill — or rather a series of hills — just north of the town of Maple Ridge where I live. My walks there have been about being outside and being with the trees, and about getting some exercise. They have also been about staying somewhat sane through difficult times. More recently, however, they have become a kind of spiritual practice, keeping me grounded and helping my mind — so easily occupied and muddled by the snarl of life itself — stay relatively clear.

About a year ago, I began to do series of drawings on my visits there, a project begun as an endeavour to know the place better and to connect with it in an embodied way. The drawings were of particular little niches of the woods that caught my eye, places that invited me to stop and be with them for a time, to look closer and to absorb. I drew on thick pieces of white card, about 3 inches square, very dense and with a texture similar to that of watercolour paper, giving them a lovely, soft, almost fabric-like feel. These drawings were, for the most part, very basic — almost schema-like — and depicted only particular details, framed off by the small size of the cards. Because of their intimate size, and because the drawings are done with a medium point permanent marker, there isn't much that fits within that space. They have almost always been fragments of things, little squares of view that isolate certain areas; one needs to use the imagination to see how the forest continues beyond their edges.

After doing each drawing, I dated it on the back, then found a place where the woods could keep it safe for me until I returned to retrieve it — under some half-decomposing foliage, behind a log, in a tree stump, anywhere close by that offered itself as a suitable hiding place.



Image 6.1. Rock Ridge, Maple Ridge

While the drawing was kept there — sometimes for a few days, other times much longer — the elements, together with the leaves, soil and decomposing wood would work on it and leave their mark. When I returned to look for a drawing on my next visit, it was sometimes tricky to remember where I had placed it. There were many times when finding one was difficult, when I was dismayed with myself for not remembering or

knowing the place and its private landmarks well enough. In a childish way, I sometimes felt disappointed with the forest itself, for not revealing the white pieces of card and offering them back to me.

Whenever I found a drawing, however, it was always a small but very real moment of pleasure. *Here it is, here is this small work of mine that the place has taken care of for me, and is now offering it back.* I felt like a child receiving a gift, or finding a hidden treasure. There is also something deeply satisfying about hiding something out in the world, knowing that only I know where it is, then finding it later. I imagined how a squirrel might feel when finding a buried nut.^m

There were times when I didn't get to that particular part of the woods for a while, and my memory of where exactly I had left a drawing failed me. This was always disappointing. There are many drawings that I never found and that are in those woods still. Sometimes, however, after several tries, I found that sought-for piece of white card, and it was like magic. Part of the trick was simply trusting and having faith that I would somehow be led to it. Because the pieces of card are thick and dense enough to withstand the elements they survived well, and the marks left by soil and decomposing wood, by weather and moisture were interesting, telling of the particular niche of the woods where the drawings had been resident for a time.

^m Jacobs and Liman (1991) found that grey squirrels (contrary to what had previously been thought, that squirrels often forget where they cache their food) actually do rely on memory, not just smell, to find the food they have buried. "Grey Squirrels Remember the Locations of Buried Nuts" *Animal Behaviour*, 41, 103-110



Image 6.2. Rock Ridge, Maple Ridge

I worked on a series of these in Maple Ridge, and also a smaller series on the Trans Canada Trail at the Burnaby campus of SFU. I also did a series of contour drawings, trying out a different format and a different way of seeing and experiencing the woods. These I didn't hide there, but took home with me. Once I had started this project of visiting, walking and drawing in earnest, I felt a commitment to the places and to my dialogue with them, as if I had a responsibility of sorts to carry on my part of it.

Admittedly, there were times when, due to other commitments, I lagged a bit. Like with any practice, after an interval, it was more difficult to find exactly where I had left off. But on the whole this project, with some variations on the drawings, kept me going over the course of the year. What follows are some accounts of my experiences in the woods during that time.



It was something special today, when on the trail at SFU I found by the tree with the branch that curves into this beautiful sideways teardrop — that branch of which I had done the drawing — the patch of ferns that hid the drawing itself. I had hidden it there many weeks ago; it was one of the first drawings I had done of this place, but when I had attempted to find it several times before, it was not revealed to me. I had scrambled up the bank in several places, uncovering patches of ground, lifting dead, dried fronds, but had found nothing. Then, today, I somehow looked at the place anew. I realized it was likely not *that* patch of ferns that hid it, but a different one. Then, at the moment when I wanted to uncover and explore it, some people came down the trail. Not wanting to be seen digging around in the dirt, I walked on a bit, then returned. It wasn't actually under the clump of ferns I where I thought it would be, but under the one beside it. Each cluster of ferns has some dead fronds that lie flat on the ground, dropping down with the slope of the hill, on their way to becoming part of the ground itself, and it is here that I found it. There it was — the drawing of that beautiful curve, solidified in black on the white ground of the paper, with the background of the tracery of smaller branches and their twigs.



On my more muddled days, when I'm low on energy and my mind is not particularly clear and lively, or when I'm feeling I need to be comforted, I sometimes just want to walk the woods and be in them, rather than stop and make something to give to them. These might also be days when I'm anxious, and feel that the movement and the fresh air — the release that exercise brings — are what I need most.

Today was such a day, up on Rock Ridge hill in Maple Ridge. I feel I have been building a relationship with these woods, something to which I've given a sense of commitment, and when I was there collecting my drawings (I found them easily today, even though I had that initial moment of despair with one of them), I felt a slight sense of guilt for taking and not giving back. But then, I thought that with any relationship, there are times when one gives, other times when one is given to, and it usually balances out in the end. For it does feel that these woods are giving me something by keeping my work safe for me, and then revealing it to me once again, for my taking. It is not unlike finding buried treasure — not the stuff of gold and wealth, but of smaller, special moments.

I've realized that it is not just a matter of being in the woods that does the magic — it also the walking and the solitude. But even so, walking and solitude, if experienced anywhere else, are not quite the same as when I'm up there; only the woods seem to revive and nurture in quite the same way.



Dry Day

On a dry day, it's different.
Light casts shadows where
there was nothing but shadow before,
sounds are crisp
and the rocks, rather than the moss
hide things for me.

The sun comes onto my paper,
trying to trick my drawing,
while the tall fir, without the moisture to keep
it still against the brother it leans on
creeks a silent groan from above.
As the sun sets, the shadows call me home.



Image 6.3. Trans Canada Trail, Burnaby

I went to the very top of the ridge today for the first time in a long time — in about a month, according to the date of the drawing I found there. From the top of the ridge, you can see over the hills and valley to the north, where there are few signs of civilization. The sun was out and mist was rising from the valley. It took me a while to find the drawing though — for a moment, I thought someone may have taken it. On the young tree that grew from the patch of moss and salal, all of which took root in a small

hollow in the rock at the top of the hill, a black mitten was hung, left there by a thoughtful soul in hope its owner might find it. Perhaps, I thought, they took my drawing instead? Because the moss was very dense there, I hadn't been able to bury this one the way I usually did the others, and so I had hidden it in the low, thick growth of salal bush. When I eventually found it, I was surprised that it had been altered. At first I thought an insect may have been busy there, but then realized the drawing had simply decomposed more here since the hollow in the rock had likely filled with water, there being almost no soil to absorb it.

Coming down from the hill and seeing all the life coming out — young trees budding, a raven overhead calling and flying in a flustered way, bushes with red flowers (must find out their name, for we have one in our yard — I've called it the Birthday Bush because it blooms around the time of my son's birthday)... For a moment, a brief moment, instead of experiencing calm and clarity as I usually do, I felt overwhelmed by all this activity — there was so much to absorb. Earlier, I had seen salmon berry bushes blooming, and more remarkably, a patch of trilliums, spread out shyly in a clearing just away from the trail. The thing about spring is that everything is in a state of rapid change. Suddenly, buds appear, then blossoms, and if you turn your attention away for a few days, these are gone and maturing leaves have taken their place. Your mind and eyes are occupied elsewhere for a moment, and you miss things. Perhaps this is the feeling of being overwhelmed — there is much to take in, and the time in which to do it is fleeting. As Annie Dillard says, nature is a now-you-see-it-now-you-don't kind of place.²²⁴



It is May, and after doing the buried drawings on the cards for about four months, I started doing contour drawings today, having decided to move do something different, to try look at and engage with the woods in a different way. By the stream that cuts through the small valley I come to after climbing and descending the first hill, I sat on a large log. This is a favourite spot, a place I've spent many moments of repose and contemplation. It is not something I usually intend to do here, but often seem invited to. This area holds for me certain moments and eras of the past few years, and memories flood back, sometimes bringing a sense of peace, and sometimes pain. Contour

drawings take longer, and because I am using ordinary paper instead of the stiff card, I needed to rest my paper on something solid and so had to sit down. The stream flowed gently past, surrounding me with its gentle, burbling voice. A fly or some sort buzzed around my ears. Birds made themselves heard from up in the treetops.

Contour drawing is slower, more focused. I rest my pen on the paper but focus my eyes only on the thing I'm actually drawing, in this case a young salmonberry bush with its young vernal leaves and twiggy, spindly base. The idea behind a contour drawing is that the eyes remain on the subject being drawn; in a strict blind contour, the eyes never look at the drawing itself, but focus entirely on the contour, or outline, of the thing being drawn. Because one imagines the tip of their pen or pencil to physically be on the contour of the subject itself and not on the paper, the pen following along the contour exactly as the eye does, it is a particularly embodied form of drawing, connecting one to the world in a physically felt and imagined way. Though I am not doing strict blind contours (I wanted to relish making the line and creating the image in a way I couldn't with the small cards, their tight format allowing only for relatively clumsy depictions), the experience of drawing this way still brought me close to the plant life, my eyes so locked on their form.

I notice the angles where the twigs and branches depart from one another — forking like upright V's, the angles almost symmetrical each time. I'm accustomed to doing contour drawings of the human form — hands, faces and also the curves of the body — all more essentially contour-like, and these straight lines don't seem to lend themselves to it as well. But then I realize it is just because I haven't yet grown accustomed to it, and continue.

Being able to understand the ethos and nuances of more than one visual language gives one a view of the world that is richer, more complex, and more multi-faceted. Having the ability to take in the world, and to express what one perceives in several languages — be they verbal, visual, kinetic or aural — reveals to us different aspects and potential both of the world and of ourselves. I recall several experiences of learning to understand and to express myself in a different language and how it felt, tasting different words and expressions and ways of relating to world: being careful to be as accurate as my limited knowledge would allow me, yet also making that language my

own form of expression. It is a bit like trying on a different garment, and wearing it as only I could. There were different aspects of me that came out; at the same time, my connection with things around me took on a different palette, a different tone, as some expressions that just weren't part of the language I spoke regularly became my means of communication. This discovery was a pathway into a particular realm and its culture. This experience was about being part of something, part of a tradition; I wanted to delve into it, yet have it within me as well.



Image 6.4. Rock Ridge, Maple Ridge

The contour drawings were a mode of representing unlike the drawings I had done before. Because my materials were different (fine-tipped marker on larger, lighter paper), as was the mode of viewing, it caused me to look for different things. I sought out aspects of my surroundings that seemed better suited to the way in which I was

representing them, or more interesting because of it,. With contour drawings, one looks close up. Vision is slower, and more concerned with subtle details than with the whole. While proportions are still important, the focus is on how a line curls around the thing it depicts, in all its absurd and lovely intricacy.

Instead of leaving these drawings there for the woods to keep, I brought them home with me, leaving them in various places around the house. As my eyes were cast on the drawing left on the kitchen table, I had a chance to further absorb what I had seen in the woods that day, and at what my hands had made of it.



Image 6.5. Rock Ridge, Maple Ridge



Image 6.6. Trans Canada Trail, Burnaby

Yesterday, I walked the trail on the hillside at SFU. I looked for a card drawing I had hidden some time ago, and came upon the decaying stump on the side of the bank which I had drawn, and beneath which I had hidden the drawing, or thought I had. I

recognized the sharp jagged wooden line of the opening that revealed the stump's dark interior, and the striking shape of the shadow it produced. But I couldn't find the drawing. The ground there seemed reduced somehow, shrunken and more compact than the place where I remembered slipping my hand into a small opening beneath one of the roots to hide the drawing. I found nothing. I thought perhaps I had the wrong place, but felt certain the jagged dark shape was the one I had drawn. I kept walking, found other similar stumps, but knew right away that they were not it. I returned to the first stump, and consulted the rough scribble of a drawing I had made on the back of one of the cards to help me remember the spot where I had buried it. The forms matched; I was convinced this was the place, and put my hand again into the opening.

It was the dry sand that had thrown me off. As I had recently come back to campus after semester break, it had been a month since I had deposited the drawing, and much had changed in the woods since then. Where before the ground had been damp, rich and swollen, now there was nothing but dryness. April turning into May and dry weather had done that. I had deposited my drawing into moist earth, now I retrieved it from dusty sand, which caked to it, the only remaining bits of moisture having deposited themselves into parts of the paper. But the moment of finding it was joy.

Nearby, I noticed the beautiful curved branch I had drawn long before. It had been bare then, of no readily distinguishable species, and now I could see it was from a vine maple — its baby light green leaves like tiny kites above me, spreading seven-fingered against the sky, catching the light of the sun. How much its character had changed, as the darkness of its wood now retreated into obscurity behind the new vernal growth. What a difference a month had made!

Today, in Maple Ridge, I did more contour drawing. It brings your attention to just that — the contours, and when looking around for something to draw, I viewed the woods differently this time — as a mass of (relatively) straight lines moving heavenward, parallels infinitely repeated. With the drawings on the cards, I had noticed proportions, space, the overlapping and foreshortening of forms, whereas now I looked specifically for lines. I wanted curved ones that lend themselves well to contour, and had to really look for them in the place where I happened to be standing. I thought again of Eisner's observation that we seek out what we know how to represent. I was looking to depict

through the particular mode of drawing I had chosen: it was a certain kind of framework that worked with a particular kind of visual vocabulary. The shift in these had made me feel momentarily insecure, the way one does when required to express oneself in a less practiced language. I thought of the value of having a sense of real mastery at one's disposal. If, for example, I had the skills acquired by life-long intense focus, the kind honed by artists like Gordon Smith, Wolf Kahn, or Takao Tanabe — artists whose rendering of natural forms I particularly admire — I would choose yet different modes of representing, and therefore, of seeing. More options would certainly present themselves. As it is, I'm glad to have what I have.

In the creative projects I've done with students around places that are meaningful to them, the avenues were open as to how they could render their response to their chosen milieu — whether through photography, sound, drawings or poetry. Though I encouraged them to reach outside their comfort zone in terms of creative media, usually students tended to choose a medium with which they were at least partly familiar. Though there were some who were particularly talented or practiced, many had not done anything they could call 'art' in a very long time, and so felt limited in terms of their own capacities. While there was no emphasis placed on existing artistic abilities, the richness of their project was in many respects affected by the richness of the creative languages they had at their disposal. With many students being self-acknowledged beginners, what mattered more were the risks they were willing to take in exploring and inhabiting particular means of representation. The project required them to delve into and trust their creative sensibilities and sense of imagination; it also required them to respond to a place sincerely. These two together were what produced some evocative work. More importantly, however, they felt themselves inspired by the place itself, and by the opportunity to respond to it in affective ways that varied from childlike to deeply personal to highly conceptual. A Surrey beach that had been frequented during childhood brought about the desire to use colour boldly, to play with imaginative and childlike imagery and push cliché things like flowers and ladybugs into delightful new forms. Derby's Reach on the south bank of the Fraser, which had been a place of healing after a traumatic accident, evoked poetry so intense for the writer she had ask someone else to read it for her. Pollution found at Burnaby Lake Park gave rise to anger which became palpable in the collages and rubbings that resulted. Regardless of the

experience, it seemed a treat to explore it through a creative lens. When these projects were done as part of a curriculum course, the process allowed the place itself to come alive for prospective teachers in ways that revealed fertile possibilities for curriculum.



Image 6.7. Rock Ridge, Maple Ridge

It's a May weekend, the first real hot weather this year. I've spent a lot of time walking the woods lately and feel a need to walk in different places — to be outside in the shelter of trees and to have green around me, yet to have people and urban life there as well. My son, Miro, and I were about to go to South Bonson in Pitt Meadows, where there is a walk along the Fraser River, alders with their light green leaves alive in the breeze; there is also interesting architecture and a coffee shop nearby. But just as we are leaving, he expresses a wish to go instead to Horseman's Park, a small wooded area by the south arm of the Allouette River. We have many memories there; it is place we have come to for years. When my elder son was around two it was ideal, as the trails are not very long; there is the gurgling river whose banks we could explore, and in which we could wade in the summer. In the fall, we find salmon fighting their way up the creek, their carcasses languishing on the banks in various states of decomposition for the weeks to come.

It is a place I've visited many times in solitude as well, when the soft green ground and the river took into themselves my grief and confusion, and nurtured my need for peace. I've watched the small swallows flit along the trees by the river as dusk approached in early summer, and asked the place for guidance. It usually came in unexpected forms, but it came. The place is close by for us and has always been accessible enough for a few breaths of solace when I needed them, even if very briefly on the way to picking up the kids from school.

When Miro and I were there this time, the place was alive with spring: seas of blue forget-me-nots, spotted here and there with pink bleeding hearts, bloomed in most areas not filled with trees. Miro has often named certain areas here by their characteristics, and this time, the little trail that we took off the main trail became Forget-me-not Path. The sunlight filtered through the tall cottonwoods and we saw it sparkle on the water once we made our way down to the bank. He wanted to wade and urged me to walk up the river with him, but my feet went numb with cold after a few moments. The cold didn't seem to bother him though, and he kept going, wanting to be in the water.

It was late afternoon and the sun slanted from the west. Miro had found a long stick and slapped the water with it, first in straight vertical whips coming down at right angles to the water, then in longer, diagonal swinging motions that sent silvery ropes of

water into the air, arcing in the sunlight like dancing ribbons. The sound of the slapping of water accentuated the gentle rush of the river, and occasionally the frantic barks of our dog, pleading desperately for a stick to be thrown.

Something about those watery arcs and Miro's creation of them while he stood in the river has stayed with me, as has the quality of light at that particular moment. I've watched my sons wade in this part of the river many times through their changing childhood, have watched them grow from experiencing the simple delight of the water's edge as toddlers, to exploring the way their feet can negotiate the bottom of the river as they ventured into some deeper and faster sections, to, in the case of my older son, Vladan, experiencing some uneasy moments of reflection, as he matured beyond his childhood. Miro is not quite there yet — on the cusp, perhaps, but not there yet — and for now, watching what he can do with the water by playing with it, still gives him a thrill.

Later on, Miro insisted on stopping at the horse corral; he turned upright the red barrels (actually metal garbage containers) that are used for horses to jump over, and began to drum on them. The sound reverberated through the woods. Again, I was reminded of another time about a year ago, when both boys were here, drumming on the tops of these barrels with sticks, mesmerized somewhat by the rhythms. Downy cottonwood seeds were wafting and circling through the air, and again, it was that special hour of twilight when the sun is at a slant, and its rays make golden all that they cast their light upon.



The latter part of May is the time of ferns unfurling, and I've been drawing them in the woods. The most special part is the top of their fronds and their resemblance to fiddleheads, tender like a baby rising from sleep, coming out of its fetal position and extending limbs into air. It's the first day of June today, and it seems this work is now done — the ferns are mostly straightened, uncurled, and reaching into the understory space of the woods. I was there today to return to a particular fern that had sung something to me about a week ago, and the tips are all exposed, even if still tender. How things change all the time. I couldn't get very far with my drawing, as the rain coming down wet the paper, and the ink from my pen wouldn't take. The raindrops also

made the ends of the fern fronds twitch, as they fell on them. This I didn't mind, it was kind of interesting, but there was little point in continuing with small pools of water on the paper.



Image 6.8. Trans Canada Trail, Burnaby

Everything is starting to have that overgrown look. Banks of buttercups are drooping over from the wet, in our backyard as well as at the trailhead up on the hill.

There is something magical about that sprightly yellow against the velvety green — it brings out the paler hues of the verdant background. It's funny how buttercups can appear stubborn and delicate at the same time. I guess I know a few humans who are that way as well. I noticed today that the forest was punctuated with more diagonals — there wasn't just the vertical ubiquity of trunks going straight up and down. It appeared there had been a windstorm which had brought down the less solid of the thinner trees, causing them to snap at the base and lean over. Instead of descending all the way to the ground, however, they leaned on other trunks. The forest is so thick that unless its weight overpowers the other trunks, a falling one doesn't have the room to make its way all the way to the ground.



Besides the freshness of green, the moist, newly-charged air, the sanctuary of trees and the possibility to move over distance and burn off frustrated energy, one of the larger draws of the woods for me is the immense feeling of freedom, of peace. I don't feel there are expectations of me here, other than my own. I notice that when I meet people on the trail, as happens more often on the hill on campus, I feel more self-conscious. The business of doing my drawings, burying them and then searching for them usually has to wait until people have left. I am aware that I am probably doing something unusual, something that would be deemed at least curious by most.

In a meditation on the simple act of observing life and place, Karen Meyer remarks how the animal and bird life around her on the beach of a quiet island seems to not mind her presence. When, after some time of quiet observation there, she becomes aware that she is not a threat, she notices that she feels invisible, and quite happily so. Inquiring into her own presence with respect to the life around her, she wonders if they even see her. Then, she says, "I find that the more invisible I become, the more visible the real world is."²²⁵

Something about this resonates with me. I, too, feel I can observe and be part of things much better, when I don't feel visible. One can feel unseen in the sense of forgetting oneself — letting go of self-consciousness, and then there's an awareness

that one is of no bother, or even of any significance, to the life forms around. Both are freeing.

I recall when at the age of twelve I decided to go out for a run in our neighbourhood in the very early hours of the morning, before anyone was up. I caused my parents some alarm when they found me gone, but what I most remember was the way the world looked in the pre-dawn light, with no other people around. Though I had decided to go out for a run, I found myself sitting down on the tree-lined sidewalk, feeling a need just to take in the silence that somehow made the world come alive for me in a way that was not possible in the presence of other people when the human day had begun.

I don't think Meyer would assume that the animal world was not aware of her presence. She does, however, indicate that there is something about simple witnessing that is itself an act of quiet participation. And one can witness better, if one does not feel too visible.



It is August, and particularly hot. Two days ago when I was drawing on Rock Ridge hill, it was difficult to focus for all the insects wanting to sting me. There were a variety of them — flies, mosquitoes, ants. The huckleberry bushes I had drawn when I first began the contour drawings are bearing fruit now — not quite sweet and fully red yet, but there and plentiful nonetheless. It was not these on which I was focusing, however, but a cluster of contoured trunks standing close to each other, many of them likely part of the same tree base. It was the angles and spaces between them, how they related to each other and the shapes of the spaces between them that drew me. But I had to leave it for another day, as those bugs outwilled me.

Then yesterday, I went somewhere else. Cliff Park in Maple Ridge is a place I know well in a different way — there I have often gone with my boys, with family and friends. I have been there on my own many times as well, but usually I think of it as a place I've shared with others. By myself this time, I sat down to draw.

It was one of those times when the simple act of shifting my mind to the mode of seeing and drawing caused something to release and to show itself. I found it difficult to focus on my drawing, for it, itself, was revealing things to me that had little to do with the woods. In the way the forest often reflects to me some of the more tender and raw aspects of my life, the act of drawing does too. The memory of what I drew is not as strong as that of what was revealed to me then: something inside overpowered me for a moment, sending tears of shock and realization down my face. Why does drawing reveal things like this to me sometimes? This has happened before. What the busyness of everyday life tries so hard to hide — *this* is given room to breathe, to be, to make itself known, in the quiet of putting pencil to paper, in the shelter of the trees.



It is the last day of August. There is something cool in the air, an indication the season may change early this year. The quality of the light is different. Although the sun is bright, it is lower and this morning the shadows are longer, the contrast between sunlit and shaded areas somehow starker. I'm conscious of a slight weight on my shoulders, the tighter schedule of the coming weeks, pressures and duties making themselves felt prematurely. Sitting on the back step with my coffee, I'm facing the somewhat neglected yard and taking in the atmosphere of the place, turn of the seasons, yet also the somehow heavy sameness of everything, the familiarity of it all. A breeze plays with the wind chime and also curls itself around my neck and ankles, nudging at the verbena and the ferns that have lost the rich verdure they had earlier in the summer.

Still, something about the familiar arrangement of the wooden table with the background of the apple tree and the potted Calla lily in front pulls at me. Not wanting to do the reading that was my task for this morning, I pull out a sketchpad, sharpen a 4B pencil, and begin focusing on the leaves of the lily. And it shows itself to me in slightly new ways, this scene, as I negotiate the rendering of vague laurel foliage in the background, the angles of the table structure, how all these things relate to each other in the space.

The wind continues with the sounds it makes, and the positions of the shadows shift.



Image 6.9. Cliff Park, Maple Ridge

September: it has been dry for two months and this affects everything in the woods. Entering them today, there was still the feeling of solace, of canopy, that I always get, though the canopy somehow seemed more porous. There wasn't the usual feeling of walking into a cathedral that is there when things are damp; it was more like

walking into a breezy house than a sheltering one. Had the sun been out and hot, there would have been shelter. As it was the shelter seemed dry and sparse. The crunch of gravel underfoot sounded drier as well. The woods are waiting. Waiting for the rain to come.

Finding a place to hide the drawings is also trickier. The ground gives less, resisting opening itself up, having become compacted through the weeks of heat. I've resorted to picking up small fallen logs to put my drawings under, and am surprised at how easily the logs lift, without the weight of dampness, without the tentacles of mosses — given strength by moisture — pulling them down. Still, I don't want to disturb them. It feels wrong somehow, to pry them apart from the ground that cradles them so perfectly.

As a way of trying out yet a different medium through which to see the woods, I've taken my camera with me a few times. Taking photographs feels so very different than drawing. In some ways it is almost too quick — you choose the angle, compose, and the image gets created all at once. Yet, I do notice that in looking for features to focus on, I see, and search out, different things than if I am drawing. Colour, for one. The effects of light. Things the camera does well with, that my black pen doesn't tend to.



When I went to the woods a few days ago, I felt my mortality there. It had been a while since my last visit, and this time, I was dismayed to find I had absolutely no clue where I had left the last drawing. I wondered if they had become harder to find now because I had already used so many hiding places — while the first ones were easier for my memory to retain because the project was new, more recent ones have blurred into everything else. Is this how life memories work as well? That once you have accumulated a good many of them, they are less distinct from each other, and fade into one another? Is it that they are simply less remarkable against the background and context of everything else that is already known? Or is it because memory is not what it once was? Also, the drawings are also getting harder to do well without my glasses. And I saw how, now that it is autumn, late autumn at that — and the leaves are down

from the trees, but still littered on the ground in various stages of decomposing — the cycles of life do indeed change.



Image 6.10. Trans Canada Trail, Burnaby

The sunny weather lasted long into the fall this year, and the autumn colours were beautiful — great shocks of orange and yellow amidst the evergreens, and when you looked up from the trail, it looked like there were shafts of light coming down among

the darkened canopy. Then, with the rains came heavy winds, bringing the leaves down quickly. The last time I was on the trail on campus, it looked as though every bit of plant life was a maple tree, as it was wearing large maple leaves. They had been strewn everywhere, like a garment blown haphazardly over everything. I didn't at first realize that the many leaves at all levels of height around me weren't borne by the trees and bushes that held them, but had simply landed there, scattered by that determined wind. Ironically, if you looked up, the maples themselves were bare, their leaves now worn by everyone else below them. Everything wore the clothing of maple, except the maples. The leaves had fallen at random, yet there was something oddly orderly about the disorder. There was also something comforting in knowing that this kind of disorder is meant to be, and that it will take care of itself over time, finding a new kind of harmony as it melds into the ground.



Since that one somewhat fearful time when I couldn't remember where things were, or even if I'd placed a drawing in a particular place, I've been going about things differently. When there is a lot of traffic and preoccupation in the mind, it becomes difficult to make things distinct and to truly absorb them. The answer, I realize (as I have learned over and over again), is to slow down, to breathe, to be attentive. Thoreau said he went to live in the woods because he wanted to live deliberately, and I think this is the key. It is difficult to commit things to memory, to make them part of oneself, when only a part of the mind is present.

Since then, I have remembered much better where things are. What has also helped is that the places where I've drawn and buried the drawings have built on each other: instead of randomly finding something on my walk that drew my eye, asking to be drawn, I stayed close to where the last drawing had been, building connections between the places. I've come to know certain sections of these woods particularly well now. When I was there today, a gloomy December Thursday, the light inside the woods — even at mid-morning — had the quality of dusk. I lost sight of my dog for a moment, and after I whistled for her and looked around, I saw her there within plain view, staring at me, bewildered, as if to say, I've been here all along, couldn't you see? She is black, and had blended in with the shadows, part of the dense air that stood still as tombs

around the tree trunks. There is something enchanting there, haunting, even, when the light is like that. Things hide, seem farther away than they are, suspended by the half-light.

And again, the process of drawing revealed something to me. My pen, fine-tipped (contour drawing this time), followed the quirky lines of the fuzzy moss that clothed a nurse log, leading me to delight at seeing the tiny mushroom-like structures that popped out of it. Being yellowy and lighter in colour, they shone in the relative darkness, asserting themselves brightly in their tininess. Looking things up when I get home, I find this is common hair cap moss, that these tiny hair-like structures are not indeed mushrooms, but part of the moss itself. I would never have noticed them had I not been drawing.



Projects of coming to know a place, such as the one I've done here, can be engaged with by students of any age. It is quite special to visit a place on different days or in different seasons, to find the particular spot or landmark one has drawn and to notice how it has changed its expression and demeanour. This coming-to-know of a place can be done through any visual medium that is reasonably portable, through photography or the creation of images through various media. While not the main objective, the integration of some technical skill as is appropriate for age level has a real place here, for the process of learning to compose images and to draw is a process of learning to see. It is a process of returning to the senses and of honing perceptual abilities, of taking in the entities being observed through a mode that brings us to the immediacy of the world.

One of the things that most drew me to this way of working was simply that of maintaining a practice: something that connects regularly with my daily life and that is built upon over time. Also, it increases in depth and understanding through the various repeated experiences. As with any habitual practice, there is the danger that it becomes just that — habitual and perhaps routine, and it was up to me to consciously attend, both to the drawings and to the place, in order to keep the experiences and the process alive. There were times when this happened more, of course, than others. Yet one of the

wonderful things about a habitual practice is that it saves *thinking*: one can go straight into the work and trust that it will guide what to do next. Thinking can sometimes halt that flow; it can postpone starting and sinking into the work by putting consciousness too much with the mind rather than with the senses and the body. It was these other ways of knowing and of experiencing that I wanted to explore, to dwell in.

These woods are a part of me now, and my hope is that I, too, can be part of them.

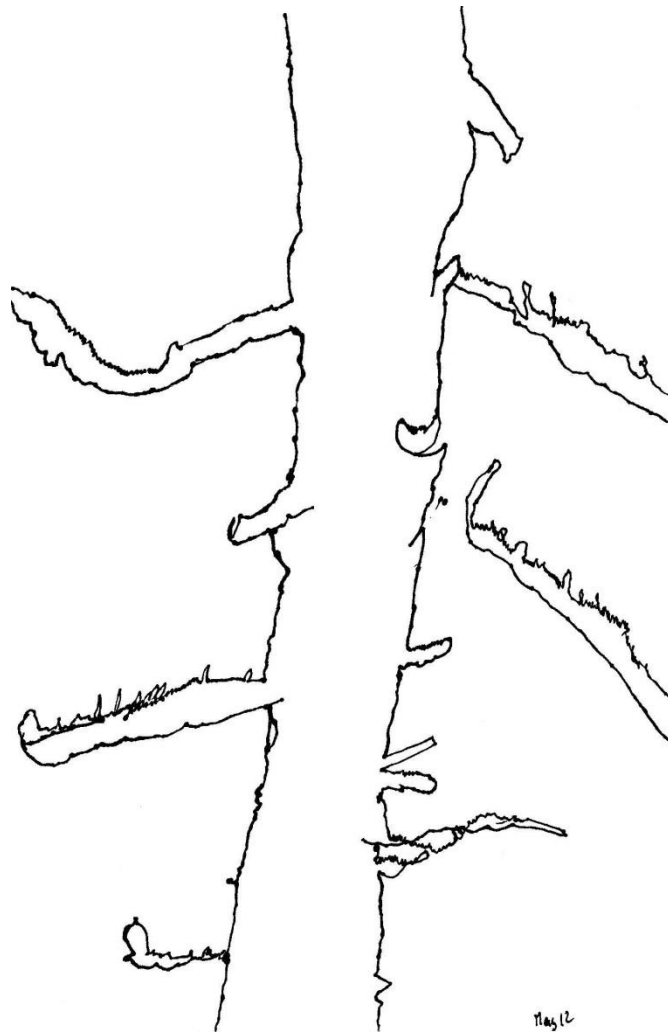


Image 6.11. Rock Ridge, Maple Ridge

Structure

I want to weave the bones of
my fingers together with the fingered points
of this maple leaf, let my
hair fall with the strands of
moss hanging from the sunken branch and
allow feet to fade into the
rocks, pebbles, mulch beneath.

My arm the green-clothed branch
of the cedar and my sides,
the coarse streaks of its bark.



Image 6.12. Rock Ridge, Maple Ridge

Rooted

If my heels could
grow roots in this place and
my fingertips sprout leaves,
limbs perform arabesques
in the wind, eyes
reaching up to the sun,

what would I do when they
come
with machines to
clear us.

Do I,
continue to be, as only
our heel-roots are left,
tarsals dug up later by
some archeologist, or by
a playing child, or,
more likely by
a backhoe, and mixed,
unnoticed, with concrete debris,
to become fill.

If trunks
bled as humans do, would it
make a difference?



Image 6.13. Trans Canada Trail, Burnaby

7. Listening to What the Natural World Might Say

*I do not despise real woods because I have read of enchanted ones,
rather, the reading makes all real woods a little enchanted.*

C.S Lewis²²⁶

Ethics is a discipline of listening.

Warren Heit²²⁷

When the world speaks, try to not to get in the way.

Susan McCaslin²²⁸

Listening

Some years ago, I was very much intrigued by the title of a film created by Narcisse Blood and Cynthia Chambers: “Kaaahsinnooniksi...If the Land Could Speak and We Would Listen...” Inquiring into learning that is grounded in a place, specifically the traditional territory of the Blackfoot in Alberta, the film is informed by the ethic of *kitaowahsinnoon*, which in Blackfoot means, “that which nurtures us.”ⁿ The question that the title posed haunted me for some time, and led me to wonder... what might we, if we were to open ourselves enough, hear the land say?

Aware that this speaking and listening could not be embodied or contained in one conversation, that the land indeed always speaks, and that we need to listen again and again for it to have real meaning or effect, I began to ask myself this question, and try to listen for the answer, on repeated trips to the forests and various wild places around

ⁿ This was a lecture and film presented at Simon Fraser University in the spring of 2009 by Narcisse Blood and Cynthia Chambers. The explanation of ‘*kitaowahsinnoon*’ is from the event publicity. I was unfortunately unable to attend the screening (and have not been able to find it elsewhere since), and so I write about it here with some caution, wishing only to extend the possibilities of the question it poses. Cynthia Chalmers refers to the film’s production in Chambers, C. “Where are we? Finding Common Ground in a Curriculum of Place”, *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum, Studies* Volume 6 Number 2 2008

Maple Ridge where I live. This was some time before my project of leaving drawings in the woods. Of course, what I hear may be very different from what the Blackfoot Elders, with their particular lifetimes of experience in a place, would hear, and what the land in the Fraser Valley of south western British Columbia breathes forth is likely somewhat different from what the land of traditional Blackfoot territory communicates. Still, considering this a valid question to ask of anyone, anywhere, and going with Tim Lilburn's idea that while there is value in considering what Native traditions have to say, "we shouldn't go further than just a little listening; a person can't simply inhabit the fine ear of another culture through mere intention,"²²⁹ I wanted to try listening for myself — to the land of my here and now.

Lilburn speaks of finding a sense of home in a landscape, and emphasizes the importance of listening with humility to the rhythms of a place, to learn the details of what can be found there. He advises to "practice an activism of forgetting the royalty of one's name, of yielding, of stepping aside."²³⁰ Like Kant's concept of free beauty and of attending to a phenomenon for its own sake, putting aside self interest in order to be fully present to what is before us, and like Iris Murdoch's idea of "unselfing" — letting go of "blinding self-centered aims"²³¹ — in order to see clearly, the idea is that we are not the centre of things. Though the hum of human and individual bias is ever-present, there is value in learning to quieten it for a moment in order to listen to the soil beneath our feet, the life around us.

This is not often an easy task. Murdoch herself states repeatedly that putting oneself aside in order to perceive clearly takes effort. There is also the temptation to project our own concerns onto what we see and listen for, to see in the world that which we bring to it — our experiences and preoccupations of the moment. Yet, there is also the matter of believing sincerely that the land indeed has something to say. Peter London observes our common tendency to see nature as beautiful, but without speech — something to look at and admire, rather than to listen to and learn from. He encourages us to develop awareness of the various languages of nature, and to understand that "Nature is not dumb; it is we who are not listening, not listening because we conceive of nature as dumb."²³²

Thus, returning to the question of what the land might say, here are some of the things that I absorbed, heard and on my contemplative visits to the woods:

- The land and all the life in it, on it — trees, rocks, grasses, birds, creatures, and formations — embody a great history. Things that occurred in the past are present here, held in the memory of twig and leaf, of rock and water. Yet even with all this, the life and energy here is very much in the present. Unlike humans, who tend to live with one eye on tomorrow or next year, with one foot in the past, the land is in the here and now. This has the effect, I think, of inviting us to do the same, of bringing us to the intrinsic value of the present moment. This is something from which we can learn.
- There is constant change in the processes of nature — it is developing, evolving, all the time. If we listen, watch, we can see tiny changes as the air shifts, as the light does, as the currents and pressures of movement and energy flow through. The relationships between the various living things change too, with the time of day, with the shortening and lengthening of shadows and the change in temperature. Larger changes occur with the seasons; larger ones still with extreme weather. Stream beds alter their paths; trees topple and new ones grow; things get blown about. The land is asking that this be observed — not in the sense of merely looked at, but acknowledged, taken part in.
- The land knows we fancy ourselves as conquerors, as those who dominate and manage, often all but blind to these subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) developments, while we create sweeping developments of our own — ones that are outpacing not only what the earth can sustain but also our very humanness, our need for stillness, peace, and groundedness.
- The land is asking to be dwelt in; it is the home, and we are inhabitants. It asks that we absorb ourselves in it, rather than try to stand on, or above, it. The land is also asking to be *beheld* — really seen, loved for all its subtleties.
- The land will nurture us — if we allow it to. If we value its flourishing, and that of all its inhabitants, we might learn how to bring about our own.
- Though it is active, evolving, and dynamic, most of all, the land is also simply *there*. It shows us the virtue of being. While we may get caught up in accomplishing, thinking, doing, gaining, it reminds us that among all this, we can return to consciously *being*.



These have been some of the thoughts I've felt, heard from the woods. Looking them over, I cannot help but notice how much they focus on the relationship between the land and us, and on what we can learn from it. At the time, I had hoped perhaps to be able to hear the wilderness in and of itself, perhaps not necessarily in relation to us. But

perhaps focusing on a relationship, and on what we might learn — if we allow the land to impart its own wisdom — is not a bad place to start.



Image 7.1. Rock Ridge, Maple Ridge

Though I still feel these ‘heard’ things to be true, I also find them rather generalized: they characterize a worthwhile ecological view, yet say relatively little of *this*

particular place, of *these* life forms, of *this* history. I am not in a position, as Blackfoot — or any First Nations — Elders are, to feel the ancestry of a land through a connectedness to my own lineage. Like many who inhabit this continent, the bones of my history are elsewhere. And, while I do sometimes crave something of the solidity and rootedness that only those who are *of* a land will know, I still feel a connectedness to what is alive here and now. My imagination still wants to go *into* things, into the soft red wood of cedar, the rocks beneath the cold creek, the view from high in the hemlock that a squirrel might have.



Exploring nonhuman voices through human lore

What I would like to do here is play a little with what can be done when we imagine our way into forms that are not human. With this, I would like to explore some aspects of what might happen when we really listen, in all wisdoms of the word: with ears, heart, mind, intuition and other senses, giving over to various possibilities of what listening might mean. In a way, this is an endeavour to animate for ourselves the land and the life in it, through creative forms of writing among other means, and through finding voice that is both ours and of a place and its creatures. I speak of animating the place ‘for ourselves’ because I believe the land and its inhabitants already are animate, but that it is us who need reminding, and to sometimes discover it anew. Because of our human propensity to feel that something is most alive when it has a voice of its own, there need to be stories that give those voices room to tell in a way that is explorative, rich and playful for us, yet also respectful of the life in a place.

While I have some trepidation about the implications of his statement, there is considerable value in Simon Schama’s thought that “The wilderness, after all, does not locate itself, does not name itself... Nor could the wilderness venerate itself.”²³³ For that, he says, it needs us. Schama refers here to those who founded the national parks of North America, as well as to speakers, writers, spiritual leaders, photographers and painters who aimed to bring to people’s attention the magnificence of what are now considered the treasures of the American landscape. His premise is that many places we now appreciate for their wildness are in their current state as much because of our

cultural intentions as despite them. He also claims that our cultural mythology and history inevitably frames the landscape for us, even before our encounters with it. While ecosystems exist and flourish independently of human life, our perception is seldom objective or separate from our cultural heritage: “Before it can ever be a repose for the senses, the landscape is a work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from the strata of memory as from layers of rock.”²³⁴ It would seem to follow, then, that if we are to value the land in any way, the kind of lore we have around various landscapes and our relations with them is rather significant. The stories and myths our children grow up with and how they view various aspects of the wild matter a great deal. And it is valuable too, if children and youth feel they can participate in this lore by creating stories and imaginative forms of writing of their own, exploring various possibilities for voices that other life forms, or the land itself, might take on.

In the chapter on symbolic languages, as well as elsewhere, I addressed how a large part of the creative process involves listening of various forms. Here, I want to take that further. Natalie Goldberg observes how “Ninety percent of writing is listening, which we do in order to receive the world and to receive ourselves.”²³⁵ The question I would like to explore is something to the effect of: with our senses and imagination working together, how can we endeavour to listen to what the natural world might have to say, in ways that are affective and immediate, and in ways that pursue a sense of wonder? I want to recall Abram’s idea that the imagination is essentially an attribute of the senses themselves, and a way of looking beyond what is immediately given: it is not separate from our senses, but rather a means to see another aspect, another possibility, to see things that are not immediately obvious or logical, in order to get a fuller view. Abram compares the possibility of being enchanted with the phenomenal world with the experience of being beguiled by the performance of a magician: we need to *allow* ourselves to be captivated in order to see the magic. Rather than be “armoured with countless explanations and analyses,” and “encouraged by a cultural discourse that disdains the unpredictable and puts a premium on detached objectivity,”²³⁶ he suggests we participate — through the imagination — in the activity of the nature around us. For this, he says, we need to take the world in through a perceiving body (in the sense of the entire being), rather than through an objective mind. While we may go back and forth through various ways of perceiving, shifting our attention to different things and

considering from different angles, the nature of the experience remains perceptual, rather than objectifying.

I've spoken here of seeing and listening as if they're interchangeable, which may seem confusing. But as Abram reminds us, our senses work together — the whole body absorbs things in a kind of fusion that is perception as a whole. Here specifically, though, I'm thinking of seeing as taking things in — noticing, perceiving and absorbing; and listening as considering carefully what is being conveyed — the way we listen attentively to the concerns and perspective of someone we care for, putting aside our own concerns for a moment. Or, the way one might listen wholeheartedly in an engaging conversation. What I am looking toward is an exploration that not only helps us better observe and understand our surroundings, but also enriches our connection with them.

Perceiving and Silence

I mentioned earlier Wolfgang Iser's observation that we often privilege ourselves with the idea that it is mostly us humans who have the ability to truly perceive the world, and that a communicative relationship with nature is to be initiated by our side alone.²³⁷ London raises this matter in his own way, claiming that we often perceive the natural world as being dumb, while in truth, it is we who are not listening. A visual artist, he also speaks of listening in a metaphoric, as well as literal, sense. In endeavouring to understand nature's language, he says, we need to allow it to do the initial speaking — to begin the sacred conversation he believes to be possible with nature through art. In this, he emphasises the importance of looking and listening:

However, if you withdraw from the arena of discourse, if you fail to listen, then *for you* Nature becomes silent... Deaf, you think that the world is not speaking, not singing day and night, not bringing news about everything there ever was and is.²³⁸

In order to listen well, London suggests, we need to first silence ourselves, to prepare ourselves to receive. This involves quieting the "busybody chatty mind" so that one can attend to a "universe that speaks softly and at a pace that is beneath and beyond that of ordinary consciousness."²³⁹ This differentiation in pace is itself something significant: the act of slowing down allows us to see and to hear things we wouldn't ordinarily; we

still ourselves to a pace that is more like that of nature, less like that of our technologies. It calls for a state of mind that is meditative, one that calls for quiet and stillness.

With respect to seeing and being open to what is there, Annie Dillard also talks of the necessity to quiet oneself. She describes a special experience one evening when she is wholly absorbed in the multitudinous flash of small fish in a stream, unfolding before her as they catch the glow of the sunset at her back, and becomes filled with the spirit of everything. She then contemplates the nature of seeing:

But I can't go out and try to see this way. I'll fail, I'll go mad. All I can do is try to gag the commentator, to hush the noises of useless interior babble that keeps me from seeing just as surely as a newspaper dangled before my eyes. The effort is really a discipline requiring a lifetime of dedicated struggle; it marks the literature of saints and monks of every order East and West... The secret of seeing is, then, is the pearl of great price. But although the pearl may be found, it may not be sought... I cannot cause the light; the most I can do is to try to put myself in the path of its beam... Hone and spread your spirit till you yourself are a sail, whetted, translucent, broadside to the merest puff.²⁴⁰

I don't think it is possible to put it more beautifully. This passage and the image of spreading one's spirit like a sail to be available to the world, to see with an eye that accepts all, not just what it is looking for, has been with me a long time. For this, it takes being present in a particular way: it is seeing, being open, that makes everything alive.



It is June, a week before school is out, and the sun has made one of its rare appearances; it has been unseasonably wet. I am on my way to Maple Ridge Park with a class of grade three students; we take the short walk along the somewhat busy road — a road that at this time of day has frequent large trucks travelling along its course, to transport gravel and sand and, I imagine, to bring out debris from one of the many new construction sites down the valley. The children walk along, happy to be outside, signalling to the passing trucks to blow their horns. Some of them do, to the great delight of the kids.

Once at the park, we find a spot close to the river, and get out the drawing materials. My instructions seem to be understood well enough, despite a loud mower

that circles around behind me, bringing its imposing engine hum closer to us at each turn. I try to keep my talk brief, as I can tell they are anxious to be in the park itself.

The children disperse, find a place to draw, and begin. Their teacher has given cautionary instructions about not going too close to the river, yet this is what seems to pull them the most. Children who were gregarious on the walk here quieten down now in order to focus. Several girls have made their way further up the path and are absorbed in their work. When I remark that they've found a nice spot, they reply, "It's calm here."

There are several (most notably my own son) who are rambunctious and need reminding to focus on their work. Only when their own words are calm, are they able to hear those of the river they are drawing.

After a time, one girl who has been working in solitary silence shows me her drawing — a crisscross of branches, leaves, blue conversing with yellow in large, dynamically competing forms. I look around, and for a moment I cannot see what her view is, what her eyes have focused on; the colours she has used intrigue me. And then, she points up, straight up, and I see it: the overlapping maple leaves against the sky and sunlight that comes through, bringing out the yellow tints of the young leaves and giving them double shapes, those of their own forms and those of the shadows they create against each other. In her drawings, these shapes seem almost abstract. Her eyes have observed carefully; this is what they have shown her.

Mona Brooks, author of *Drawing with Children*, points out how she is very firm about not having children talk while they are drawing, as it impairs their ability to see.²⁴¹ I agree that the part of the mind that absorbs images is often not the same as that which processes words, particularly if these are spoken words. In order to be wholly absorbed in an image, in the phenomenon before us, and to take in what is there, somehow, silence *is* needed. It is ourselves we need to quieten in order for things to be revealed to us, to speak to us.

Considering Animism

In addition to opening ourselves to the idea that there is articulate life in the nonhuman world, we need an ecological humility that doesn't privilege ourselves above other forms with the status of communication and speech. We might consider that one of the reasons why we see nature as silent may be because we are comparatively noisy as humans, and our own noise drowns out, for us, these other voices. Christopher Manes proposes that a viable environmental ethics needs to challenge the idea that nature is silent, as well as question the motifs and habits of language that have formed through the history of western thought to create what he calls "the fiction of 'Man,' a character portrayed as sole subject, speaker and *telos* of the world."²⁴² He considers, for example, the idea of the Great Chain of Being — the *scala naturae* — which in medieval times was still seen to value diversity and the necessity of all forms in the cosmos, but with the advent of Renaissance humanism came to be understood as placing humans in a superior position. An advocate of deep ecology, Manes proposes that we look instead to the ontological humility of primal cultures, and draws particularly on the idea of animism, a perspective with a pervasive history if one looks to pre-literate times. From an animist view, not only humans, but also other creatures, plant life and even rocks and rivers are considered to be inspirited, and to be articulate entities able to communicate with humans. In this regard, "In addition to human language, there is also the language of birds, the wind, earthworms, wolves, and waterfalls — a world of autonomous speakers whose intents (especially for hunter-gatherer peoples) one ignores at one's peril."²⁴³

Manes goes further, considering how this affects ideas of learning and realms of education: "To regard nature as alive and articulate has consequences in the realm of social practices. It conditions what passes for knowledge about nature and how institutions put that knowledge to use."²⁴⁴ Drawing on the work of Foucault, Manes considers how social power functions through privileged speakers rather than through silenced ones, and invites us to confront the way in which we have silenced nature in order to exploit it. We are less likely, after all, to treat cruelly, or ignore, those who are able to speak to us, particularly if we feel they have something worthwhile to impart, if their communication is valued. What is necessary, then, is the learning of different forms

of language, ones that don't place the human realm as the centre of knowledge and of knowing. I think Manes himself says it best:

To privilege intellect or self-consciousness, as opposed to photosynthesis, poisoned fangs, or sporogenesis, may soothe ancient insecurities about humanity's place in the cosmos, but it has nothing to do with evolutionary theory and does not correspond to observable nature.²⁴⁵

Our way of being in the world, then, is simply one of many.

Today, we may find somewhat archaic the view espoused by Francis Bacon in the Renaissance, that, "Man... may be regarded as the centre of the world; inasmuch that if man were taken away from the world, the rest would seem to be all astray, without aim or purpose..."²⁴⁶ Yet our practices still continue, in large part, this philosophy. We are able to critique the extreme anthropocentrism of this statement on an intellectual level, yet most of what we consider normal — our use of resources, our social structures, even our desires, motivations and pursuits — still seem to embody this perspective. Perhaps the complexity behind a notion like that of Bacon's is that it is no longer openly articulated as it was in the Renaissance — rather, it has for us become a kind of underlying *modus operandi* which is not commonly questioned and from which it is difficult to escape, since our economic systems, and thereby our daily lives, are built upon it. Bacon's standpoint corresponds with the beginnings of Empiricism, which is still in many ways a kind of default epistemology today, the one we most seem to trust when we look to some sort of solidity in an often confusing world. Yet in many respects, it operates with a model that is interrogative of nature rather than seeking a dialogue; it wants answers to our human-serving questions (and not often in ways that always invite natural entities to answer on their own terms), rather than seeking connection and understanding. Also, the sense of mystery and unpredictability that makes wonder possible begins to slip away, as does our valuing of things which cannot be proven, things which need to be understood subtly and with the heart, rather than by verified evidence.



Inhabiting Non-Human Voices

If we want to encourage empathy for other beings and engender the kind of view that considers things as animals and other life forms might, I think the imagination of children is a great place to start. Imagining empathetically in a way that seeks to sincerely understand another life *as that life* is rather different from what is often seen in much popular culture, particularly animated films and television programs where animal characters are often anthropomorphised — in characteristics, motivations, behaviour and even appearance — to the point where they are hardly recognizable as the creatures they are supposed to be or represent. It is true that in our stories, we often want animals to think and function as humans do, to have the same desires, behaviours, and ways of communicating. Many of the most enticing children's stories involve animals that communicate with other animals and sometimes with humans, often in a largely human-structured world. It is also true that portraying human-like characters in animal form is indeed a means to reimagine the world of humans in a fresh and allegorical way. Aesop's Fables are a great example of this tradition. Yet there is also much room for stories and perspectives that attend, and give a more sincere, perceptively accurate and empathetic voice to other forms of life — imagining them as themselves, rather than merely as reworked forms of our own consciousness.

With their natural affinity toward animals and their curiosity about the natural world, young children (and the rest of us too, if we let ourselves go a little) can follow the imagination in a way that considers a view beyond the human one. Animism is something that makes inherent sense to many young children: they talk to animals and also to toys that represent living entities; they give these toys voices to make them come alive. Children do this without being considered abnormal. Yet, it takes encouragement, I think, for them to continue on that way. When my younger son, Miro, was ten, he sought assurance from me that it was a likeable trait that he thought of everything as a living thing, an idea he very much identifies with. Somehow, the rest of society didn't offer him that same assurance.

How, then, do we retrieve some of the more genuine characteristics and voice of the more-than-human world in a way that engages the imagination while bringing us to a more sincerely observant understanding? And, if that understanding takes on forms that

are allegorical and imaginative rather than based on the premise of objective 'reality', might we have the courage to let that be? This process requires us to expressly validate forms of thought and of perception other than reason. Manes raises the issue that if we are to have an ecological ethic that involves reanimating nature, we need to have the courage to learn new forms of communication that change how we talk about and perceive the world, "even if it puts at risk the privileged discourse of reason — and without a doubt, it does."²⁴⁷

While looking to connect human voices with those of other entities in a spirit of compassion and respect, perhaps there needs to be some acceptance that a certain degree of anthropomorphisation is inevitable, simply because the human perspective and manner of communication is what we have. Yet this is where an important challenge lies: by exploring these limits to our own perspectives, we begin to see beyond toward new possibilities. Indigenous cultures, for example, many of which have strong and ongoing mythologies that include animals, birds, rivers and mountains, would likely come closer to imagining their way into the natural world than industrialised ones. Certainly, we have limits to our perspectives which may seem significant, but I don't think that is reason to not make inroads into a different way of imagining. In the same way that we cannot truly understand another culture, being so steeped in our own, but can go a long way by endeavouring sincerely to respect, to learn, be open to other perspectives and become familiar through personal experience, I feel it is possible to extend our perception to beings and entities that are beyond our human kind.



July 18

Image 7.2. Mitra's garden, ink on paper



While it is easy enough to understand our tendency to anthropomorphise animals, it is interesting to see what happens when one imagines one's way into plant life. Personally, I feel a real kinship with trees, a need to be around them often, and to turn to them at various times for refuge and rejuvenation. Somehow, they allow me to connect with an essential life force, something greater than I am. Over many years, I have watched the cluster of trees of various sorts across my street through various stages of growth and being pruned, thinned and topped by my neighbours. One day, focussing on a particular cedar right next to the creek, I wrote my way into what it might be like to live as it does. It was a simple endeavour to come to know something of this cedar, and to imagine what 'being' might be like from where it stands.

Cedar tree, across the street

It's cooler today than it was yesterday. Wetter, too. I'm managing to keep warm between my branches; at least there's no wind, or not much, anyway. No sun today, I have to content myself with the light of the clouds, the warmth from the still air.

Cottonwood has been taken down, or most of him anyway. Now, what is left of my neighbour to the dawnward, sunward side of me is just a stump, albeit a tall one, about a third of my height, covered on his sides with ivy. Cottonwood will grow back again, I can feel him sprouting through the ivy, even though from my top I can see the rawness of what used to be the core of his trunk. Down below, however, his roots reaffirm themselves in the soil as they intertwine with mine.

As for alder, he's gone, completely. The humans took him right down to the ground — too close to the creek bank he was, right on it, in fact. He was too close to the house, and with roots made unstable by the creek, they said, he was unsafe.

Unsafe for whom, I wonder?

Now, as the height of the other trees no longer accompanies mine, there is even less to shield me from the cold air. And, from the sun as well, though I don't mind that so much now. Mostly, I miss their company, the feeling of standing together. But I am growing used to their above-ground absence. One gets used to anything, given enough time. And now is all there is.

To the side of my late-morning shadow, other trees stand with me — another alder, and another cedar, as tall as I am. Narrower than me, but straighter, with more symmetry to its form, especially its above-ground part. My own shape is a little wonky, but I don't mind much. Perhaps it is because I started growing closer to the creek — less symmetry for my roots, and thus less symmetry for branches as well. And indeed, my roots stretch duskward to make up for the less available soil on the dawn side.

Something is missing. Heat and light are supposed to be here by now to warm my branches. Ah, a crow landed on one of my lower ones, a long one that reaches far dawnward. Heh, I like how his weight makes my branch swing as he adjusts himself. He's off again now. Having taken off, pressed his weight down for lift-off, he made my branch swing more. I like that.

Where did he go? I'd like him to come back.

The other birds are silent at this moment; the air is so still, it's sleepy.

Hmm, a gentle breeze now, from the dawn side. Moisture in the air, telling of more rain, not far away. But not just yet.

Down below, things feel alive, churning in the soil. Here, the moisture is good. This part of me at least is always sheltered, always home. The creek bed beside me a constant companion, I can feel how heavy it is on some days after the rain, the vibrations of that weight and rush coming through. When something seems missing up above, I take refuge in feeling my roots, the ground, my home and anchor. My source of nourishment. That is rich.

The weight of the creek is less now that the heavy rains are past. The soil is lighter right here, but still waiting for some warmth.

Sounds at the level of the ground — humans, mother, child.

I think the moisture in my branches makes their voices echo more.

Moisture in the air, and cold. Yes, it'll rain again soon.



In imagining this story, many questions and possibilities arose for me about how things might be for the cedar. Of course, these had to be raised from my limited human and individual perspective. What arose might indeed reveal more about me than about the tree, yet it nonetheless *does* reveal something about the tree, and it does so in what is for me a rather viscerally imagined experience. Thinking back to London's proposal that art is about what something is *to me*, and also that we take seriously what our senses and imagination bring to us, this experience of imaginative sensing revealed things I would likely not otherwise come upon. And afterward, I felt more closely connected to this place, *with* the tree.

There were several considerations that (however unwittingly and unconsciously) arose about the perspective of the tree as the story was written, and others still that occur after. Many of them are, of course, human centred, but as I think about them afterward, in an endeavour to get beyond the limitations of my perspective, these questions open up possibilities for furthering a sense of understanding. And, perhaps more importantly, a sense of wonder. How, for example, would the tree *sense* the world around it? And what counterpart might it have to our sense of sight, of hearing, or other sensory experience? If so, where would they be located? The realisation that my sight,

my dominant sense, is from the top of my body makes me wonder how, and from where in its body, the tree might sense. With this, comes the realisation of an entirely different way of being.

Does the cedar have something of a sense of past and future, of what has happened, or of what is about to occur? As humans, we are (for better or worse) obsessed with time — memories of the past, and planning for the future — and surely this is not the same for a botanical form. Still, there is likely some sense of a retained or evident history, and how might it be felt? How far in the past matters, or is evident still? Is there a sense of preparation for changes in seasons, weather or geology? I think of a story I heard of animals in south-east Asia, who, sensing that danger was imminent just before the 2004 tsunami, ran for the hills, while the human animals had no such internal barometer to save them.

Might this cedar experience some form of feeling response, such as loss, with the departure of a fellow tree? Or perhaps disappointment when the crow leaves, or from the lack of sunlight and heat? This piece is written in June when spring had been late, and summer, to that point, almost non-existent — it was very cold and wet for the time of year. Taking it further...might the cedar feel a sense of company, solidarity, or connectedness with the other trees? Or might it be territorial, glad to have more room to itself, now that the southern ones are all but gone? What would be its sense of space, of rootedness to a particular place and relationship with the surrounding beings? To what degree might this sense of space depend on the individual tree? With each re-reading and re-working of this story, a further realisation of human-centered assumptions arose. A sense of time and of returning, then, increases possibilities for depth of understanding.

How might heat, light and wind be felt, and how does this tree accept these things? Would there be a definite sense of preference? Of course it is helpful to observe a particular tree or set of trees through various seasons and conditions to find out what makes it flourish and what doesn't. A botanist or silviculturist might answer such questions from a biological perspective, which has its own validity — additional knowledge would certainly enrich an exploration of this kind. Creative writing often involves some form of research, and the same would apply here. If one is going to imagine and write their way into the lives of salmon, for example, it is important to know

their life cycle; with a wolf, it is valuable to know their social dynamics and emotional tendencies, not to mention their habitat and dietary needs; with a river, the path of flow through different kinds of terrain is fundamental.

Yet knowledge of these facts is not a replacement for personal observation if the latter is possible, nor does biological or geographic knowledge alone necessarily build the kind of connection that can come about through imaginative empathy. This kind of wondering what it might be like for a particular cedar can complement other ways of knowing. It also has value in its own right. In this small bit of writing, there is much subjective interpretation, but it has the effect of understanding something about the cedar, and appreciating some of the qualities of its life. I relate its physical form to my own, and if it appears to be (as one of my readers commented) the imagining of a tree as a human in a different body, this is one way to connect with this other being. Even if done without in-depth biological knowledge, something like this holds certain allegorical value that resides in a different, and more personal, part of the mind and spirit. Again, I recall Rachel Carson's observation that it is more important to feel than to know when introducing a young child to nature. Having a sense of wonder can mean actually articulating what one wonders — and imagining a response: what might *this* be like for a particular being, one so different from me?

While looking closely at the shifts in awareness behind this short piece of writing is helpful, I feel a little silly going on in what feels too analytical a mode, as it seems to work somewhat against the spirit of this project. If such imagining of what things may be like for a particular tree were in the hands of a child who put herself into it, the experience of imagining itself would be the real teacher. The process of imagining would also be part of the 'sacred conversation' with nature that London speaks of, as would be the process of writing, and reflective thoughts that come after, and conversations with other humans in response.

One thing to be mindful of, however, is that, as with any other self, this tree will always be much, much more than what I, as a separate other, perceive it to be. It has capacities that I can only attempt to fathom. While I may have mental and perceptual abilities, I am not capable of photosynthesis or of growing the beginnings of new limbs each year, nor of being anchored in particular ground — among other equally anchored

ones — so fundamentally that it defines my being. Nor am I capable of extracting nutrients from the soil. For every part I see and think I can understand, there is much that I don't. There will be things that perhaps we need to accept as beyond our ken. Perhaps this idea, more than anything else, leaves us open to the notion of mystery and wonder, and of something greater than ourselves.



In this spirit of seeing from the perspective of another species, Margaret Atwood has a short story written from the view of a bat that I find quite haunting, and I would like to share part of it here. This is from a section titled "Nightmares".

In another nightmare, I am winging my way — flittering, I suppose you'd call it — through the clean-washed demi-light before dawn. This is a desert. The yuccas are in bloom, and I have been gorging myself on their juices and pollen. I'm heading to my home, to my home cave, where it will be cool during the burnout of day and there will be the sound of water trickling through limestone, coating the rock with a glistening hush, with the moistness of new mushrooms, and the other bats will chirp and rustle and doze until night unfurls again and makes the hot sky tender for us.

But when I reach the entrance to the cave, it is sealed over. It's blocked in. Who can have done this?

I vibrate my wings, sniffing blind as a dazzled moth over the hard surface. In a short time the sun will rise like a balloon on fire and I will be blasted with its glare, shrivelled to a few small bones.

Whoever said that life was light and darkness nothing?

For some of us, the mythologies are different.



Reconsidering the metaphor of speech

It is interesting how, as humans, we almost inevitably equate communication with speech. As I struggle with terms such as listening to what the natural world has to say, letting the land *speak*, and being open to what it might have to *tell* us, I find that this level of communication seems to be the one that we humans take most seriously —

oftentimes, it is the only form of communication that is openly acknowledged. Traditionally, we have thought of a person who cannot speak as dumb, a word which also reaches its meaning into stupidity. One who is articulate, on the other hand, or well-spoken, is thought of as intelligent, even a kind of paragon of the cultivated and educated individual. If one looks at the history of education, rhetoric and speaking well was, for a number of centuries, regarded as the mainstream of higher learning.²⁴⁸ Incidentally, we often (in contemporary English, anyway) equate listening — as when one says ‘I hear you’, or when we ask children to ‘listen’ — with making a conscious effort to absorb what is being communicated, and to take heed of its content. We equate a sense of identity and recognition in society, as ‘having a voice’ and if that voice is taken seriously, we feel that we are ‘being heard’. This kind of metaphoric language has a well-meaning and humane sense behind it, perhaps because it returns us to our senses.

Yet, if we look back at Wittgenstein’s recognition that there is much that cannot be told and that needs instead to be shown, it is helpful to look to metaphors of communication that do not hold speech as central. It is also important not to take this idea of speaking literally, and to return instead to a more symbolic or metaphoric sense of its meaning. The arts give possibilities of showing that are less direct: although there is a kind of reciprocal back and forth, it is not quite like that of literal conversation or speech. No single metaphor can encompass the myriad ways in which the natural world conveys meaning or the manifestations that communication might take. Yet the various metaphors of creative engagement seem, somehow, to resonate — dance, harmony and tension, poetry, myth, stories, symphony, musical phrasing, drama: the forms these take somehow come closer to symbolizing the way nature communicates than does the idea of literal speech. Each makes possible reciprocal conversations that are deeply varied, subtle and complex, but do not follow the conventions of literal language. Many of them also ask us to suspend a sense of reason or analysis, to let go for a moment of the frame of mind where things ‘add up’, fit easily into categories, or are direct or linear. They invite us, instead, to be enchanted, to *feel* what is there if we open ourselves to it, to get caught up in the particulars and qualities of the here and now.



In this process of putting ourselves as well as a sense of disbelief aside, the arts have a way of evoking empathy. When art is present in our search for understanding, and in communicating that understanding, it enables one, as Eisner says, to “participate vicariously in a situation” He explains more fully:

Experiencing a situation in a form that allows you to walk in the shoes of another is one way to know one aspect of it. Empathy is a means to understanding, and strong empathetic feelings may provide deep insight into what others are experiencing. In that sense, the arts in research promote a form of understanding that is derived or evoked from empathetic experience.²⁴⁹

I felt a certain sense of risk, a danger almost, in applying a human voice to a non-human entity. Rather than speaking about a place, it might say more about my place in it. Rather than portray a cedar, I might just be portraying my view of it. One may well ask, who are *we* to give a voice to nature, to other forms of life? How do we know we are getting it right? Surely, we should be letting these other forms of life speak for themselves, allow a place to speak for itself? These are all valuable questions, and I think a valid response is that the asking encourages us to listen — to listen sincerely and to listen for ourselves. Perhaps we aren’t getting it exactly right, though through trying, we may come closer than we were before. And the trying, the wanting to understand, gives occasion to look more carefully, and more often. It spurs us on to find out more. Perhaps in the endeavour to give a voice, we do much in simply raising awareness that there *is* one worth listening to, and that it communicates much that is meaningful.

There are many situations where a perceptual view, aided by the imagination, is appropriate in understanding the world. Iris Murdoch, as I mentioned before, states that in seeking to act morally we use our imagination not to escape the world, but to join it. She also says that it is a *task* to see the world as it is — connoting that while we are unable to escape our subjectivity, the endeavour of sincere observation, of a kind of accuracy, is nonetheless essential. In terms of connecting to the natural world through our subjective imagination, London puts it this way:

Informed by that degree and quality of listening to the outer world as well as the inner imaginative one, the artist says what it means to be a witness to the world: nothing less, nothing more... But the portrayal portion of the artistic process is preceded by a sustained and attentive *listening*

phase... It might be even said that an artwork — choreography, a musical composition, a novel, a painting, architecture — is the artist's portion of the dialogue he or she is having with nature.²⁵⁰

Though I've been cautious about giving other entities a voice that is informed by my imagination — for fear of misrepresenting, or simply anthropomorphising — there have been many instances when I've come to know a place better by doing exactly that.



Golden Ears Park, close to the southern bank of Gold Creek where it reaches Alouette Lake

The world is here whether I write about it or not, whether or not I observe it. But for now, I'm glad to be here with it, to be part of this place, as the rush from the creek is voluminous undertone for the buoyant chirps in the canopy above. Somewhere in the distance, engine noise... doing what? It is not a car or truck, it seems to be a large tool of some kind, doing something; usually, in areas like this, such engines move, rearrange, destroy... but here, where things are supposed to be protected, I'll need to trust that things are safe.

To my right, a small patch of swampy water, reflecting the sky, a murky storm with a clear surface delineating the branches and needles up above. A small dark water-skeeter sends ripples, staccato-like, across the otherwise glass-like surface. For a moment, this surface is still, except for quiet undulations from the micro-life beneath. Always, there is movement.

To my left, on some nurse logs, are some ferns — a lower one, and a higher. From the perspective of the lower one, looking up at the higher.... how might one relate to the other?

...

Light is doing beautiful things to him. He grows there, just above me on a splintered log than leans on mine, his ground diagonal. His fronds are tall enough now that they form gentle arcs, curving while reaching out to different viewpoints, to see further.

And as the light comes through, he's a luminescent light green, lit up where the fronds are single-layered and free, and making darker filigrees where the fronds companion with others, overlapping, densifying the tone, making shadows on each other.

It's good to see him there, young and full, tender and vernal, spores structuring even symmetry... the spores are somehow what holds his pattern of leaves together.

I can see it well here, with the light coming from behind him.

I suppose the other fern that grows on the ground beneath me must see the dark shadow-filigrees in the places where I overlap, as well. Are my arcs as graceful?

It feels good to have new fronds, too. The old ones, now somewhat lifeless and streaking brown to the ground on the side of the nurse. I have one that is still uncurled, tiny and tender, slower, and more shy than the others, only now unfurling from its ball.

The air moves, taking me on a subtle dance.



I realise again how much we, as humans, rely on our sight to make sense of the world. A fern would not ‘see’ a companion, as I do — it perceives light and shadow in ways that are not visual, and yet I understand this fern by relying almost entirely on seeing, and I imagine what its life may be like through my own sense of sight. It is interesting how our keen sense of sight, both limits and shapes. It is through our very *human* sense of perception that we can understand and connect with forms that are not human.

Sean Blenkinsop suggests that communication between us and the natural world occurs in several layers, the first of which is simply noticing, and taking in, what we see and hear — a flock of geese flying overhead, a wind from the west — and noticing that it has an effect on us.²⁵¹ As I write this, for example, it is mid-July, yet instead of the typical weather for this time of year, it is cool and rain is coming down heavily. I can hear it moving through the downspouts, pounding on the roof, hitting the ground and the leaves that are abundant, lush and overgrown because it has been such a wet season. It all affects how I feel — while I might ordinarily be energetic and want to go for a morning walk, the idea of curling up with a blanket and continuing with the good movie I began last night is more appealing. A second layer, continues Blenkinsop, is understood when we listen and observe more actively, endeavouring to understand messages “in context and complexity”²⁵² and accept that the natural world is dynamic. A third layer, he

says, occurs through what one might call a kind of second language. I would venture to say that it is not so much a second language but a more primal one, the means to which have been with us all along. Like a language that is not practiced or given frequent exposure, however, it can fade into the background and recesses of memory.

How might the idea of 'language' be made flexible and inclusive of silence, intuition, sensing and responding, in a way that includes the more-than-human world? Here I mean silence in the sense of wordlessness, not in the sense of no communication. There are no words in nature in the sense that we know; even for us, while words present possibilities for great eloquence and are also pragmatic necessities, their real meaning lies beyond them. Jan Zwicky puts it rather beautifully: "Here is what is paradoxical: that a significant part of the meaning of a word rests in wordlessness."²⁵³

Like Anderson and Guyas, Blenkinsop proposes that if education is to effect real change in the way we relate to the environment, then important work needs to happen at the level of the culture in which we operate, including the ways children are raised. He quotes C.A. Bowers, who observes that the metaphors we use as a culture significantly contribute to the way in which we structure our relationship with the natural world.²⁵⁴ It is true that in the time we have moved away from a connection with the land, the language we use has changed. Even in my own limited lifetime I have observed metaphors change from being rooted in the natural world (since I am a post-industrial child, these have mostly been hangers-on that have survived, or that I noticed in older literature), to metaphors that are mechanical. A student of mine once said that, as teachers, instead of 'pumping out' candidates for the work force, we need to focus on 'pumping out' good citizens, unaware of her use of industrial language even while proposing a change away from the industrial model of education. More recently, of course, our language has gained its metaphors from technology. We speak of being 'wired' or 'programmed' to have, or not have, certain habits or capabilities. Close friends of mine often talk of not having the 'bandwidth' to process or handle a great many things at once. One of our challenges, then, is to find ways to educate with a language that leaves us more receptive of — and responsive to — the natural world around us, rather than to products we have made.

Yet such receptivity needs to occur on other levels as well, if we want our language to be more integrated with the forms of life around us. It needs to coincide with an openness of the senses, the mind, heart and spirit in order to hear, and to see, in the ways I've touched on here. Jan Van Boeckel notices a vital relationship between creativity and receptivity to the particularities of our environment: in many ways, the creative process necessitates and engenders being receptive, while receptivity in turn inspires the creative impulse.²⁵⁵ Perhaps receptivity, then, is what makes empathy possible.



On the bank of the Fraser

It flows massively, this river. This is only part of its width here; I am sitting on its southern bank, looking out at the island that runs several kilometres along its middle, between Fort Langley and Maple Ridge. I wish my pencil, a single black 4B, could capture the varieties of green I see on the other side — light coloured shrubbery and young alder growing by the bank, and mature, darker cottonwood higher and taller behind. And between here and there, the swollen flow of the river, a grey-green massive movement, heading out to sea.

The woods across the river hold a magical echo, reverberating with birdsong, like a secret symphony that nevertheless carries across the water. There is din and shadow in those woods that contain the birds, giving their song a cathedral.

The water carries on it a smell like the sea, that of moisture, wet sand, seaweed. Having collected many rivulets, creeks and streams of water from east and north, it is now a great body here, unstoppable fluid flow.

I wonder what it would be like, to move like water, to be a form with no real form of my own, but shaped and held by the chasm in which I'm contained. Being joined, at any time, with more that is like me — whether in the form of rain or adjoining streams, or having parts of myself evaporate into the air, having beings and vessels of various kinds and sizes flow through me, or dive into me, steer or fly over me. A dog walks in at the bank and I give it room within myself, submerging parts of its body.

I make sounds carry far through the moist air. The chorus of birdsong floats across me with great acoustic, while down below, underneath, inside me, they're not heard at all. Down below, there is echo,

vibration, force with no name. I am glad to be the place where so much life gathers — birds, fish, trees. Even people.

I flow copiously, with all parts of myself, whether moisture, droplet or massive current — great and small parts becoming one, carried along by my own force, momentum and gravity. Within me, a thousand smaller currents, each with its own dance and tremor as it joins with the others, or is thrust upon bank, into eddy, upon rock.

I go on.

And I go on.

And I go on.





Image 7.3. Rock Ridge, Maple Ridge

Alouette River Dike, July

Dusk is coming down slanting over long grass over
the region beneath my throat across my ribs.
The swallows, like the movement of a conductor's baton, flit
about, playing on currents of evening air,
while the cold settles on my sides.
Silence in the waning light a distant footfall on the path
western mountain horizon drawing down the sun.
Soon the colours will change
and my shadow, vertical in the mauve grass,
will disappear.



Image 7.4. Rock Ridge, Maple Ridge

Heavy Green

In this long wet green robe of a summer,
July rain causes overgrowth, voluminous, trailing.
Bushes meet each other where before was passable space.
Spirits remain grey, but the moisture
feeds something that
will take root in deeper soil.

8. Reflections of Self in Greater Spheres

*...nature is linked to a voice within. Conscience, our inner guide, “speaks to us in the language of nature.” It speaks to everyone, but very few hear it.*²⁵⁶

Charles Taylor, on Jean-Jacques Rousseau

*It is not by accident that the pristine wilderness of our planet disappears as the understanding of our own inner wild nature fades.*²⁵⁷

Clarissa Pinkola Estes

*The wild is the only place where we can be ourselves.*²⁵⁸

Robert Bringhurst

The wooded hill in the Rock Ridge area of Maple Ridge, an area which I have now walked many times, served as a place of solace and sanctuary during a period in my life that was intensely complex and difficult. My need to get outside — to have a physical outlet and be in a place that was nurturing and offered sanity — has been always been there, yet during those times of crisis, the woods called me to me more constantly. It was as if something inside were pushing me out the door, into the outside where I could think for a moment and be away from the anxiety that held me captive, where my mind could have some respite. There were days when going to the woods was not possible, when walking in the neighbourhood simply had to suffice. That was certainly helpful, but nothing relieved as the shelter of trees did. Once I was there, my mind would churn things over until some of the chaos was dissolved and walked off, usually somewhere near the top of the first hill before descending down to the creek in the small valley, until the trees took into themselves my anger, confusion and pain; and when I was on my way back, they soothed and readied me for the world of people once again. In the woods, I was not judged; the pressures of what to do, the voices and words of others and the forces they represented did not press upon my head so urgently. The woods helped me to sort things out.

Sometimes, to ground myself, I would pick up a pebble or small rock and clutch it tightly as I walked, feeling the connection of what I held in my hand with the earth beneath. When I felt I didn't want to take it any further from its original home, I would put it down, and pick up another. Sometimes I played a game with myself and tried to remember, on returning walks, where I had placed a certain pebble, where the forest had kept it until I might find it again and take it back in the direction of its original spot. These walks became a necessity for keeping myself together, for making sense of the world, for connecting with something that was life-affirming. And the practice of placing the stones and then trying to find them again later led to my project of doing the drawings which were buried.

As the seasons went by, I noticed how the life in the woods changed, how the weather and temperature acted on the soil, how plant life flourished over the spring and summer and then later gave itself back into the ground, and how the light — with its changing qualities and angles — brought out the myriad characteristics and moods of the place and of particular areas; it also helped nudge along certain necessary cycles. When I actually did notice more about the forest and turned my awareness to *it* rather than just to the churning of my mind, it was a sign of things coming open, of tension slipping away. And it was a good place to look around in.

I will admit that there were many times, however, when I was so caught up with my concerns that the greenery and dark columns around me were little but a soothing blur, a balm I was conscious of mostly as background, a haven and necessary comfort, the way the embrace of a trusted person might cause more pain to well up and come to the surface because it is safe there, and the embrace becomes about something other than itself.

I was aware that many times I went to the woods not so much to appreciate the place for itself, but for what it gave me, the way a child might naturally — and rightly — want to be with a loved and trusted parent: not for who they are themselves, but for the consolation they offer. Yet, the practice of being in the forest was not about taking for myself. Somehow, it seemed also about rebuilding a foundation of sorts, not only of my own sanity but of an unspoken link with the woods and with the world itself, with life and my sense of place in it. When I needed a safe realm in which to feel outrage, the forest

provided it; when I wanted peace and solace, that, too, was offered. When I sought clarity from the relentless disorder or direction on how to proceed, some semblance thereof became possible, even if only for the next immediate step to be taken. The forest was constant — it would not betray or denigrate me, it would not create more chaos. I felt the place did not mind my being there, and had the sense that it would go on quite well whether or not I came. Yet it was always there, and this was comforting.

When my visits to the woods became the project of drawing there regularly and retrieving the drawings, the sojourns were given a very welcome focus that further channeled the emotions and thoughts that were churning inside. In a way, my drawing was a kind of thanks to the woods, an authentication of the relationship I had with the place. As I learned about the hills and their niches, about the textures and tones of the life there, it helped me heal and make sense of things.

A place to be with self

There have been a few occasions when, during class time, I have taken students out into the wooded area close to our faculty wing on campus. This has been aside from the creative projects that were done based on a place of the students' own choosing. My specific intentions and motives have varied depending on the particular course, but generally they sought to encourage reflection on the role that place, and specifically nature, have in our lives. When there hasn't been enough class time to go onto the trail, I have asked students to find a place closer by on campus that somehow speaks to them. Many gravitate toward a site that has some form of nature among the built structures — one of the ponds, the terraces with views of the mountains, or by the Japanese maples in the courtyard. The guidance was to write about what the place says to them, or, what comes to mind for them when they feel themselves present there. Though I have not been privy to all the reflections that emerge from this writing (because they are often quite personal, the students share them in small, supportive groups rather than with the whole class), what students have shared with me has often said more about their thoughts and state of mind at the time, than about the concrete things that inspired their writing. Though there is reflection on the place itself and description of its qualities and details, there is often symbolism and allegory which characterizes not so much *what* is being perceived, but *how*: the qualities that various natural phenomena

take on, the strivings, apprehensions and realizations they represent for the writer. It is interesting that in this process, often more is revealed about the individual and their state of being than about the place itself.

This led me to ask: if, when we listen and look for what the place tells us, we hear and see something that is more about our own lives, is this a self-absorbed shortcoming on our part? Are we merely projecting ourselves onto nature or onto a place as if it were a kind of blank canvas, rather than focusing on its own qualities? And perhaps most intriguingly, how is it that we see something of ourselves, or of our own predicaments, reflected there?

I could not help but think that even if the inquiry had begun with the intention to listen to the natural world and to place, yet more was revealed about human selves than about the surroundings, this experience was still valuable. It might just be that finding ourselves reflected there is a very good way to connect with nature, and that such a connection offers the kind of meaning that allows us to feel a sense of place in the world, in both literal and metaphorical terms. Perhaps the solace and opportunity to reflect and process is one of the greatest gifts we receive from nature. Being brought to see our own predicaments in new ways, to consider and make sense of things at some distance from urban and social structures — this is an important part of the relationship we have with the natural world. This might be because it echoes and revivifies something of the nature in us. An unbuilt place can offer a kind of neutrality and nurture for our own situations, at times guiding in a way I think little else can.

When I had the opportunity to teach a class on Reflective Practice, I took my students to a large wooded area away from campus for the purpose of nothing other than reflection. They were invited to consider some meaningful work they are involved in and how it looks and feels from *here* in the woods, away for a moment from the web of society. The question, which for the most part they seemed to understand intuitively, was: what does this place tell you — about this work and your place with it? One student was quite moved by the insight another student shared with her: that the way we treat nature, the things we do to it, are not altogether separate from the things we do to

children.^o Both of these women were prospective teachers. When the inquiry was taken further in a creative project of their own, it expanded and deepened their understanding about aspects of their individual lives and practices; this came about through consciously spending time with, and listening to, the natural place they had chosen. The place, together with the students' attentiveness and creative engagement, revealed to them valuable forms of understanding. Sometimes this was as basic as a return to self. Of her experience, one student stated, "Slowly, I fell in love with the silence because it was a calling to become truthful and real to myself."²⁵⁹

As a whole, this kind of exploration of listening for intimations about our own lives is a little different from the empathetic inquiry of imagining our way into other living entities I described in the previous chapter. Yet, while the intentions and the more obvious outcomes might differ, it appears to me that both these endeavours are rather similar in that they encourage reflection through relational means; both involve receptivity and openness to the unexpected, both involve listening with the heart. We hear what a place is telling us and the ear that listens has a life behind it — it is the subjective and imaginative link between the two that brings things to life. This is not unlike the more meaningful relationships we have with fellow humans, where we become interested in their lives — while enriching our own. Yet with nature, this process perhaps calls upon the imagination in a different way; it also calls upon a subtler ear. As my student's statement implies, the listening is as much a taking in of stories as it is a reorientation, and return, to our own.

While being with the natural world has a way of calling our attention to what is within, the effect also goes the other way: an honest look at the realms inside brings us to consider also our effect on our ecologies. Heesoon Bai makes the argument that the manner in which we treat the environment has a great deal to do with how whole we are within. It is only to the extent that we are aware of our sense of moral responsibility, of our own assumptions and effect on the world, she says, that we are able to make change: "the first order of action we need to take is re-searching ourselves and changing who (or how) we are."²⁶⁰ Rather than assume it is the environment 'out there'

^o I thank my students Krystin Lozynyc and Sheena Dhaliwal for sharing this.

that needs managing and mending, Bai's call is to look within ourselves as moral agents, for the "[e]nvironment is *us*."²⁶¹ Thus while there is value in noticing the particulars of the phenomenal world, it is equally valuable to notice and be conscious of the orientations and attitudes that occur within. I have spoken here of the need to look to approaches other than control when it comes to interactions with our physical environment, yet Bai suggests that if there is something over which we need to exert change, it is our own inner landscape. In some ways this echoes the idea of changing the paradigms with which we relate to our environs on a societal level, yet this step seems considerably more fundamental. Bai points to common examples in social and child-rearing practices that shut down the open-heartedness and compassion needed to allow ourselves — and thereby other beings — to be whole and thus to receive other entities openly. The way in which we relate, as individuals, to our children, to each other, and most particularly to ourselves, is integrally connected to the way in which we relate to other forms of life. It is for these reasons, she asserts, that environmental education needs to begin with the self: we need to heal what is within, if we are to heal the environment. Listening for what the woods might tell us about ourselves, then, can be an ethical, rather than a self-absorbed, act.



Thinking of my own search for guidance and of being thus drawn to the woods brings to mind the lines of William Wordsworth, who, in response to a friend who was “somewhat unreasonably attached to books of modern philosophy,”²⁶² wrote in his poem, “The Tables Turned,”

One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man
Of moral evil and of good
Than all the sages can.

While elsewhere in this poem Wordsworth revels in the qualities and particulars of nature for their own sake, the idea of nature's capacity to teach us more about ourselves than our own works can has particular resonance for me. The poem exudes a celebratory joy in the simpler things, yet its teachings are far from simple. There is also something about life itself — in the sense of our own experience as well as the life

around us in its less adulterated forms — being the wellspring of integrated learning and inspiration.

Jean-Jacque Rousseau was of course also inclined to turn to nature and to lived experience rather than to societal teaching as a moral guide. It is interesting that in Charles Taylor's account of Rousseau's contribution to our ideas of modern selfhood, little distinction seems to be made between nature as is found in the world, and human nature: the voice within us is likened to nature itself.²⁶³ One of the main tenets in Rousseau's *Emile* is that the inner guide of our conscience "speaks to us in the language of nature"²⁶⁴ — indeed, that the loss of this impulse in ourselves is what leads us astray, morally, as individuals. Rousseau claimed that education should do everything possible to preserve what he called "the nature within us," to protect it from being distorted by societal expectation and convention, and by the constraint of imposed habits.²⁶⁵ He linked human conscience to instinct, both of which provide an important spiritual bond to something greater than ourselves. By contrast, too much reason and concern for societal pressure results in forms of depravity and moral waywardness.

Such a view of nature as an ethical source suggests that our conscience might stem from — and also encompass — ethical considerations beyond social circles, to something more universal and fundamental. While many with urban lives may have limited contact with the wilder natural world, there is still something about this vision of conscience and the nature within us that ties us to something more eternal, beyond contemporary social custom. Taylor clarifies that rather than suggesting our connection to nature be a kind of pre-cultural or pre-societal state, Rousseau equates the voice of nature with self-reliance in one who is well integrated into society, has capabilities for reason and language, and yet remains true to an inner voice which relates to nature.²⁶⁶ In this respect, nature becomes a kind of spiritual source — not in a religious sense but in terms of a link to a greater good, to a source of sincerity within the self.

When Rousseau says, "the first impulses of nature are always right,"²⁶⁷ the meaning I take is not that the trees, rivers and sky literally spur us to better inclinations, but rather that our intimate contact with them returns us to a place in ourselves where our better instincts speak more clearly than do the voices of society, which can be inconstant and ever-changing, and often with questionable motives. Rousseau would

say it is this instinct we need to turn to and depend upon, rather than a need to satisfy the expectations and admiration of others. One who puts emphasis on getting along with others within the human realm might view this proposal with some disdain. Yet perhaps a good equivalent in our contemporary times would be the idea espoused by Greene — that we are in need of a source of learning that returns us to a more sincere moral compass in the face of ever-present market media, which indeed has the capacity to lead young people astray with its motives for power, influence, and profit. For Greene, of course, this source is the arts.

The idea of wisdom gained from nature is likely as old as humanity, and has a history that seems fairly universal. I think, for example, of the ancient Chinese tradition of gardens built for the purpose of spiritual contemplation, where nature is seen as an intermediary between the individual and society. In a rather different context, there are the shamanic traditions of tribal cultures, where the shaman is seen as interpreter of nature and thereby a source of wisdom for his people. Yet such ideas are not particularly obvious to most of us now. Though it may seem a stretch for some, I find that even in contemporary urban life the natural world (in whatever capacity we are able to access it) can be a realm to which we can turn for spiritual guidance. As ever-constricting schedules and various forms of media press on us, however, we often forget this, just as it is easy to forget that we, too, are nature.

Though a wildish place offers pause from societal structures and expectations, it is not merely the absence of felt pressures and restraints that has an effect on us. There is a definite life-giving *presence* there. While urban environments tend to reflect back to us notions of who we are within a specific social structure, place and time, perhaps the forest (or the hills, the fields, the oceanside, wherever one goes for wildness) reflects us back to ourselves in a way that is somehow more timeless and universal.

When we seek rest or vacation from what has been ‘too much,’ we often return to natural places — the appeal of going to an ‘unspoiled’ place to ‘get away’ is common and understandable. Yet I think we need to see wild places as more than realms of escape. They are far more fundamental and necessary than that; they replenish and feed those less moulded aspects of ourselves that allow us to know how to proceed in ways that are right for us. Jungian scholar Clarissa Pinkola Estes wisely points out that

“vacation is not the same as refuge,”²⁶⁸ and that our need to be in the wild is not just for respite from our work in the world, but a return to a spiritual home that puts us in touch with ourselves one again, a necessary part of a soulful life. She puts it this way:

Every creature on earth returns to home. It is ironic that we have made wildlife refuges for ibis, pelican, egret, wolf, crane, deer, mouse, moose, and bear, but not for ourselves in the places where we live day after day. We understand that the loss of habitat is the most disastrous event that can occur to a free creature. We fervently point out how other creatures’ natural territories have become surrounded by cities, ranches, highways, noise, and other dissonance, as though we are not surrounded by the same, as though we are not affected also.²⁶⁹

Estes points out that we often tend to “compensate for the loss of serene habitat by taking a vacation or holiday,” when a return to wildness needs more essentially to be a return to home.



Being in a wooded place in silence and in solitude affords me *space* — for thoughts, feelings, observations, musings and, to be absorbed in the place, to sink into it for a while. I have never felt lonely when I am out there on my own. Indeed, it is a balm to loneliness, a reconnection with things beyond myself; the life there is plentiful, even if I don’t interact with it in the same way I might with fellow humans. Being there also puts me more in touch with myself. Yet while some clarity is brought to my own situation and some inner stillness is regained, I benefit most when I am open to *its* wisdom. It is a humbling experience, really, for these woods know things I cannot fathom. They also know how to tame my less-than-helpful preoccupations, and to put them in their place.

Perhaps the wisdom that can be felt there has something to do with a kind of release from language as we use it in everyday life. Words often simply fall away. It is not that they do not have a place there, it is just that somehow, the wild has different ways of filling us with meaning: it imparts rather than informs, whispers and sings rather than speaks, and it communicates through myriad silences, movements and rhythms that are felt rather than heard. Wordsworth’s turning away from excessive time spent with philosophy and with books, toward reading nature in a more lyrical way, is part of

accessing the wisdom that dwells in that space between perception and the imagination. In an essay on place as co-teacher, Sean Blenkinsop describes how certain moments of learning in the natural world “defy easy explanation,” and that “words must fail” for, as he says, “I have not had the language or system of understanding to draw them into my pre-conceived frames.”²⁷⁰ Yet, this ineffability is what renders the experience powerful, even as he struggles with the lack of means to explain them.

Somehow, it is not just the social frameworks that are invited to fall away, but also the assumptions that go with them: the idea that everything can be described, and perhaps more significantly, that things can be predicted and known before they are even encountered. The turning moment in Blenkinsop’s essay occurs with the narration about a participant in his outdoor group who does best when he, the teacher, steps out of the way and allows this young woman to relate to the wilderness on her own — in the humbling realization that surrendering his own role and input brings about the most meaningful experience. With the dissolution of preconceived structures, there can also be the realization that there are things beyond our own design worth being open to: the encounter itself is what offers understanding.

On Wisdom and Receptivity

In my exploration, earlier in this work, of wisdom as a more valuable aim than knowledge, I brought in Zwicky’s observation that inviting someone to attend — rather than just telling or informing them — is what leads to recognition. It also helps if there is the kind of perceptual and emotional receptivity that allows for recognition, the kind that Wordsworth proposes at the end of his poem:

Come forth, and bring with you a heart
That watches and receives.

Words such as these may appear almost too simple and rosy to more critical and intellectualized contemporary ears, something one might find on a greeting card or in kindergarten (though kindergarten perhaps gets many things right, compared to other levels of education). Yet this receptivity, coming forward, and perceiving with heart is key. Here is echoed Hillman’s proposition that revivifying the soul of the world is an act of *aesthesis*, where the heart is the organ of perception, sensation and imagination, where we listen to, and hear, the *poesis* of the world.



It is worth asking ourselves how far we might extend such receptiveness, and how it affects our sense of who we are. In his beautifully titled essay, “The Silence That Is Not Poetry — and The Silence That Is,” Robert Bringhurst reflects on the nature of poetry and metaphor and their associations with the sacred, and ultimately suggests that one becomes most human when their sense of sacredness includes other species and forms of being. Through an etymological exploration of the root meaning of poetry in various languages, Bringhurst observes the Arabic connection of the word to that of perceiving, sensing, intuiting and feeling, and the ancient Greek to that of a maker or artisan, “whose work is graced or guided by the gods.” In Bringhurst’s words,

That’s a way of saying that humans can reach out, by making or doing, to realms beyond the human, and that the things humans make or do can have a presence and a value that might also reach beyond the human realm.²⁷¹

While Plato may not have included the visual arts among such poetic deeds, I feel these acts of making and of looking beyond ourselves are significant aspects of what we, in our day, call the arts. Together with the acts of perceiving, intuiting, and sensing (from the Arabic etymology of poetry), they characterize the kind of flow that is a sincere endeavour to interpret the world through creative means — means which have the capacity to bring us closer to the sacred. The resonance we feel in poetry, Bringhurst goes on to suggest, is not so much a resonance we feel with the language of the poem, but one we feel with the world: “poetry...is a property of reality itself.”²⁷² It has a way of bringing us closer to things, allowing us to breathe with them.

Here, Bringhurst echoes the themes that have woven through this thesis. And in the next thought he takes it further, addressing the idea of gaining insight into oneself through the natural world. The Grecian tenet of knowing oneself, Bringhurst says, has greater meaning when taken in a broader sense: the self he would prefer to know is not one that is limited to social realms with an impeded view of the rest of the world, but rather, “the larger self, consisting of more species, and more incarnations of being, organic and inorganic, than you or I can count.”²⁷³ And later, a claim that while, “like

penguins and seals and lichens and rocks,” humans are interesting in and of themselves and their own particularities, their interrelations with everything else form the larger picture:

what makes them...interesting is in large part what they manage to illuminate, or to *connect with*, in the world beyond the human... The more they recede into a world of their own making, the less truly human they become.²⁷⁴

Thus, in order to enliven the poetry of our own existence, we need to look beyond it to other forms of life.^p I find that particularly apt at this time in history, when, perhaps more than ever, we are becoming wrapped up in a world of our own making — not through the idea of ‘man being the measure of all things’ that gained ground during the Renaissance, or through the Baconian quest for objective knowledge, but through an involvement in media technologies that diverts our minds, senses and perceptions away from the physical world itself in staggering ways. Technology certainly helps us know the world and expands our scopes in social and conceptual spheres, yet it has a way of silencing our receptivity to the subtle, the immediate, and the embodied aspects of the sensuous world.

Bringhurst argues that if we are to write books and poems (and, I would add, create images, music, dance) that aim to make us more human rather than less so, we do better to include realms beyond our limited human circles. He asks what it may be like to view through the world’s eyes, and offers no definite answers to the question. “I have no hope of ever knowing,” he says, but feels a need to “try to do it nevertheless.”²⁷⁵ It is the kind of allegorical question to which answers need to be imagined, rather than deduced, the kind where one relies on hunch and intuition rather than reason. Keen sensing, in the manner of following one’s nose, is also a part of it. We are accustomed to viewing ourselves in relation to (and from the perspectives of) other human beings, and of course we need to do that in order to get on with them and find a sense of place

^p Edward O. Wilson, known for his promotion of the idea of biophilia, expresses a rather similar thought: “The more we know of other forms of life, the more we enjoy and respect ourselves...Humanity is exalted not because we are so far above the other living creatures, but because knowing them well elevates the very concept of life” (as cited in *The Footprint Press*, Issue 9, 2013, p. 12).

and purpose within our human and social world. Indeed, our relationships with each other are often what are most meaningful to us. Yet, to imagine how we might be viewed by the physical world itself — by the river, the mountain, from certain treetops or by the air itself, from the perspective of a crow or deer — that takes us further. At the same time, it also reminds us of what is most essential and basic in life.

For one thing, we might seem smaller and less significant, our rushing about may appear frenzied and aimless, our obsessions and goals, and the single-mindedness we apply to them, somewhat myopic. I imagine we might appear rather different from the viewpoint of ants, squirrels, pebbles, to whom we would be gigantic. From all these perspectives, we may likely appear to have formidable powers that we use rather unwisely, perhaps even cruelly. Yet perhaps we would get a humbling sense of our significance as it relates to everything else. We might, too, come to appreciate our own role as participants (rather than managers) of a larger cosmos. Either way, trying on the idea of how I might be considered from the vantage of these different entities and places is enough to jar me out of my relatively trifling concerns, and to remind me that there is something more. The very idea that we are perceived by other kinds of beings changes things.²⁷⁶

I find I come to a similarly ineffable mode of mind when I ask, what kind of wisdom — if we open ourselves to it — might be offered by the forest, the ground, the natural world itself? Can this wisdom be described, explained, or put into words at all? Is it different for everyone, or, if there are commonalities, what might they be? Is it something that we feel within and that cannot be easily placed, or is it something that can be imparted to others? What might this place say to me, on this day, with my present situations? Again, the response needs to be imagined and felt, rather than stated. Perhaps it is similar with the wisdom I might gain from a maple tree or from the creek in the small valley to my northeast. If I am open and listen carefully, I can be shown the way. It is up to me how long I stay with that wisdom, and how I take it in. When I am in a wooded place, and my feet, eyes and gut sense what is around the corner, or I notice how the mood of the mountainside is different today than it was yesterday and it whispers to me, hinting at what in my life needs attending to... when I emerge feeling more balanced for having been with a familiar practice and place: this is a kind of knowing — on some days even wisdom — that has been imparted to me.

I could go on exploring how we might ascertain whether or not — or how — the natural world is able to teach us, how it might be manifested, and by which names we might call that wisdom. But what I hope to do more is to somehow impart the possibility of a faith — for I have no claim or proof — that there is wisdom to be gained. Trying to find proof seems the wrong path to take, and it appears I have instead found myself caught in a web of wondering about the nature of wisdom. As I grapple with these thoughts, I sense that sages from generations before ours would look upon this question with some bewilderment. Their response might be, *Of course there is wisdom to be gained from nature. Why spend so much effort trying to name it? That is not necessary.* Perhaps the best I can do is to impart that sensing the poetry in the world, listening to it and exploring that conveyance through equally poetic means, is a fruitful way to experience that wisdom.

In 'The Tables Turned,' Wordsworth observes,

Our meddling intellect
Mis-shapes the beauteous form of things: —
We murder to dissect.

At times it seems to me, the nature of academic writing being what it is, that perhaps I have gone too far in shaping (perhaps even dissecting) certain forms of thought that would be more evocative were they transmitted by means of colour, form, movement, verse, rather than explained or described in literary terms. Speaking and writing about these things is not the same as being engaged in them in one's own skin.



The resonance and poetry we look for in the world — and in our work of interpreting it — is something we need to be open to, rather than rely upon. Perhaps it is better to see it as a gift, rather than a given we assume to be there. It is a matter of letting things flow and work through us, of allowing the world to have a life of its own rather than trying to manage it. This way, we are more likely to feel part of things ourselves, and respond in a manner that is perhaps more humble, that is about participation and understanding, rather than imposing order. A sincere artistic process is like that too: one of listening, of being sensitive, and most of all, of bearing witness.

Eisner invites us to distinguish between the descriptive and the evocative, suggesting that the latter aims to have qualities that “create an empathetic sense of life in those who encounter it.”²⁷⁷ In my experiments of writing from the point of view of a cedar, a fern, a river, it was a sense of empathetic imagination that informed everything. There was also an embodied sense, as I imagined how it might feel, physically, to have a body shaped as theirs, with different capabilities of movement, grounding, sensing, with different desires and inclinations, and with my body made of different substance.

Expanded Scopes

To ask a child to try to think, feel, see, and listen from the point of view of another living form, or of a place — and to express this through creative means — can be a potent and far-reaching inquiry if it is done well and brought to fruitive development. These are questions I feel we should be asking children, allowing them to elaborate with their imaginations in detail and in full. Articulating what these imaginings reveal, whether through words, images, movement or sound, invites children and youth to join the world in the empathetic sense proposed by Murdoch and Eisner. It becomes an intimate experience of coming closer to things. To the extent that the childlike act of imagining the world animates for us the soul of things, their soul, to use Hillman’s words, “corresponds and coalesces with ours.”²⁷⁸ It is particularly helpful if activities of this nature begin at a young age when the vitality of play, curiosity and imagination characterizes a child’s vision of the world. The benefits of this are several. It helps imagination, an essential part of ethical thought,²⁷⁹ remain nurtured, validated and intact. Empathetic capacities are fostered through the very act of asking: what is it like for this other being, so different from myself? If the practice of such active awareness continues through the formative years and into adolescence, when interests turn more to social and cultural concerns as young people figure out their role in those spheres, their sense of who they are will be richer and deeper. As Bringhurst and Wilson suggest, we come closer to our own humanness when we have an expanded awareness of, and sensitivity to, realms and ways of being in the world beyond our own human ones.

I would like for a moment to be rather bold and suggest a broader vision for education and for the development of humanity as they relate to the other forms of life with which we share the earth. The twentieth century was a time when, for various

reasons such as political necessity, global media and an increased emphasis on social justice, many of us opened our lives, doors and hearts to people of other heritage and ethnicity in vast and unprecedented ways. Certainly, this has been far from a smooth journey: ignorance and intolerance continue to murmur beneath the surface of many interactions as practices of acceptance and welcome involve ongoing tensions and contradictions. Yet while it is not always easy to open up to other ways of being, the progress that has occurred as a whole has certainly been remarkable. I realize this may seem an oversimplification, but I want to think here in terms of broad strokes. In Canada as well as other places, we have on the whole expanded not only our tolerance, but also our perspectives and interests to the point where, for many, multiculturalism has become a valued norm — whether or not it is actively practiced. We have shown that we are capable, as human beings, of extending our imaginations and sympathies to those whose ways of being are, in some cases, vastly different from ours, and focused instead on what we have in common — most notably, on the ways in which we can relate to each other. If we have come to value such diversity, might it be possible for this valuing to also include other life forms whose structures, life-worlds and means of communication are different from ours? For if we consider carefully, there are many basic elements of life — needs, desires, and behaviours, forms of awareness and communication — that are shared. Might it be possible that in the coming years, the sense of consciously expanded awareness and sympathy we have seen among humans, this overcoming of otherness, the insistence on equality and efforts of understanding might more wholly include non-human life forms?

Bolivia has already taken a step in this direction on a fundamentally large scale, with its Law of Mother Earth, a bill which gives nature legal rights to life and regeneration.²⁸⁰ Environmental lawyer Cormac Cullinan, who led the drafting of this law, is involved also in similar legislation in South Africa.²⁸¹ In the United States, legal movements are afoot in a quest to rewrite laws to assert the rights of nature and of communities that choose to preserve natural elements over economic growth imposed by corporations.²⁸² And across the continent, our views of how we want society to treat animals have changed significantly in the past decades: more stringent regulations aim for ethical treatment and good health, and give animals the “freedom to express behaviours that promote well-being.”²⁸³ Movements such as these give me hope. Yet

much needs to be done in order to change the paradigm — in both law and education — from one where humans have the right to material and economic gain to one where other beings have a right to habitat and to flourish simply by having the basic freedoms of life itself. Some close, careful and heartfelt consideration would hopefully reveal to many that the latter trumps the former. Since education is what shapes the minds and perspectives of future citizens and lawmakers, I propose that this is a responsibility we educators need to take on, and take it on fully.

Yet before, or at least alongside, bringing about these forms of awareness and orientation in our students, we need for them to be alive within ourselves.



As means of communication that can bridge sympathies across cultures and eras, the arts have played a significant role in opening pathways of understanding and curiosity, forging links between people of varying cultures. Because of their affective and invitational power, and because of their capacity to involve empathy, the arts operate on a level somewhat different from that of policies, laws, and even endeavours of justice education or Social Studies curricula. Through works of fiction, for example, I can get a vivid sense of what it is, or was, like to live a life in a very different culture and time than my own. As examples I have recently read: Camilla Gibb's *Sweetness in the Belly*, leads my imagination through the trials of devout Muslim women as they endure extreme poverty in an Ethiopia of political upheaval; through Alice Munro's *The View from Castle Rock*, the journey of early nineteenth century Scottish settlers coming to Canada is given dimension and texture. While both these authors were personally familiar with the geographical settings and had researched the social situations, their piecing together of both the building blocks and the essence of their stories is done through imagination and empathy, bringing things alive for us in a way that little else can.

We have heard widely of the injustices endured by First Nations children and families through the imposition of residential schools, yet the children's story *Fatty Legs*, together with its poignant illustrations, makes these experiences more real in the minds of young people than most social studies lessons are capable of. I am not suggesting that stories and works of art replace the facts and the figures, but they are necessary

both as gateways of interest as well as means to find depth and personal connection. All of these fictive works have been published in Canada within the last decade, yet they bring us very close to lives lived in other eras and to places unfamiliar to most readers. If imaginative writing can do this, it is possible that it may also illuminate lives that are different from ours with regard to predicaments faced by other species. Katherine Applegate's *The One and Only Ivan*, written from the perspective of a silverback gorilla, is a lovely example; its sensitive tone and sparse language made this story immensely moving. I had never imagined a gorilla point of view quite like the one this book made available to me. Meeka Walsh's "A Love Story,"²⁸⁴ written from the perspective of a dog longing for closeness, is powerfully sad and affected me for a long time afterward. Barbara Gowdy's work *The White Bone* is told from the viewpoint of elephants living in African desert; while based around researched facts, its success is in the empathy that is elicited in a reader through the complex, and at times horrific, unfolding of the story. And recently, my son showed me Miriam Elia and Ezra Elia's *Diary of Edward the Hamster 1990-1990*, a short and existentially brooding work that led me to consider differently the lives of many pets.

For most adults, I think such leaps of imagination feel greater — and riskier — than they do for most children. This is why such a practice needs to be part of childhood, when imagination and receptivity are at their most open, so that these ways of viewing feel familiar and meaningful throughout life. My view is that the arts, whether through stories, images, movement or music, can have powerfully affective sway when it comes to the life of creatures, rivers, ecosystems and places. These phenomena may not offer us their forms of art in the manner of what we call the humanities. Yet, there is much art *within* the world if we consciously open our senses and hearts to noticing and appreciating its various forms. Building on Bringham and Lilburn's feeling that poetry is within the world itself, I suggest we take on London's proposal that our creative expression be our part of the dialogue with the natural world.

Yet we need first to see, to hear and to feel the art that is there, to notice it so that we can respond. The land, fauna, beings of feathers, fur and scales might not make art in the way humans do, but it is up to us to see — and to take in through all our senses — their expressivity and the various moods of the land and its inhabitants. The dance in the swoop of the eagle, the staccato of a deer as it bounds away, the

symphony in the deep thrum of the ocean, the understated poetry of the wind as it whispers through the moist alder leaves: these are forms of communication we can choose to take in. The haunting composition of stark colours when a storm pushes itself against the mountains, or the restful lines of a gentler landscape's horizon on a calmer day: to me, these are part of the poetry of the world — offered to us as gifts, as part of the world's dialogue with us. It becomes dialogue when we receive these things as expressions of the *experience* of these entities. Bai intimates that with any other being, we best acknowledge them by sensitively receiving their “expression of experience, thereby their presence.”²⁸⁵

The practice of art makes us aesthetically aware in a way that brings us to this mode of receptivity. Being entranced by the beauty of a painting, by the closing scenes of a play, stems from a very similar place in ourselves as the propensity to feel enchanted by dawn light on dew-soaked foliage. Being moved by the lilt of a line of music is not altogether different from being moved by the dance of porpoises I watch from the ferry as they perform their arabesques across the plane of the ocean's surface. We know more now than we once did about the intelligence of animals such as other primates, elephants, and whales. Yet while news of their intelligence may impress us, it is their sentience and their propensities to be expressive — to show their faces and character, their desires, their modes of interaction — which *move* us. We can recall here the suggestion from Orr and from Blazer that at its best, intelligence — whether our own or that of other beings — cannot but include love.



Parting Thoughts

At the opening of this dissertation, I began with asking: how might we connect, in greater depth, with the world itself, and most particularly with the life within natural areas close to home? How might we become more embedded in our ecologies in ways that bring about a sense of resonance as well as a sense of responsibility?

When I first posed this question, my committee member, Mark Fettes, asked me how I would know I had such a connection, if I had it. This is complex to answer, but I

will try as best I can. It would begin with a return to my senses feeling more alive and tender, less compressed by the rush of obligations and responsibilities that constantly pull me elsewhere. My imagination would go to magical places involuntarily, and, perhaps more importantly, have the time to do so. In many respects, the time and reflection that were involved in this dissertation have brought these about. The walking in the woods, the experiences of drawing and writing outside, the space to think, consider, be aware, have engendered a greater awareness. (This has been not just of nature and places themselves, but also of the complexity of the our relationships to them as a society.) While I have struggled with the fact that the writing itself — and the frame of mind it often required — is not the same as the actual practice of more sensuous forms of communication I've written of so fervently, it also had a way of returning me to them, leading me to understand in greater depth and breadth.

Yet perhaps most poignantly, when it comes to a connection of greater vitality with place, I imagine others around me sharing an attachment to the land around them, far more than what I see now. Places would be valued as part of a living heritage to which we belong, rather than belonging to us. We would be stewards of this heritage much as we are guardians of our children, and companions to these places, as we are capable of being with each other. I would feel safer allowing myself to be attached to them, less fearful that they may well be slated for destruction. There is something potent in the validation from the culture for one's love of something: even if that love is subtle and unspoken (or only quietly spoken), it can run deep. An ideal would be to have this cultural validation, to have natural settings be meaningful social settings as well, yet to still have opportunities to engage with natural places on my own without the interference of other humans. I realise this is somewhat of a paradox. But I like the idea of nature being an intermediary between ourselves and the rest of society, instead of being felt as outside it.

This leads to another thought: if we can feel love, in common, for something as fundamental as the land that is our home, perhaps we might feel more strongly how we are, and could be, connected to each other.

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