**A Critical Reflection on Environmental Education**

**During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper problematizes the current conception and purview of environmental education (EE), seeing it as part and parcel of the modernist western worldview that normalizes and valourizes human domination and exploitation of nature in the name of progress. Using the COVID-19 pandemic as a lens through which to examine and expose the modernist western blueprint of EE, this paper suggests another way of reconsidering EE: the Zen way of ‘becoming one with ten thousand things.’ Paradoxically, the Zen way, to be true to itself, must transcend itself, and this paper invites the reader to see environmental education in the same light. To go further than just arguing for a Zen inspired EE, this paper includes a section that offers three practices for the reader to try.

**The Need to Reframe Environmental Education Today**

Environmental education (EE) today still carries with it the old and problematic habit of mind that sees that the external environment is in trouble, has problems, and needs to be helped and fixed. It is true that there are issues and concerns, most of them increasingly dire, regarding the environment, and therefore we need to address them, find solutions, and take action. Air pollution, global warming, deforestation and desertification, groundwater depletion…the list goes on. However, to limit our EE approaches and actions to addressing the problems in the environment is short-sighted and akin to only treating skin lesions when the underlying condition is diabetes. In this example, a thorough medical diagnosis would show that the skin lesions are expressions of the whole-body system being under duress and in a state of biochemical imbalance. Moreover, further health analysis would show that the person’s ill health is connected to larger sociocultural systemic issues that are part of our civilization. Environmental issues are no different. Hence, in this paper, I propose to analyze environmental education within a holistic framework.

The essential understanding of holism has to do with the relationship between parts and the whole: that it is integral, dynamic, and emergent. While maintaining their individual integrity, the parts are never separate from each other, as they participate in each other’s interactional processes, through which the whole continually undergoes dynamic changes (Holdredge, 2020) and exhibits emergent properties (Santos, 2015). Given that this world and life are holistic systems, does it make sense to have environmental education that still focuses largely on the problems in the physical environment “out there,” as opposed to “in here”? I take the position that it does not make sense to do so. This position may be further supported by the following reflections on knowledge construction.

What is completely normalized is hard to see, like the air to us. Until we are able to step out of the system that surrounds us and look at it from the outside, it’s hard to discern its contingent nature. We gain perspective about the system surrounding us when we are able to compare it to other systems that are differently constructed. The way we think about environmental education—what we think its scope and aims are, and what actions we should take in order to improve or protect the environment—is part of the Modern Western[[1]](#endnote-1) system of thought. (Let us call it ModWest for short.) It turns out that, compared to other ways or traditions of construing what it is to know, how we know, and what we know, the ModWest worldview sees information as the most worthwhile system of knowledge. In this case, ‘information’ consists of disembodied, objectified, discrete, and commodifiable informational units essentially divorced from subjectivity and intersubjectivity, hence from ethics and sentiments. Under the ModWest worldview, information has become the dominant way of knowing. Such a knowledge system is derived from exercising the cognitive, rational, cerebral, calculative, strategic, and instrumental facilities and resources at our disposal.[[2]](#endnote-2) Environmental education (EE) is part of this epistemic system, too, and has been conditioned to see its objectives and scope of activity through the same ModWest interpretive framework. Common thoughts and beliefs in environmental education that have been shaped by the ModWest mindset include the following: the environment is external to humanity; EE is primarily learning about the problems that are in the physical environment; when EE takes action, it’s about human beings doing something *to* the environment to restore and improve; and moreover, since humans have caused all these environmental problems, human interests are generally seen to stand in opposition to environmental interests.

**What the Covid-19 Crisis is Revealing**

Early January of 2020 saw the arrival a novel coronavirus, which spread explosively all over the world. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization Director-General, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, made an announcement that ‘COVID-19 can be characterized as a pandemic’ (Tedros, 2020). That day, there were 118,000 cases reported globally in 14 countries, and 4,291 people had died from COVID-19. On March 29, 2020, the number of deaths climbed to 30,935. As of May 9, the number of deaths climbed to 277,784 globally and to 78,790 in the United States alone. In his speech, Tedros further commented: ‘[W]e have never before seen a pandemic that can be controlled…’ (Tedros, 2020). In response to the pandemic, social isolation became the method of choice in most countries for slowing down the spread of infection. Schools, shops, stores, bars, restaurants, community centres, workplaces, doctors’ and therapists’ offices, churches—all except those deemed essential services closed down to aggressively contain the spread of infection. As a result, many millions of people in most countries are out of work. The gargantuan economic machinery that has been relentlessly pushing this civilization forward came to a halt almost overnight.

With the world’s economic activities drastically paused, streets that were once noisy and filled with fumes are now bare and quiet, and the air is fresh. Many reports indicate air pollution levels around the world have been dramatically reduced due to decreased human activity during the COVID-19 crisis (Science Media Centre, 2020). The dramatic improvement in air quality is not only measurable with instruments but also visible to the naked eye. Sound pollution has improved as well. Suddenly, without the din caused by traffic, urban dwellers can hear birdsong loud and clear. While economic disaster looms and people are understandably very worried about their financial viability during and after the COVID-19 crisis, the earth is finally getting a break, however brief, from humanity’s relentless assault and plunder. The earth has been subjected to this process since the inception of the Industrial Revolution in the 18th century at least, and perhaps before then as well. Our collective history of debasing and being aggressive towards Nature may date back to prehistory. Perhaps thrusting the plough into the land some 120,000 years ago, at the start of the agricultural revolution, was literally and symbolically an act of aggression against the Earth.

In the PIBES Expert Guest article by professors Settele, Diaz, Brondizio, and Daszak, published on April 27, 2020, the authors assert that ‘[t]here is a single species that is responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic – us’ (Inter Press Service, 2020). They go on to make the case:

As with the climate biodiversity crises, recent pandemics are a direct consequence of human activity – particularly our global financial and economic systems, based on a limited paradigm that prizes economic growth at any cost. [...] Pandemics […] are caused by activities that bring increasing numbers of people into direct contact and often conflict with the animals that carry these pathogens.

The authors of the article go on to comment on humans’ relationship to wildlife in particular and Nature in general:

Rampant deforestation, uncontrolled expansion of agriculture, intensive farming, mining and infrastructure development, as well as the exploitation of wild species have created a ‘perfect storm’ for the spillover of diseases from wildlife to people. This often occurs in areas where communities live that are most vulnerable to infectious diseases.

I note that the above appraisal could just as well be describing, instead of pandemics, the mega-forest fires that have become a recurring summer nightmare for many countries in recent years with increasing frequency. What the COVID-19 pandemic is revealing to us, in the boldest strokes possible, is the absolute degree to which life is interconnected on this planet. This interconnectivity involves all spheres of human activity, including the economic, sociocultural, environmental, geopolitical, philosophical, and psychological aspects of humanity. What COVID-19 reveals is: *economic is environmental is sociocultural is philosophical is psychological is geopolitical…* Given this, what is the purview of EE?

**Changing the Mind, Changing the Environment**

Let us now go back to the last quote. When I re-read it, I was immediately struck by the following words: *rampant, uncontrolled, intensive, exploitation*. These are words that we associate with the ethos of modernity and for achieving progress (Wright, 2004). When these descriptors are applied to humanity, humans eminently qualify as agents of destruction, not only to the larger biosphere and physical environment, but also to each other, and internally to their own psyches (Vetlesen, 1993). It is extremely tempting to draw a certain conclusion: that humans are essentially, therefore irredeemably, destructive animals, and at this point in human cultural evolution, we are likely to destroy ourselves by destroying our own nest—the entire biosphere itself (Wright, 2004). But there is nothing essential and irredeemable about human destructiveness; for, as long as we have the possibility of choosing a way that is not destructive, essentialism doesn’t work. No matter how severe the constraints are that we face, human beings still can choose to go down the path of compassion and mutual care, towards mutual flourishing with all beings on this planet.

As I write this essay in May of 2020, many cities in North America are trying to come out of lockdown, and people are cautiously returning to the ‘normal.’ However, many have begun, also, to wonder whether it’s a good idea to go back to the former “normal”: that is, to the dominant modernist ethos of progress and its mandate to plunder Nature to overproduce and overconsume, all for the sake of the monetary economy, while people overwork and neglect family, community, and self-care (Eisenstein, 2020). Anecdotally, I have heard people saying to us that they don’t want to go back to work, that they value and enjoy having more time with their loved ones, that they find having more time in Nature to be healing, that they find that they can live more frugally, simply, and mindfully. COVID-19 has shown us a possibility, however fleetingly, of how we could live differently, and how that would make a major difference to the earth’s environment.

Living differently, in the sense of making a major change to how we live, requires changing the way we see the world and see ourselves. We need epistemic and ontic readjustments[[3]](#endnote-3) to shift out of the ModWest culture of dualism (separation of mind and matter), atomistic individualism (separation of self and other), materialism (denial of the sacred and disrespect for beings’ intrinsic worth), scientific materialism (the belief that consciousness is not part of the material world), economism (the belief that money is the ultimate value and what drives the world), and so on. The habit of mind that sees the environment as ‘out there,’ that our work as environmental educators or activists is to do something *about*, *to*, or *for* the environment, and that other beings have no consciousness, value, and agency of their own, is one-piece with the ModWest’s epistemology of dualism. The latter separates mind from matter, inner life from outer environment, what is animate from what is inanimate, and so on. As well, the ModWest epistemology is essentially atomistic: it takes what is whole, breaks it apart into individual bits and pieces, and makes them into self-existing entities. This process is behind any ‘entity’ we can think of, all the way from ‘self’ to ‘environment.’ We could argue that the same process went into creating and defining what EE is. Coming out of the current pandemic, does it make sense to continue doing EE the same way, and if not, how could it be differently conducted?

**Is It Environmental Education?**

I am not at all suggesting that we stop caring about or doing something about various issues and problems impacting the environment. Nor am I suggesting that we should do away with the subject matter of “environmental education” or do away with departments or faculties for environmental studies. As well, I would like to affirm that the knowledge obtained through tearing things apart and turning them into data is a certain kind of knowledge that can be useful. However, what results from this approach, while useful for control and manipulation, *must not* overpower, eclipse, and replace the holistic, embodied, empathic, and participatory ways that lie beyond the ModWest. Whether we call the latter the way of wisdom traditions, the mystics’ way, or the contemplative and spiritual way, they all point to what lies on the other side of the still currently dominant ModWest views, values, and ways.

These other currently marginalized approaches and traditions all hold the promise of our recovering and reclaiming a thick interconnectivity, thereby becoming whole, or to use the ancient Chinese expression, ‘one with the ten thousand things.’ This expression goes to the heart of Zen, and I wish to introduce Zen here. By Zen, I don’t mean Zen Buddhism: the religious, spiritual, or cultural tradition that has been proliferating over the centuries and across many continents and countries, establishing many schools and sects, including ones in North America. While these establishments can all be vehicles of Zen, we must not confuse the vehicle with the driver. Or, to use another celebrated, quintessential Zen expression, we must not confuse the finger that points to the moon with the moon. Or, to speak paradoxically, Zen is not Zen when it becomes and stays Zen. The way (道, Dao) of Zen is ‘the ten thousand things’ that lead us to *nowhere* and *no-self*. *If I am one with the whole phenomenal world, I’m not just ‘here,’ but everywhere. If I am everywhere in the whole world, then, I am not this discrete, separate ego self: I am the world. If I am the world, who is this self and who is not?*

I underline, above, ‘the ten thousand ways’ of Zen to signal that I am not talking about the reified tradition we call, Zen. When Zen, like anything else, settles into ‘something,’ becoming a concrete particular *this* or *that,* it too runs the risk of becoming dogmatic and fundamentalist, thereby self-destructing its essence and spirit. Reb Anderson, a contemporary American Zen teacher in the Soto Zen tradition, offers an illuminating way to think of authentic Zen: that *any* tradition becomes Zen when it overcomes or goes beyond itself (Anderson, 2020, February). Anderson also reminds us that true Zen’s self-overcoming nature applies to itself as well. When a Zen tradition remains stuck in itself and does not offer ways to go beyond itself, it will have lost its essence—its vitality. To put it another way, the only Zen worth pursuing would be No-Zen! True Zen, regardless of how and where it shows up, or what it’s called, is about helping us to become ‘one with the ten thousand things,’ that is, to become intimate with all and to become animate through ‘interbeing’ (Thich Nhat Hahn, 1991). Herein lies its contribution to EE.

Seen from the Zen perspective, the ethos and modus operandi of current environmental education are caught up in the dominant worldview that pits the interest of humanity against that of the environment. In other words, what is good for humans is not good for the environment. In order to keep the nation’s economy going, adults must go back to work, notwithstanding the risk of catching the virus. And since we cannot leave children at home while the parents are at work, children too must go back to school. Unbelievably, this very rationale has been officially given for sending children back to school in many parts of the United States. Children go to school so that adults can go to work. The aim of education, it turns out (and we have known it for a long time), is to serve the nation’s economic ends. Unbelievably and truly lamentably, we seem to have come to this point in human cultural evolution where everything must serve one transcendental value: money. As long as environmental education (EE) is offered out of the ModWest worldview that consciously or unconsciously continues to propagate ModWest views and values, it has little hope and chance of changing the instrumentalist, insatiable heart of the dominant system and its views and values.

By the same token, however, EE *can* become a vehicle of teaching that *can* transform students’ consciousness to *the ten thousand ways* of Zen, thereby accomplishing EE’s mission to protect and heal the ravaged environment. Zen inspired and infused EE may not look like environmental education as it has been promoted and practiced, but I am pragmatist enough (or, I should say, Zen-inspired enough) to not worry about what an EE looks like or should look like.

**Becoming Animate**

Becoming whole, that is, becoming one with the ten thousand things, is not just a philosophically compelling idea. What it is really about is the embodied experience of feeling alive, vital, and animate: that is, feeling inherently or intrinsically fulfilled. It is illuminating and instructive to note that the phenomenon of addition that bedevils the contemporary world is the consequence of becoming fragmented—not whole—and thus feeling not fully alive, vital, and animate. Addiction is the shadow side of ModWest in that ModWest encourages and actively machinates all forms of bonding ruptures in the three domains of relationality: self-to-self, self-to-human other, and human-to-Nature (Bai, Cohen & Scott, 2013). Bonding ruptures result in insecurity, anxiety, and existential unfulfillment, which precipitates small or big life crisis: ‘I got to have my smoke!’; ‘Where is my stimulant (coffee, alcohol . . .)?’; ‘Let’s go gambling’; ‘I wish I were dead,’ and so on. The contemporary world is thickly mired in all forms of addiction (Alexander, 2010): for, life in ModWest likely starves our ‘soul,’ leaving us perpetually hungry and wanting to consume more and more, and sucks the spirit out of us, leaving us de-animated. For starved and insatiable souls, there is no such thing as ‘enough.’ We have to consume endlessly until we go senseless and render our world lifeless. ‘Never enough’ is essentially what addiction is about. In the Buddhist iconography, this insatiable character is represented by the Hungry Ghost who has a bloated stomach and a small and needle-like mouth. Consumerism as a worldview and a way of life begets Hungry Ghosts.

Consumerism is fundamentally the problem of existential lack (Loy, 1996). Lacking a sense of fullness of being or fulfillment, a starving soul seeks substitutes for existential fulfillment that may numb their suffering and even temporarily lift them out of existential misery into a sense of euphoria. Substitutes only keep feeding addiction, and do not cure consumerism. Ultimately, again, there is only one ‘solution’ to this problem: becoming ‘one with the ten thousand things.’ If we can be ‘one with’ Life and World, that is, if we are Life and are the World, we will feel fully filled or fulfilled. We are not talking about anything abstract, metaphysical, or metaphorical here. Feeling fulfilled translates into the experience of vitality: the sense of being fully charged and animated. Instead of constantly striving to fill the gnawing void through the endless pursuit and amassment of material wealth, social capital, power, and other assets, we could directly connect to the artery of pulsating life-force and spell the end of existential hunger for fullness of being (Fromm, 1976).

Soul or spirit starvation pervades the contemporary world. Just as when we are starving and feeling faint, we can’t hear (or see) too well, a starved and de-animated consciousness struggles to hear the world. If we are fully animated, we may even hear the trees talking to us (Stuckey, 2010), or rocks chattering amongst themselves. We may hear sights and see sounds, as Zen poets report about the enlightenment experience. Hence, the first step to recharging our starving psyche and bringing it into full animation is Great Feasting: nourishing the whole person till they feel existentially full and fulfilled. It may then be possible to see sacred beauty even in the smallest bloom of a weed poking out of the cracks in a cemented path. It may be possible to feel every heartbeat in every being, small or big, named or unnamed, human or beyond-human. As such a being, you would stand, not apart from, but part of, every other being, together participating in the mystery and meaning of Life and Cosmos.

For the remainder of this short paper, let us explore ways of nourishing ourselves, filling and recharging every layer and fold of our being with animate energy. Let Great Feasting begin!

**Practice One**

Our eyes are used to looking, staring, searching, catching, picking out, recognizing, and so on, all of which has to do with information processing and gathering. Could our eyes do something more and different? Yes: we would like to call this other way *soaking up*. Experiencing is believing. Try to soak up beauty, endearment, awe, wonder, admiration while gazing around and upon what you see. It may help to have a ‘soft eye’: not hard staring or penetrating and probing. Receive and soak up what emanates from the seen and the unseen world. Now and then close your eyes and further sink into restfulness. Let the soaking up continue, uninterrupted. You may not notice the effects right away, but it is good to check in inwardly now and then to see if you feel differently. Do you feel a little more replenished and animated? When you look around, do you feel a little more aliveness coming through? Do your surroundings have the look of shimmering? How you look at the world greatly influences how the world appears to you, which in turn influences how you respond to the world in terms of acting.

**Practice Two**

The past is no more; the future is not yet. There is only this moment. The here-and-now is the only existential home that we have, and we know that we are home when we feel the totality of aliveness in the embedded wholeness of being in-the-moment, which ‘I’ am a part of, not apart from. It is precisely this indivisibility of what’s alive from what is not alive, and what is ‘my’ aliveness from what is ‘not my’ aliveness, that characterizes what Thich Nhat Hahn calls ‘interbeing.’ In yoga, we say, ‘Energy follows attention.’ By attending to the moment, here-and-now, we can experience a release of energy (氣, *qi* or *ki*) from the interbeing contained within each moment. The more deeply we can tune into the moment and attend, the more energized and alive we can feel. This practice does not require us to be anywhere in particular. Just tune in to the moment, no matter what the occasion or circumstances we face, or what activity we are engaged in. Tune in; drop down; and feel, deeply. By constantly dwelling in the past or in the anticipated future, we become depleted of energy as the past and the future are not here in this embodied moment where the energy is. By disciplining ourselves to be present in, and to, the moment[[4]](#endnote-4), we don’t succumb to the Hungry Ghost’s insatiable desire to consume.

**Practice Three**

How we understand things guides how we experience the world. For example, when we think of breathing, we only think of lungs. What about all the green plants on land and phytoplankton in the ocean that are our breathing partners? Without them, human lungs are useless. Hence, it’s more accurate to think of breathing being accomplished by lungs-and-green-plants together. In fact, visualize that the other half of your lungs are out there, hanging out in trees and plants and phytoplankton. This kind of understanding can radically change one’s perception of who one is in relationship to the world. Below is a set of guided meditations that I scripted[[5]](#endnote-5) to awaken such an understanding.

*WATER*

*I am water. I am made of water.*

*I’m 80% water: the same water that flows in the streams, waterfalls, rivers, and oceans.*

*The same water that’s in the rain, fog, and snow courses through me.*

*I feel close to all water-beings, water-persons, water-families.*

*Streams, waterfalls, rain and snow, rivers and oceans –*

*they all are my water relations; they are my family.*

*AIR*

*I am air. I am made of air.*

*Air courses through every vein and artery, through every trillion blood cells*

*that make up who I am.*

*With every breath of air that I take in, I commune with*

*all beings who breathe.*

*Air is everywhere:*

*in the sky, in the ocean, in the plants, in the animals –*

*the whole earth is blanketed with air.*

*I am an air-being.*

*EARTH*

*I am earth.*

*I am made of earth.*

*All plants and animals that come into my body to nourish me and repair me, to become my body, come from the earth. All earth beings enter deep inside me and make up who I am.*

*From the earth I come; to the earth I return.*

*I come again and I go again,*

*as earth beings in permutations of all forms and formations.*

**Coda**

Zen has been with us since time immemorial. Paul Reps and Nyogen Senzaki (1957, 1959) compiled, *Zen Flesh and Zen Bones*: A *Collection of Zen and Pre-Zen Writings,* and this collection contains a section called, *Centering*, which consists of 112 short verses that instruct the reader-listener how to achieve an awakened state. Here is an example: ‘*11*. Place your whole attention in the nerve, delicate as the lotus thread, in the center of your spinal column. In such *be transformed*’ (p. 195). Reps and Senzaki estimate that these verses are about five thousand years old, orally transmitted as well as copied and re-copied countless times. The search for awakening and becoming ‘one with the ten thousand things’ has been with humanity forever. The three practices presented in the last section created by the author are variations on the theme of awakening, like the 112 awakening instructions. As Reps and Senzaki (p. 191) tell us:

Zen is nothing new, neither is it anything old. Long before Buddha was born the search was on in India . . . Long after man (sic) has forgotten such words as Zen and Buddha, satori and koan, China and Japan and America—still the search will go on, still Zen will be seen even in flowers and grass-blades before the sun.

Could we see environmental education in the same light?

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1. It is important to note that “Modern Western” is not a geographical designator. It is a cultural and philosophical designator in that it points to ways of thinking, seeing, and behaving. As such, under colonialism, modern Western ways have spread around the globe, and thus, countries outside the geopolitical boundaries of the West have adopted the Modern Western system of thought. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Certainly, there are many critics from inside the knowledge system who oppose the ModWest conception of knowledge. A good example is enactivism, which proposes to redefine knowledge as *embodied, embedded, extended, and enacted* (4E cognition). Please see, for example, Evan Thompson’s work (2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. By ‘ontic and epistemic adjustments,’ I mean a process of learning that shifts from one frame of seeing and knowing to another. For example, if a person enters a forest and sees lumber and knows its value in terms of dollars, that is one ontic and epistemic frame. If the same person enters the same forest and sees magnificent trees and experiences delight and reverence, that would be another frame. Going from the first frame to the next would require some serious ontic and epistemic adjustment in the person. In general, these shifts are part of a lengthy and graduate process of learning that starts from the moment of birth (or, to be precise, before the birth, prenatally) and is guided and shaped ongoingly through the influence of parents, family, and all the complex elements of culture that constantly surround us. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. This practice of being present in and to the moment, here and now, is essentially understood and practiced as ‘mindfulness.’ What is often not pointed out, however, is that this very practice is an embodiment practice of becoming whole and animated, as this section attempts to show. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. I have been creating small guided meditation scripts to use in my teaching and counselling practice. I call this set in Practice Three, ‘Elemental Meditation.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-5)