

*Journeying into the Heart
of Schools:
Dwelling in Time, Place and Intimacy*

by

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Abstract

This study describes one principal's journey into the heart of schools, exploring ways to humanize the institution. It develops the notion of schools as landscapes that shape and are shaped by those who inhabit them, dwelling in a mutually nurturing relationship. The study questions how we, in schools, can stay open to the fluidity, the interdependence inherent in a natural landscape. Typically, schools are defined by lines, boxes and boundaries, so unlike the organic interconnectedness of the natural world. As a principal within this institution called school, I wondered how to respond to the bureaucracy, to fulfill my role as the 'administrative officer,' and yet still look to the child, to the relationships I so value. How could I maintain my integrity amidst the relentless press of policies, procedures and standardization that pervade school culture?

Bachelard-inspired reverie is at the heart of my methodology. It breathes life into my research. In writing from reverie, I find myself breathing with the world, reminded of the deep interconnectedness of life. It connects and reconnects me to the small, everyday moments that ground and inspire my work.

Mine is a living inquiry. It embodies Buber's notion that all real living is meeting. My thinking, indeed my living, is responsive to the many others with whom I am continually engaged. It is through this responsiveness, this attentiveness, that I have come to a deeper understanding of my life practice. My encounters with others—the children, families and teachers with whom I am connected daily, the

educational thinkers whose ideas inspire and challenge me, my family, and the landscape of my formative years—are embedded in the process of my work, and woven into my writing.

We must imagine a way of being that honours our humanity, our relationships with one other, as the essence of our work in schools.

Dedication

To the memory of my mother and father

Peg and Perce Ackroyd

Acknowledgments

A summer spent at home, broken open with grief after the death of both my parents, embodies the beginning of my inquiry. Embraced by the landscape and community of my youth, my intuitive knowing about the deep interconnectedness of all life began to find voice. A wide circle of teachers, mentors, colleagues, family, friends and children walked beside me on this journey. The wisdom and insight of my committee members enabled me to weave together the strands of the personal, poetic and philosophical into a narrative tapestry. Heesoon Bai, provided a bridge into understanding the world of philosophy as an encounter with the wonder of being. Stephen Smith, opened up the doors into narrative research as a search for what it means to be human. I am eternally grateful for their guidance and inspiration. Friends and colleagues, Pat Holborn and Judy Morrison, read and responded with attentive care to many versions of my writing. Reflections on my writing and thinking about life in schools was honed in passionate conversations with them and many other friends and fellow educators too numerous to mention. Thank you. You know who you are. The teachers and families I have worked alongside these many years have reminded me daily of the hope and humanity of our work in schools. My own family, especially my sister Steffie, and my British Columbia family, Kau'i Keliipio and Michael Warsh have been a constant source of moral comfort, support and encouragement. My deep thanks. I am in gratitude to all of the children I have loved. You have breathed joy, wonder and hope into my world. And finally, to my son, Bubba, for always returning me home.

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Prologue

It is early morning, the first week of summer holidays, everyone is still fast asleep. I quietly putter around the kitchen, making coffee, trying not to wake anyone. The boat is gently rocking, the rain dripping off the roof, the sound of water lapping, raindrops splashing as they dissolve into the lake. I sit down to begin to write, savouring this solitary time – I hear the call of a bird, I look out the window and am drawn in by the landscape before me. The grey and ochre granite stares at me, imposing itself as it rises out of the water. The wind blows, the waves beat against the rock. I am in a moment, transported to the landscape of my youth. How easily I move there – the sound of the water, the feel of the wind, the gaze of the hard, unforgiving rock.

Yesterday as I scrambled on to the rock to tie up the boat, I lost time for a moment. I looked down at my feet, barefoot, standing firm on the rock below, wild blueberry bushes cracking through, bits of moss struggling to find a space to grab on to, trying to find life amidst the barrenness. For a moment I was standing on the granite, by Lake Timiskaming, outside my family home, the Northern Shield, the landscape of my youth. But I am not there. I am here, on a lake in the interior of British Columbia, trying to find my ground once again after the intensity of another school year.

My body always tells me of the internal struggle, the sadness, the worry I have carried these many months since September. I feel stiff, my bones ache as the unease leaves my body. I stretch and lean down to touch the moss that is

pushing its way through the rock, latching on to anything that will help it grow. It is soft, moist, solid, and yet yields to my touch. I feel the wind blow through me. I breathe out. I look up to the landscape that surrounds me — wide, open, stretching for miles. The tree-covered mountains reach to touch the sky, the water laps against the shore, the rocks merge into the mountains that reach out to the sky. The boundaries between water, rock, sky, merge together. I breathe it in.

As I breathe out, my mind returns to the hallways of school. “Keep to the right.” “Stay in line.” “Wait outside.” “Listen to the bell.” Schools are defined by the lines, the boxes, the boundaries. So unlike the interconnectedness of this landscape I now find myself in. So unlike the world we live in – so unnatural, for children and for those of us who teach and lead within the institution. Indeed, the barrenness of the institution can be much like the barrenness of this granite I find myself standing on. In schools we seem to forget there is a world outside. Once the children have been let in the door of the institution, we forget there is a sky, cherry trees in bloom, flowers growing in the garden, wind kicking up dust on the playground. The sensory knowledge of the world is forgotten. The natural flow and rhythm of life is checked at the door. And yet, the resilience of children and of many of us who have chosen to teach in schools is much like the solid, tenacious moss. Our instinct to survive in the institution is strong and determined, pushing our way through the cracks, finding a place to grow. This resolve takes its toll. My body tells me.

The world of schools is so unlike the landscape we inhabit. The bureaucracy of the institution is increasingly relentless. Standardization, fragmentation, rules,

policies, targets, contracts, interventions, quality control, accountability. The language in schools is predicated on “sharpening our appreciation of the moral boundaries which separate people” (Grumet, 1988, p. 167). And, I would add, separating us from the landscape, from the interconnectedness of our world and its natural rhythm. I breathe in again, taking in the vista that surrounds me.

*How, I wonder, do we in schools stay open to the
fluidity, the interconnectedness and
interdependence of which this landscape speaks?
How do I continue to maintain my integrity amidst
the relentless consciousness of policies, rules and
standardization? How do I dwell with an open
heart, remaining open to the possibilities of the
child, of the community, to my own possibilities?
Where, I wonder, can I find the courage and faith
to continue my work in this institution called
school?*

Chapter 1: Dwelling in Self

Any path is only a path, and there is no affront, to oneself or to others, in dropping it if that is what your heart tells you....Look at every path closely and deliberately. Try it as many times as you think necessary. Then ask yourself and yourself alone, one question...Does this path have a heart?

Carlos Castenada, cited in Capra, 1975, p. 37

I was twenty-four when I began my work as a teacher. I am now fifty-five. Several decades have passed since I first stepped foot in a classroom as the teacher. I hadn't always wanted to be a teacher, although as I look back an outline of my path was always there. My father, a director of business for the local school board, my mother a librarian, the many teachers who were in and out of our family home as part of my parents' social group, showed me the way.

I remember the way my mother and father would welcome new teachers into our community. We lived in a small farming town in Northern Ontario, not necessarily the fulfilment of every young teacher's desire and yet this is where the work was. My father often hired these young teachers and saw it as his responsibility to welcome them into the community. Our family home was usually their first introduction to rural northern life. And what an introduction it was! Ours was a home for living, a home full of stories and laughter. How many nights I remember sitting in the living room or outside on the deck overlooking the water, the breeze blowing, the waves lapping in tune to the stories. The stories told had a way of wrapping others in the warm embrace of our family

life. Our house was, in every sense, a home, a touchstone, a connecting point not only for our own family and circle of friends but for the many teachers who began their career in this small Northern town. I can only imagine what it must have felt like for them, away from their own family, their roots and connections, perhaps wondering why they had accepted this position so far north away from the comfort of the city. And then they felt the warmth of my mother and father and our family life. I remember several of them speaking of this connection forty years later in our home by the lake as we gathered together to celebrate my parents' life. Most of them had stayed on in our community, deciding not to leave even when the lure of city jobs became available again. I often wonder how much the warmth of my mother and my father's embrace had influenced their decision to remain.

Teaching and teachers were always a part of my life, so it's not surprising that I have ended up living my life as a teacher. But when did I consciously make this decision? My own experience at school had been mixed. I remember little of elementary school, except for two teachers, one who captivated my imagination, the other who terrified me into learning. Secondary school was much the same except for the guise of independence. Even though there were inspiring moments and imaginative teachers who opened doors, the overall messages I remember from my schooling were do as you were told, follow the rules, believe that teachers know best and never question authority. I found myself, in equal turns, acquiescing and rebelling against this order. So what, I wonder, was it that drew me to this world of teaching? Even my initial university years were uninspiring. I, like many others I knew, had only a vague idea of what I might do with my life

beyond school. Years of community service with mentally challenged children had led me to consider a career in psychology. My commitment was not to school. It was the social world, freedom, real independence for the first time in my life. After university and several months of travel in Europe, I returned home once again, not sure where life would take me. It was at this time that I made a move that would alter my life completely, taking me away from the landscape of my youth and sending me into the untamed beauty of the Queen Charlotte Islands. I had no idea at the time how dramatically this move would impact the course of my life. I saw my work with Frontier College as an opportunity to do something unique, an adventure. And yet, I now see that something more was calling me.

I remember very clearly my arrival at Wesfrob Mines in Tasu, British Columbia. I flew into the small mining community in a beaver plane in awe of the landscape that rose below me. Even from the air I could see the greatness of the trees, the wildness of the water, the strength of the mountains that lay before me. Much like Northern Ontario, I could feel the remoteness of this land.

Working for Frontier College had me shovelling iron ore in the mine during the day and teaching English as a Second Language in the evening to the many miners who came from places as far away as Korea, the former Yugoslavia, and Chile.

It is only in hindsight that I understand how profoundly this work with Frontier College influenced me. It was here that I experienced a different way to live out

the relationship between teacher and student. The philosophy of Frontier College was rooted in the work of literacy and liberation advocates such as Paulo Friere. I was a labourer-teacher. My job was to go into this community and, to use Friere's (1974) notion, demythologize the expert, the teacher as keeper of knowledge. I worked side by side in the mine with the individuals I would later teach in the evening. As I worked alongside these men I came to know their stories, their hopes, their struggles, their dreams for themselves and their families. And they came to know mine. The boundary between teacher and student shifted. In the mine, the same men I would later teach taught me. My work as a labourer-teacher was rooted in this day to day relationship of reciprocity. Standing together shovelling iron ore onto the conveyer belt, I learned from them; sitting together in a classroom learning English, they learned from me.

This experience in the remoteness of a mining community in British Columbia drew me into the world of teaching. It was from this work that I could imagine the possibilities of a different kind of relationship between student and teacher, a relationship rooted in reciprocity and connection rather than hierarchy. This understanding of teaching as the building and nurturing of relationships stayed with me as I moved through teacher's college and years of teaching in elementary schools in rural British Columbia. And yet, it was an understanding that was tacit, part of my consciousness, embodied but not yet spoken.

It was when I began my work teaching student teachers at the university and embarked on my Master's degree that this consciousness began to find words. I remember vividly my first attempt to give voice to what I knew. It was a

graduate class in philosophy. We were discussing what was necessary to be a good teacher. Content knowledge, pedagogical understandings, critical thinking, curriculum were the words bantered around the table. There was, I knew, something missing and yet I was hesitant to speak. This was not a class for tentative thinking. It was a class where definitive statements and clearly thought out propositions were expected if one was to be considered a rigorous thinker. I began slowly. "Relationships, relationships with our students are key. Our students need to feel cared for." There was silence for a moment. And then, the reply came, "Those were the kind of teachers I didn't really respect. I could wrap them around my finger. They didn't really challenge me with my thinking." I was appropriately silenced.

As challenging as this response was for me, it was a significant moment in my quest to give voice to my understandings. It sent me searching for theorists who could help me. It was here I found the work of Nel Noddings, Madeline Grument and Sara Ruddick, philosophers who speak eloquently about relationships and care in education. Their thinking shaped my Master's work. As I wrote my way into a deeper understanding of my experience, my Master's thesis became the story of my experience not only as a teacher and teacher educator but also as a woman and most significantly a mother. This theme (of mothering) did not emerge as an abstract concept or framework that informed my thinking; rather, it resonated as a deeply felt, embodied sense of myself in the world. Sara Ruddick helped me see that it was my practice as a woman and a mother that oriented me to understanding the world in this way.

In the introduction to her book Maternal Thinking, Ruddick asks: "What is the relation of thinking to life? "Here" she says "I turned to the men I had studied, particularly Wittgenstein, Winch and Habermas. All thinking, they had seemed to teach me, arises from and is shaped by the practices in which people engage. What then I asked is a woman's practice, a mother's practice" (Ruddick, 1989, p. 9).

What does it mean to be a woman and a mother? What does it mean to be a woman and a mother in the world outside my relationship with my own child? How do I bring this sense of myself as a mother into my relationships in the world outside the home? These were the questions that guided me through my Master's work.

After the completion of my Masters' work, I left the work of teacher education at the university and returned to the world of schools as an elementary school principal. My Masters' work had provided me with a deep commitment to, and understanding of, how an ethic of care -- building, nurturing and sustaining it in my relationships -- was at the heart of my life practice. This philosophical inquiry shaped not only my thinking, but also my living in schools, providing a constant touchstone to return to, in order to stay true to being a woman and mother, as well as a teacher and principal in schools.

It was the work of Nel Noddings, in particular, that resonated with my work in schools. "Caring", according to Nel Noddings, " involves stepping out of one's own framework of reference into the other, trying to understand what the other

is saying, putting aside our assumptions, our agenda for the moment and really trying to hear what the other person is saying” (Noddings, 1984, p. 24).

I think of a conversation I had in my first few years as a principal with a young grade seven student who was struggling at school both academically and socially. It was just October and she seemed to have given up hope for herself. As I listened to her talk, I did not try to hide or gloss over what was real for her – her anger at her mother for leaving, her frustration with her difficulties in reading, and her disappointment at not being as popular as she would have liked. But, at the same time, I spoke to her about her ability to work with younger children, how patient and gentle she was with the kindergarten students. I talked about the possibilities that lay ahead for someone with those qualities. In our conversation, we did not hide from what was but at the same time we spoke of what might be, of what her future might hold.

I remember the questions that were raised when I assigned Ron and Larry to a primary class as lunch monitors. Their role was to stay with the students over the lunch hour and help sort out any issues that arose. Larry and Ron’s reputations as tough guys were well known in the school. It seemed they were constantly having difficulties with other students, and getting into confrontations with teachers. They seemed alienated from school life. I had many interactions with these boys, not just in my office talking, but on the playground, in the classrooms and hallways of the school. I had observed in both of them a playfulness that I thought would be an asset in working with younger students. I had seen Ron’s gentleness with his young cousin in the school, and as I said to the teacher of the

classroom they were going to monitor, they certainly know all the tricks and won't be fooled by the rambunctious boys in her classroom. After the teacher agreed, I pulled the boys aside one day in the hall and asked them to be noon hour monitors. They paused for a moment. I was drawn in by the look on Ron's face, a look mixed with surprise and pride. "Me," Ron said, "you want me to do this? Why would you ask me to do this? I am not one of the 'good' kids?" He turned as if to walk away. My heart sank. How easily students live into the role they are given in school. I persisted. His face had told me another possibility was awaiting. I went on to explain how I had watched his gentleness and playfulness with younger children and thought he and Larry would both be great in this role. I saw their eyes light up as they said, "Sure Ms. Montabello, we'd like to try it." In that moment Ron and Larry were presented with another vision of themselves. "How good I can be is partly a function of how you, the other receive me" (Noddings, 1984, p. 6).

There is a subtlety to working with others in this way that is sometimes difficult for someone outside the relationship to understand. Introducing students, or anyone, with other possibilities for themselves, can only come from paying attention, from close observation. I had watched Ron and Larry's interactions and listened to their stories as they spoke to me. So while I was nudging them into thinking about themselves in different ways, it was not outside the realm of their vision of their own possibilities. Confirmation means more than being acknowledged; it means being confirmed as existing as a person and a learner. It is not confirmation to pronounce someone better than he is at something. We want to remain on the growing edge of the child's experience. Therein lies the

challenge: to use our own experience to guide children into possibilities and to be open to the possibilities present. We need to know how to gradually hand over the world to children so that they can make it on their own.

Most of my day as principal is spent in such conversations with children, parents, teachers and community members. These conversations take place in the classrooms, in the hallways, in the staff room, in my office. My understanding of the importance of conversation has been deepened by the work of many others: Nel Noddings (1984), who talks about the centrality of dialogue to developing an "ethic of care," Belenky *et al* (1986) who speak of "real talk," and Sara Ruddick (1989) who, in her study of mother's practice, refers to the importance of "coffee conversation." The literature on language learning also speaks to the importance of these "conversations around the dining room table," as Nancy Atwell (1989) refers to them, claiming them to belong to our meaning making, our knowing and understanding the world around us. In thinking about this conversational environment, Belenky *et al* draw a distinction between real talk and didactic talk in which a participant may report experience but there is no attempt among these participants to join together to arrive at some new understandings. "What is essential to this language of dialogue," says Stephen Smith (1989), "is that we are open to difference, that what we hear from others becomes an occasion for deliberation, for deferral, for thinking. Real dialogue carries with it the possibility of recognizing shared commitments, in spite of the fact that such commitments may be spoken of in quite different sorts of ways" (Smith, 1989, p.3).

Creating spaces for this kind of conversational environment has not been easy in the hectic life of schools, in places where five hundred plus children and adults share a space together every day. Working alongside others in this way requires a commitment to true listening, to recognizing that this child, this teacher, this parent, wants to say something important to me, something which I have to think about, something which may cause me to change my perspective on the child being spoken of.

I think back to my work with Frontier College so many years ago, when I first experienced the possibilities of a different kind of teaching relationship, a relationship that was rooted in reciprocity rather than hierarchy. The work of Nel Noddings (1984) speaks to this different way of imagining the self in relation to others.

As I reflect on my self in relation in the world of schools, I am drawn to an image of side by side: standing side by side, sitting side by side, and living side by side children and their families. This side by side image is a powerful image that has shaped my thinking and my practice as a principal. Being side by side in my work with children and with parents and teachers means dropping the masks we all too often hide behind. It means dropping the role of principal and reaching out to the student, or the parent or the teacher who is sitting in that chair. It means stepping beyond our roles and sharing our humanity.

I think of a recent conversation I had with a parent who was struggling with her daughter's outspokenness and need for independence as she moved into

adolescence. This mother wasn't sure how to respond anymore. She was angry with me, she said, because "you give kids too much freedom, they have too much say in what happens." As she spoke I could feel my body's response. I could feel myself getting defensive, ready to stand firm on my educational platform about giving kids voice and responsibility. I stopped. I took a breath. I listened. I could feel myself softening as I listened. The more she spoke, the more I began to understand her worries. I began to listen to her as a mother. As a mother, I, too, had some apprehension about my son's growing independence. I worried about what was waiting for him in the larger world beyond high school. As I listened, I began to see that her anger wasn't as much about my openness and me as much as it was about her own fearfulness of what was waiting out there for her child as she moved into high school and beyond. I continued to listen. I spoke about my own worries for my son and, as I did, a shift in the dynamic of our interaction occurred. It shifted from a principal/parent meeting to a conversation that could just as easily been happening over coffee at the kitchen table. There was no clear resolution to our conversation. It had been just that, a conversation that, hopefully, would open a door to our relationship.

I have now worked in three different schools as a principal. When I initially move into a school, the very first thing I do is to remove all of the adult chairs, the desk, and the computer from my office in order to create a more child-friendly place. As I think about it now, I recognize that the creation of this space is much more than mere decoration. It is a metaphor, an image, of how I do my work in schools. The small chairs are a concrete representation of this side by side image that informs my practice. It is my way of speaking out loud my

commitment to 'find the child' as Vivian Gussey Palley (1989) would say. When I am talking to others, it says, I am not above them, I am with them. I am sitting beside them, knee to knee, head to head, talking to them, listening to them. Together we are working to sort out our dreams, our worries, our challenges.

It is through these side by side conversations that I am daily reminded of the words of Max Van Manen, who puts forward a new definition of a pedagogue. He suggests that all those who are inhabited by hope are true parents and true teachers to children. "Pedagogic hope" he says, "animates the way a teacher lives with a child and it gives meaning to the way an adult stands in the world" (Van Manen, 1986, p. 9). Herbert Kohl tells us "creating hope in oneself as a teacher and nourishing or rekindling it in our students is the central issue educators face today" (Kohl, 1994, p. 42). In his book, I Won't Learn from You and Other Thoughts on Creative Maladjustment, he reflects on his own school experience as a child, describing an interaction with one of his teachers that demonstrates this hopeful way of being.

During yard time or just as we were returning from lunch, Mrs. Katz hung out with her class and chatted with students individually or in small groups. There was nothing formal about it, nothing threatening. She was getting to know us, and I enjoyed those moments out of class with her.

One time she came up to me. I remember it was just in front of the irises we planted on the border of the victory garden. She asked me what I was thinking about when we did social studies and I hid behind my book. She asked the question in such a casual and uncritical way that I answered, "pretending I'm in the pictures on the page."

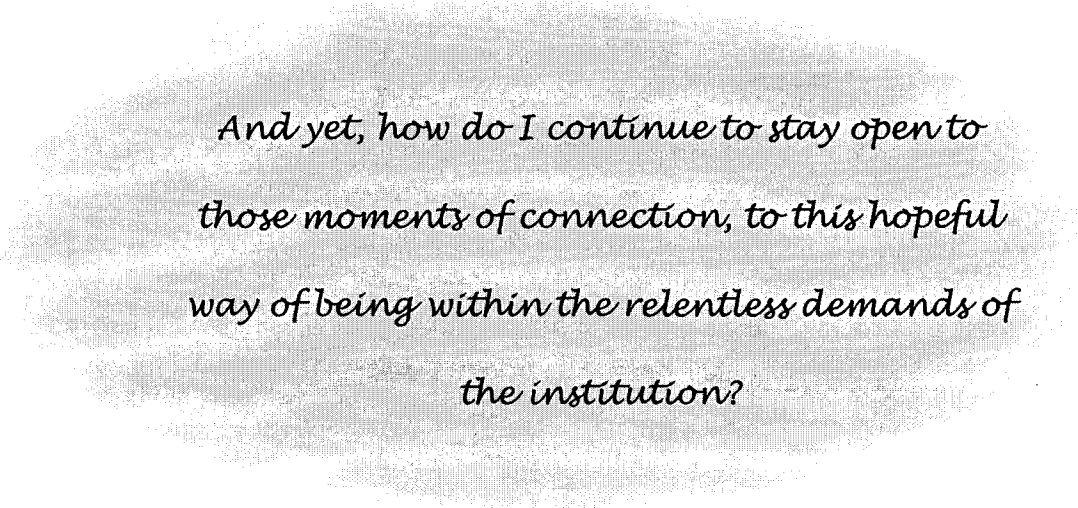
Mrs. Katz responded that she thought it was wonderful that I had such a rich imagination and that some day I might like to draw my

adventures or write about them or turn them into music. That was it...

That one moment when she revealed that she saw something in me worth honouring and respecting was the highlight of my elementary school career.

Kohl, 1994, p.82

In this moment shared between teacher and child, hope moves beyond some abstract, idealized concept and speaks to a way of being in relation with others. "Times like that are beyond motivation and go straight to the heart of helping people find out about their own internal necessities, of setting them on the road to discovering the person they must become...they are occasions for rejoicing in being themselves and no one else" (Kohl, 1994, p. 82). Living full of hope, living in those moments that Kohl describes, is at the heart of my practice in schools.

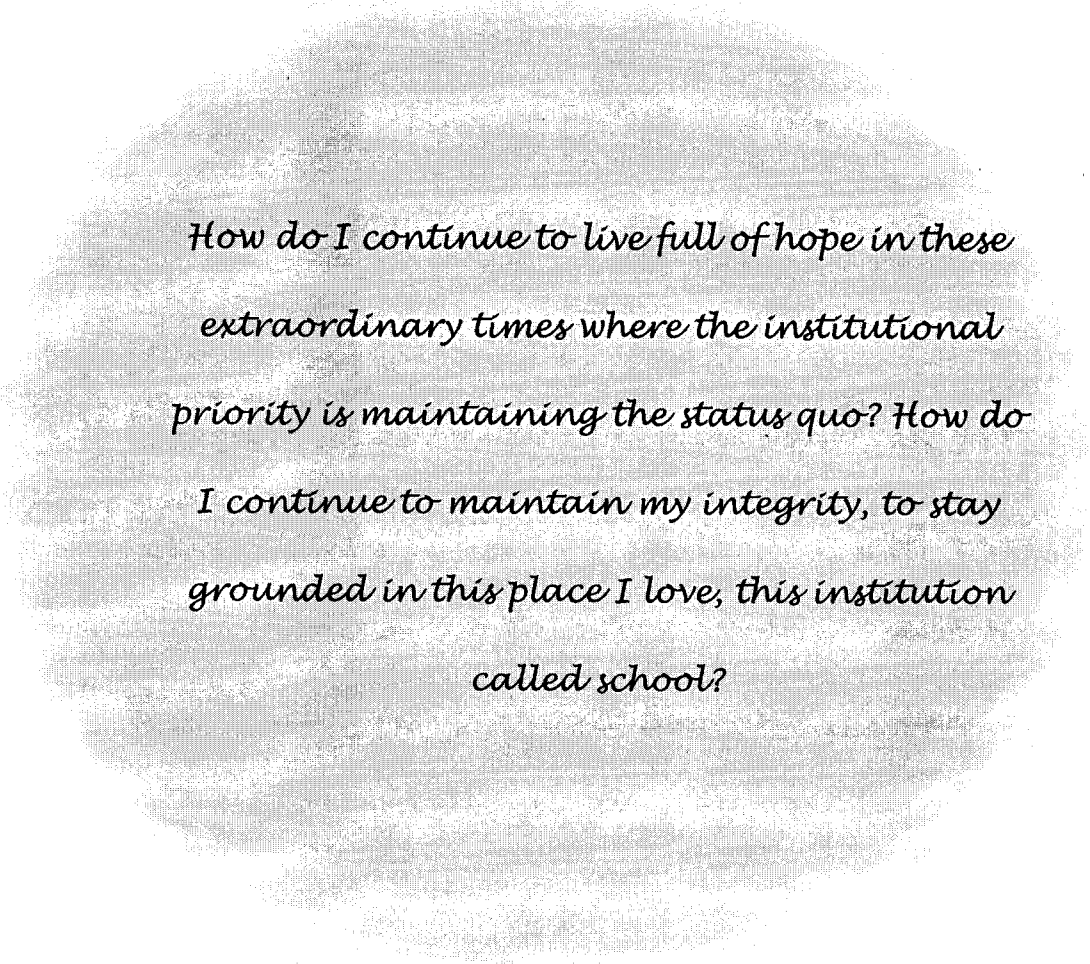


*And yet, how do I continue to stay open to
those moments of connection, to this hopeful
way of being within the relentless demands of
the institution?*

For, it is, as Peter Senge et. al., tell us in their provocative book Presence: The Exploration of Profound Change in People, Organizations and Society,

...a time of extraordinary cross-currents. Things are getting better and things are getting worse. On the one hand, people seem much more open to talking about large-scale issues that have no simple solutions...But more of the problems that are eliciting these responses are getting worse, and there seems to be more and more of a backlash to maintain the status quo. Traditional mind-sets and institutional priorities are under great threat, and they're fighting to preserve themselves...

Senge *et al*, 2004, p. 214



How do I continue to live full of hope in these extraordinary times where the institutional priority is maintaining the status quo? How do I continue to maintain my integrity, to stay grounded in this place I love, this institution called school?

Written words change us all and make us more than we could ever be without them.

hooks, 1999, p. xvi

Writing for my Master's thesis had drawn me into writing as a means to "...transcend our life, to reach beyond it...to teach ourselves to speak with others, to record the journey into the labyrinth...to expand our world..." (Nin, 1976, p. 149-150). I revisit the epilogue to my thesis, "we must listen to the voices of others, but perhaps even more closely, we must listen to ourselves. In doing so, we are not attempting to transform the world, but we are allowing ourselves to be transformed (Noddings, 1984), and in that transformation, the world that we see and know and feel can also change" (Montabello, 1993, p. 141). Writing in this way, making sense of my experience as it was interrelated with the experience of others, claiming meaning for what I cared most deeply about became a transformative experience. It was through this process that "my work as a woman, as a mother and as a teacher has come out of hiding – for my students, for my colleagues, for my thesis committee – but most importantly for myself" (Montabello, 1993, p. v). Bringing these experiences 'out of hiding' is, I believe, essential if we are to work with what Grumet calls "the wide surround, our seeing, honouring the moral and spiritual journey of the pedagogue" (Grumet, 1987, p. 324). And now, well over a decade later, I find myself drawn to this writing again. Indeed, I feel an urgency to do so if I am to continue to inhabit a hopeful way of being in the world of schools.

Richard Shusterman (1997) in his book Practising Philosophy tells us "writing is an important tool for artfully working on oneself—both as a medium of self-

knowledge and of self-transformation" (Shusterman, 1997, p. 3). Shusterman calls for a reanimation of interest in the philosophical life. He goes even further to make a plea for "philosophy as a deliberative life-practice that brings lives of beauty and happiness to its practitioners" (p. 3). Philosophy and life are similar, he suggests, in that both represent a continual reinterpretation of the experience of one's self. Maxine Greene tells us that "to speak of the self is to speak of an individual's body as well as his mind, his past as well as his present; the world in which he is involved, the others with whom he is continually engaged" (Greene, 1988). And yet, as Martin Buber reminds us, "the innermost growth of the self is not accomplished, as people like to suppose today, in man's relation to himself, but in the relation between the one and the other" (Buber, 1996, p.71). My philosophizing then is, as Shusterman would have it, "a deliberative life-practice," "a continual exercise in reinterpreting the experience of one's self and one's surroundings" (Shusterman, 1997, p. 15).

The human science literature provides me with a place for understanding and interpreting my work. "Phenomenological research is a search for what it means to be human...it has as its ultimate aim, the fulfilment of human nature: to become more fully who we are " (van Manen, 1990, p. 12). "Is not the meaning of research," van Manen asks us, "to question something by going back again and again to the things themselves until that which is put to question begins to reveal something of its essential nature?" (p. 12). "The essence of the question," says Gadamer (1975) "is the opening up and keeping open of possibilities" (cited in van Manen, 1990, p. 43). And yet, as van Manen tells us, "I can only genuinely ask the question if I am indeed animated by the question of the nature of

pedagogy. If I am indeed animated by this question in the very life I live with children" (p. 43).

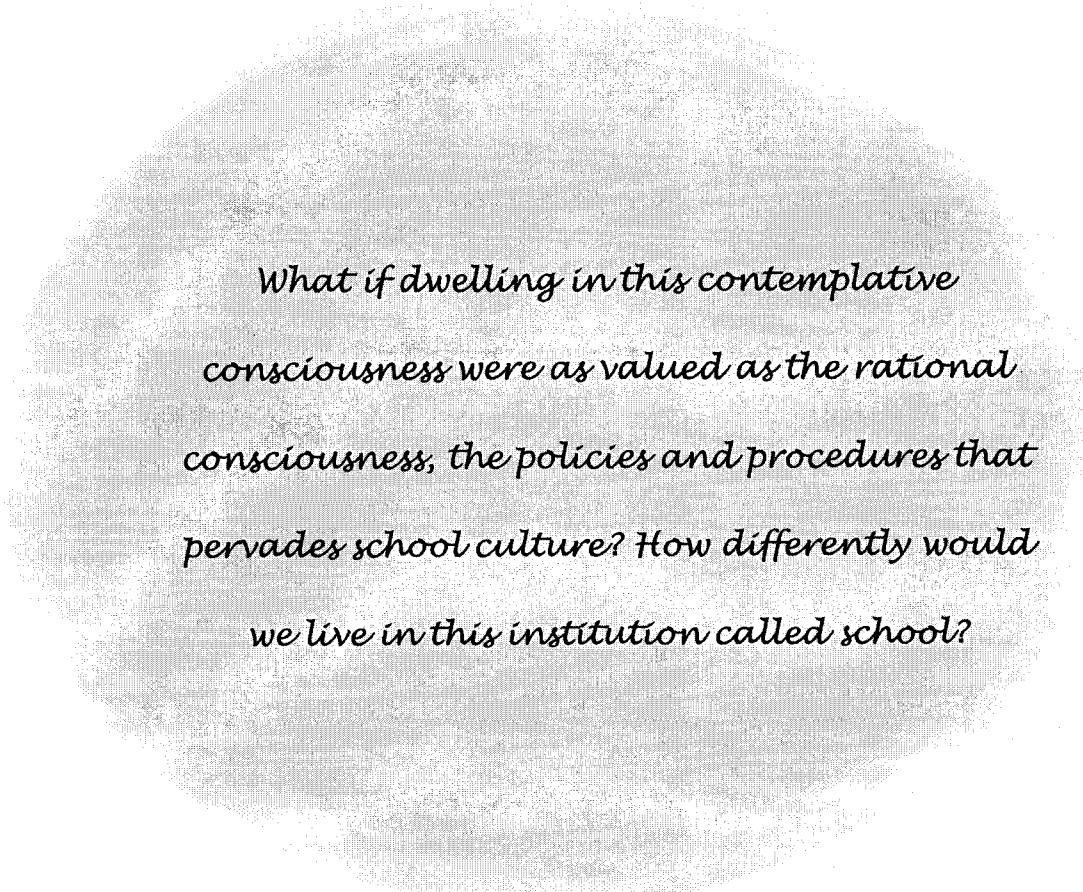
Writing in this way, questioning, returning again and again to "the things themselves," my life and work in schools, becomes my dissertation methodology. As I write, I examine the relationships, the moments, the encounters that have shaped, strengthened, challenged and sustained me in my work in schools. My progression through this is not linear but rather is constantly evolving, discovering the shape of creation along the way. The theme of my work has been one of response, "response that makes us more broadly attentive, rather than purpose that might narrow our view" (Bateson, 1989, p. 237). My thinking, indeed my living, is responsive to the many others with whom I am continually engaged. It is through this responsiveness, this attentiveness that I have come to a deeper understanding of my life practice. My encounters with these many others - the children, families and teachers with whom I am daily connected, the educational thinkers whose ideas inspire and challenge me, and my family and the landscape of my formative years which shaped my understanding of the world - are woven into my writing, embedded in the process of my work. Even more so, my living has been informed and transformed by my encounter with many of these others. Bollnow would tell us, "only in the encounter can the person come to himself" (Bollnow, 1972, p. 311). It is through these encounters that I have both questioned and affirmed in myself my "innermost being" (p. 311). Mine is a living inquiry. It lives out Buber's notion that all real living is meeting (Buber, 1970).

It is reverie that puts me in touch with these meetings, these encounters, remembered by the body. Reverie, as described by Gaston Bachelard (1960) in The Poetics of Reverie, is a mood of the soul, which is prior to the logic of the reasonable mind, "where we no longer divide ourselves into observer and observed" (p. 45). "Reverie helps us to inhabit the world" (p. 15), "letting us in on the secrets of the universe" (p. 8). It is "the consciousness of wonder" (p. 1). Bachelard inspired reverie is at the heart of the methodology of my study. It breathes life into my research. Reverie awakens me to the world, opening up those lived experiences that inform my relationships in schools and beyond. It connects and reconnects me to the small, everyday moments. Moments not yet spoken, carried in my body. When words flow from reverie they are like the moving water, keeping me open to the fluidity, the vitality of life. In writing from this space of reverie, I am performing an act of remembering. And it is in this remembering that I find the depths into which my life is taking rise (Rilke 1963). Listening to our reveries has the potential to connect us to our "innermost being," connecting us to what was, what is and to what might be. "A world takes form in our reveries, and this world is ours. This dreamed world teaches us the possibilities for expanding our being within our universe" (Bachelard, 1960, p. 8). It is through writing that I have listened deeply to my reveries. "A word is a bud attempting to become a twig. How can one not dream while writing? It is the pen which dreams" (p. 17). In reverie, we surrender the desire to know things so that we might once again be with them. In writing from reverie I find myself breathing with the world, being reminded of the deep interconnectedness of life. "All the senses awaken and fall into harmony in poetic reverie" (p.6). In reverie we remember the sensuous.

Reverie speaks to the contemplative silence, echoing the breathing of the world.
“Contemplative knowing does not seek the same epistemological mastery as reason, does not imagine that a thing known is a thing that rests easily in the palm of the mind, caught in description, known in its rough similarity to things... it does not wish to subdue the world but to dwell in it...” (Lilburn, 1999, p. 33).

*Knowing now is sleeping on the wild earth.
It is coming into the grasses,
The long grasses, crossing the border at night, thinking
How unclear the world is.*

Lilburn, 1999



*What if dwelling in this contemplative
consciousness were as valued as the rational
consciousness, the policies and procedures that
pervades school culture? How differently would
we live in this institution called school?*

Chapter Two: Dwelling in Schools

We cannot solve such deep problems quickly, but we can begin learning how to reinhabit our places, as Wendell Berry says, lovingly, knowingly. Skilfully, reverently (Berry, 281) restoring context to our lives in the process. For a world growing short of many things, the next sensible frontiers to explore are those of the places where we live and work

David Orr, 2000, p. 94

I listen to the representative from the ministry speak. "We want to solicit feedback from the system about the new initiatives and direction of the ministry" he tells us. "Our timeline is short, we will gather together a group today, after this meeting to get your input." "Student achievement is our top priority. We want all students in British Columbia to become full participants in the growing economy of our province." I can feel the growing tension in my body. I want to leave. I have heard this before. Time and time again. I want to scream out. What about the human development of the child? The child, not as an object, not as an economic resource, but as a person. I keep quiet. I look around the room. I see many of my colleagues writing notes as he speaks, others are looking inside their day planners and notebooks, disengaging from the speaker, planning their day and week ahead. I try to do the same. I cannot. My body will not let me ignore his words. I can feel the tears begin to well up. The ministry representative continues. He speaks of test results, ministry audits, data driven goals, meaningful targets!! Meaningful targets about what? For whom? For what purpose? I want to cry out. Listen to our language. It is the language of industry, of business, of economics. Where is the voice of the child? Where is the voice of the community? Where is my voice?

I slowly raise my hand. "Will you be going out to schools, to talk to children, to teachers, to families who live and work there, in order to get your feedback about your new initiatives I ask." The representative from

the ministry stops for a moment as if considering my response. "We are under a tight deadline, we will be meeting with a group of people today, after this meeting, to get feedback," he says, repeating his introductory words. He quickly moves on with his new overhead of the master plan. I am appropriately silenced.

The meeting comes to a close. I quickly leave the room and move outside, ready to leave. I can feel the tears growing. I climb into my car. Once inside, the tears flow. My weeping is interrupted by a small knock at my window. I look up to see Judy, my dear friend and colleague, recently brought back from retirement to take the place of a principal on leave. I smile. Judy has been my companion in frustration and sorrow after many such meetings. I miss her regular presence and am relieved to see her. She climbs into the car. "How have we come to this?" she asks. "Not once in that entire meeting did I hear him speak about children. The ministry agenda has become frightening. Where is education? Where are children? How have we come to this?" She put her hand on my shoulder. We looked at each other, tears in our eyes. How have we come to this?

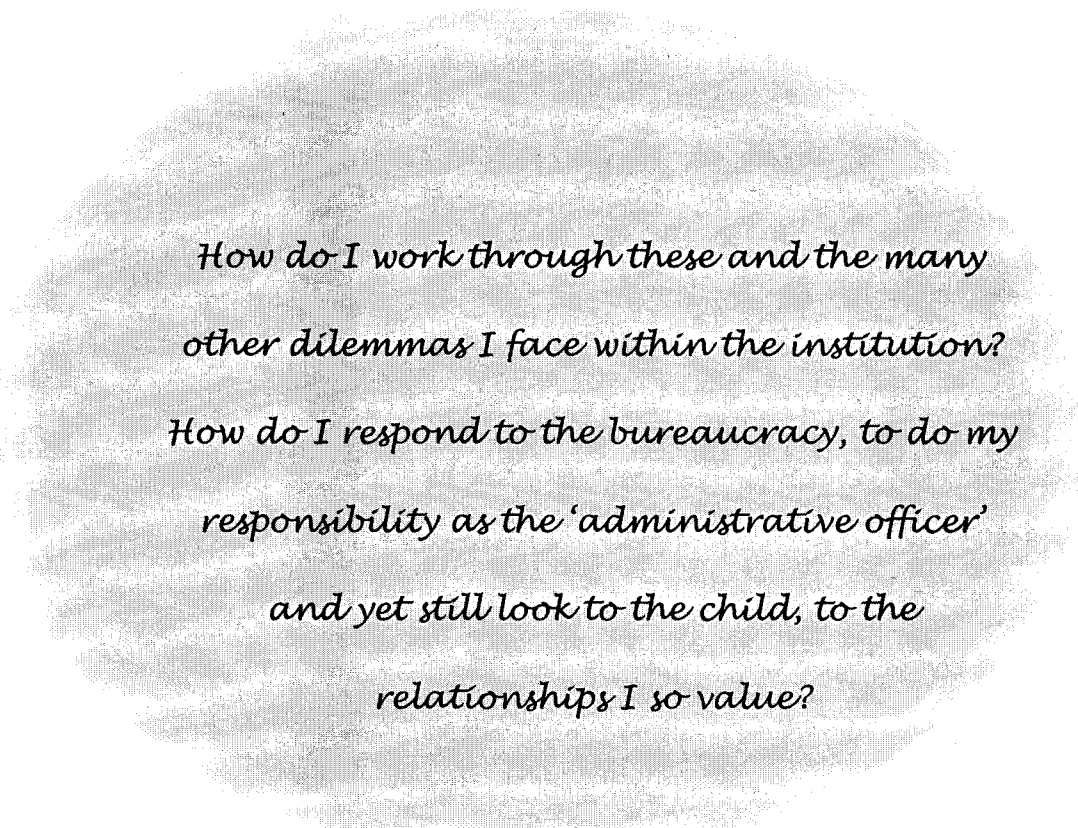
The work of David Bohm gives me some insight into why I might be feeling so voiceless, so powerless. Consider, he suggests, the traditional bureaucracy or hierarchy. "In such an organization, people are treated as objects and eventually you must treat yourself as an object saying, "I must fit in here and I must do this and be that and become better" (Bohm, 1996, p. 88).

Over the years, I have challenged the hierarchy of which Bohm speaks of, attempting to create a shift in the social organization and yet I have also questioned myself so many times along the way.

I woke up this morning and there it is, the first thought of the day. What is going to happen? How is this going to be dealt with? Will there be repercussions for me, for our staff? I have been called to the Assistant Superintendent's office for a meeting. It sounds rather formal. The letter our staff sent to parents expressing their professional concern about the Foundation Skills Assessment has had an impact. In our school, many parents excused their children from this standardized exam, in our district, our teachers have spoken about this response at union meetings. It feels like a victory. David against Goliath. Score one for the teacher's voice against the bureaucracy of the Ministry of Education. And here I am, the first day of a long weekend, wondering and worrying.

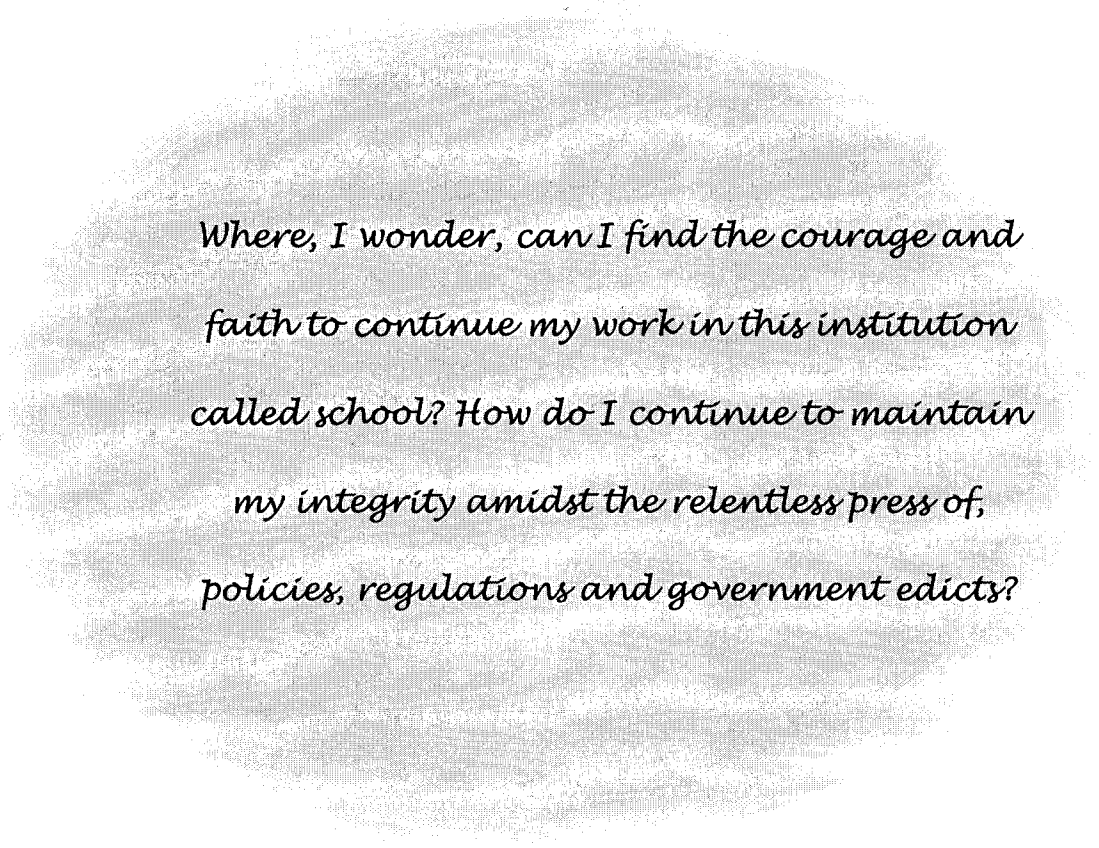
I have not been shy about expressing my concern regarding this and other standardized exams with our staff and the broader educational community. Eisner's article, "Standards not Standardization" is an essential reading for all students in my university courses. He reminds us as does Deborah Meier that the critics of standardized achievement tests are not just romantics, "softies who don't want to face tough truth, utopians waiting for perfect measuring tool, or just defensive whiny educators who can't bear to be held accountable or to be tough on kids" (Meier, 2000, p. 99). And yet this seems to be the prevalent view. "Accountability is here to stay." "Teachers need to be held accountable for student learning." These are the refrains I often hear from district administration as they echo the current government agenda. Of course, accountability is important, but accountability to whom is the question very few seem to be asking. It is not accountability to some government agenda but accountability to our children and, as Meier would tell us, a commitment to the power of their minds. I remember wanting to stand up and cheer when, in her keynote address at a recent conference, I heard Nel Noddings, urge parents to keep their children home on the days of the standardized exam. There is much theoretical support for my concern about the perils of standardization. And yet, unlike many of the authors I quote, I am not tucked away in the university enclave.

I am immersed in the lifeworld of schools. I am in the middle of the hierarchy of the institution. I am a Principal, supporter of children, families and teachers and yet also a representative of the school board dependent on the Ministry of Education for funds, funds to support the child. And so the machine of the institution chugs on. Until, of course, a chain breaks, a situation, an event, a conversation, causes a minor breakdown. The chain needs to be fixed, parts realigned, brought back into place so the machine can continue to chug on. And thus, my meeting with the Assistant Superintendent.



*How do I work through these and the many
other dilemmas I face within the institution?
How do I respond to the bureaucracy, to do my
responsibility as the 'administrative officer'
and yet still look to the child, to the
relationships I so value?*

The questions that have shaped my practice for these past fifteen years as principal have been focussed on what is best for the child, for the community, for the parents and teachers who support the child. I have ignored the political questions. It is how I have maintained my sanity. It is how I have maintained my commitment to the child. I have taken Herbert Kohl's notion of creative maladjustment to heart. "Creative maladjustment is the art of not becoming what other people want you to be, and learning, in difficult times, to affirm yourself, while at the same time remaining caring and compassionate" (Kohl, 1994, p.130). Kohl borrowed this notion from Martin Luther King who said, "while we strive to live a well-adjusted life, there are some things within our social order to which we should be proud to be maladjusted" (Kohl, 1994, p. 129). Over the years I have learned to maladjust. I have learned not to adjust to bureaucratic needs over students' needs, to government edits over the wisdom of teachers, to educational test scores as a measure of a child's worth. I have learned to maladjust creatively, as Kohl suggests, always in the background. Until now, when my support of our teacher's statement against standardized testing, has put me into the centre.



*Where, I wonder, can I find the courage and
faith to continue my work in this institution
called school? How do I continue to maintain
my integrity amidst the relentless press of,
policies, regulations and government edicts?*

Thomas Merton reminds us that “our real journey in life is interior; it is a matter of growth, deepening, and of an ever greater surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts” (Merton, 2002, p. 23). “Never” he emphasizes “was it more necessary for us to respond to that action” (p. 24).

Merton’s words resonate. Within the fragmented world of schools in which I work, there is little room for Merton’s notion of our real journey in life. Derrik Jensen (2000) in his book, Walking on Water: Reading, Writing and Revolution, writes this provocative treatise against the current school system.

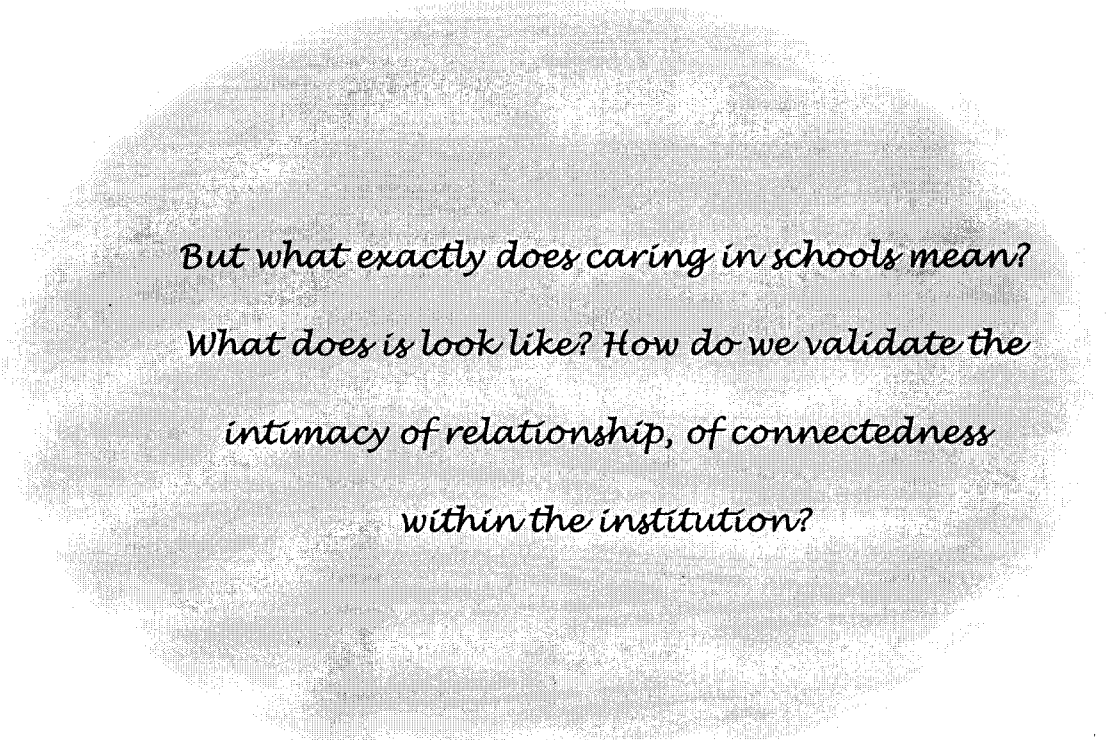
“It should surprise us less than it does that the educational system destroys students’ souls. From the beginning, that has been the purpose. Don’t take my word on this: Take it from the people who set up the system” (Jensen, 2004, p. 36). Jensen shares with his readers several quotes on the primary purpose of industrial education. First, Elwood Cubberly (1906), the Dean of Education at Stanford. “Schools should be factories ‘in which raw products, children, are to be shaped and formed into finished products...manufactured like nails, and the specifications for manufacturing will come from government and industry” (p. 37). And then,

...the Rockefeller Education Board, major backer of the movement for compulsory public schooling, gave its reasons for putting its money into that movement: ‘In our dreams ... people yield themselves with perfect docility to our moulding hands ... We shall not try to make these people or any of their children into philosophers or men of learning or men of science. We have not to raise up from among them authors, educators, poets or men of letters ... The task we set before ourselves is very simple... we will organize children ... and teach them to do in a perfect way the things their fathers and mothers are doing in an imperfect way” (p. 37).

"Those in charge could not have been clearer," Jensen emphasizes (p. 38).

Listen now to the words of the Ministry of Education. "The purpose of the British Columbia school system is to enable all learners to develop their individual potential and to acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to contribute to a healthy, democratic and pluralistic society and a prosperous and sustainable economy" (Government of BC, 2005). Those in charge could not have been clearer."

Over the years I have attempted to make sense of my work in the disconnected world of education through my own writing, and by reading philosophers such as Nel Noddings, Sara Ruddick and Madeline Grumet. "Teaching," Nel Noddings tells us, "requires fidelity to persons, fidelity to the quality of relation, to a way of being that supports affection and steadfastly promotes both the welfare of the other and that of the relation (Noddings, 1986, p.47). "While an ethic of caring cannot provide specific answers to ethical or educational questions, it can provide steady, rational guidance in the form of questions to be asked and directions to be taken. An ethic of caring guides us to ask what effect will this have on the person I teach? What effect will it have on the caring community we are trying to build?" (Noddings, 1986, p. 506). Noddings suggests the primary aim of all education must be nurturance of the ethical ideal of caring for another. It is through their writings that I began to understand how, like many women, I had come to define myself in terms of my relationships and connections to others. "Schools", as Madeline Grumet tells us "offer us the opportunity to care for other people's children" (Grumet, 1988, p. 182).



*But what exactly does caring in schools mean?
What does it look like? How do we validate the
intimacy of relationship, of connectedness
within the institution?*

The language and much of the practice of schooling, denies connectedness. It is the language of distance and separation. "In schools we become civilized by denying attachment...Policies, procedures, curriculum written by school boards, book publishers, education departments rely on little or no personal knowledge of the children or the communities for whom it is intended" (Grumet, 1988, p.164).

Certainly in my role as principal, common practice would suggest that I distance myself from the students and the community in order to enable me to be objective in my decision making. Leadership is predicated on disassociation.

"Human bodies, human families and human discourse present annoying obstacles to the creation of a thorough ongoing rationalist, bureaucratic order that you would require, namely the application to and assessment of all human beings on a single set of formal and abstract criteria" (Elshtain, cited in Grumet, 1988, p.168). Connectedness denies objectivity. I think of Jamie and Malcom.

I am standing on the playground talking to several students about their plans for the upcoming weekend when suddenly our conversation is interrupted by loud screams. I look over toward the baseball diamond and see a large group of students gathered around someone on the ground. As I begin to move toward the crowd, several students come to me. "It's Malcom! It's Malcom!" "His hand is broken! His hand is broken!" I pick up my pace and am soon running toward the group. I arrive to find Malcom writhing on the ground, screaming and crying in pain. Jamie is beside him, his face pale, tears streaming down his face, his mouth barely able to say the words, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." I didn't want to hurt you this bad. I just wanted you to stop bugging me. I just wanted you to stop." By now a much larger crowd of students is following, drawn in by all the commotion. I hear the talk around me. "Poor Malcom." "Look, Jamie is crying." "Jamie is going to be suspended, look what he has done!" "What did Malcom do?" "Jamie wouldn't hurt him on purpose." "It's not Jamie's fault." The concern for both Malcom and Jamie was palpable: each student with a different perspective about who was in the wrong and what action should be taken to make it right again.

Much the same discussion occurred once Malcom and Jamie were in the school and the story began to unfold. This time the comments were from teachers. "There has to be serious response to this!" "We have to give other students the message that violence is not tolerated!" "Look at Jamie, he is beside himself with worry for Malcom." "Jamie isn't the kind of kid who would hurt someone like this intentionally." "We have zero tolerance for violence no matter what, the same rule applies to everyone."

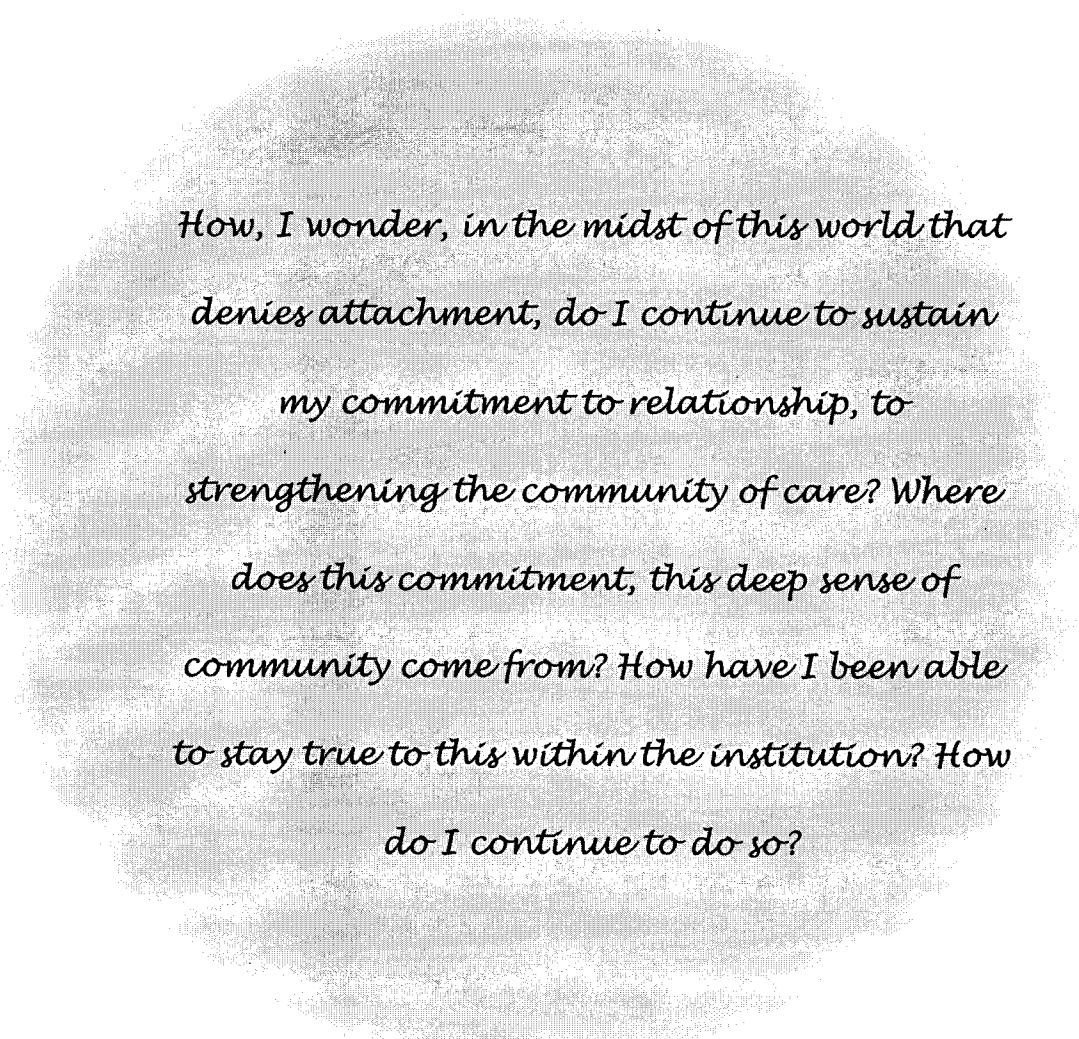
I moved past the conversations into the quiet of my office. I asked Jamie to sit with Malcom and help calm him while I telephoned his mother to come.

In many teachers' and principals' minds there is no question as to the response to this situation. 'The same rule applies to everyone' and the school board policy book is very clear. "The board shall consider any act of violence or intimidation on school premises to be a serious threat to the safety of both students and staff. The board has a zero tolerance policy toward such violence and shall take appropriate actions or lay charges against any individual so involved" (1993, p. 2). What is the best response? How do we decide in this situation or any other what is right? And right for whom? How do we look to both the policy and the child?

In the objective language of policy and rules, my response to this situation should be clear. Malcom was the victim, Jamie the offender. Consequences are necessary to maintain the 'safe environment of the school'. Other students need to see that there has been 'a serious response' in order to deter them from committing the same offence. As I think about the situation from this perspective, I should have never left the two together. I should have kept Jamie away from Malcom in case he 're-offended.' Everything I did by leaving the two alone together went against the grain of policy. And yet it didn't even occur to me to separate them. Keeping them together seemed like the right thing to do. When I try to articulate why I responded in this way, I am drawn once again to the theory of care.

I return to Nel Noddings and her discussions of an ethic of care to guide my response, an ethic that has fidelity to persons and the quality of relations at its heart (Noddings 1984). Noddings (2002) challenges us to rethink policy that separates and suggests that a better start for develop a social theory is with relation and encounter. She speaks of the importance of a community where people do not act as representatives of positions or roles; instead they get to know each other as individuals. Her thinking resonates and helps support and guide my practice and the development of a caring community. In this and other situations, I know that a caring response cannot be achieved by formula. It requires different responses from situation to situation and person to person. My internal compass as I wrestle with a decision has always been to ask myself, what impact will my response have on this person, on the caring community I am trying to build?

It sounds so simple as I write this. And yet staying true to this question haunts me. It is hierarchy, not community that remains the defining principle that guides the organization of schools. And therein lies much of my struggle.



*How, I wonder, in the midst of this world that
denies attachment, do I continue to sustain
my commitment to relationship, to
strengthening the community of care? Where
does this commitment, this deep sense of
community come from? How have I been able
to stay true to this within the institution? How
do I continue to do so?*

The church is quiet, voices hushed, sacred music surrounds us as we wait for the service to begin. A man, a friend of the family I do not know, gets up and begins to speak. He speaks of Jane's integrity, her humour, her commitment to her family. I smile, remembering the many conversations she and I had had about her children. How she cared for them, how she worried for them. And now here they are, standing at the front of the church, solemnly watching on. I am sure the past few months during their mother's illness they brought this same care and worry to their mother's bedside. I remember only too well the many hours I sat beside my mother as she waited to die. How I worried for her in the same way I know she worried for me all those years. The family friend goes on to speak about the children's father who died just a few years ago. I look up and watch the children standing proud and alone. The image sends a shiver through me. Two years ago I stood with my sisters watching on as a close family friend talked about my mother and father. He spoke of their integrity, of their humour, of their commitment to family. We too stood proud and alone. Alone and yet not. As I look about the church I see the faces of the many families I shared four years with in my work as Principal of Franklin Elementary. Parents and children, now young adults, with whom I spent so many of my days, now here in support of this family. I think back to my parents' memorial service. On the lake, the landscape of my youth, surrounded by a community of families I grew up with, parents and their children, now middle-age adults who loved my parents and now were here for us. In the same way, the Smith's children were surrounded by a community of friends and others like me, their elementary school principal, who had gathered to support them. After the service I reunite with many previous students – hugs, laughter, joy amidst such deep sadness. Our family home, too, was full of laughter on the day of the memorial service. Laughter and tears and stories. Story after story was told. Stories

that shaped my own and my family's life. Stories that took care of us. Stories that united us as a community. Once again I find myself surrounded by stories, I listen as the students I once worked so intimately with remind me of our time together. Story after story is told. It is 3:00 p.m., December 30, 2001, two years to the day and time of my mother's death. I long to see her. I long to be with my family. I long to return to the landscape of my youth. And yet here I am, thousands of miles away. Yet somehow I feel at peace. I leave the funeral feeling wrapped in the strength of community. This feeling of community, I now realize, runs through me, carried forward from my childhood into my adolescence and young adulthood. I carry it with me. Now as a mother, a friend, a teacher, a principal, I search out and create the community of my childhood.

Mary Catherine Bateson tells us that one of the most striking facts about lives is the recurrence of threads of continuity, the re-echoing of earlier themes. One of the central themes of my life has been this sense of community. As I moved into my role of principal in an institution that in many ways denied community, I began to "search in ambiguity for my own kind of integrity, learning to adapt and improvise in a culture in which I could only partly be at home" (Bateson, 1989, p. 13).

In Habits of the Heart Robert Bellah *et al* suggest that "Education can never merely be for the sake of individual self-enhancement. It pulls us into the common world or it fails altogether" (Bellah et. al., 1985, p. 21).

I listen to my mother on the telephone, talking to her old friend about her daughter who has cancer. There is silence for a while as she listens. I can tell the news is not good. She asks if there is anything she can do to help. I am for a moment taken back at her question. Here is my mother lying in bed connected to an oxygen machine that keeps her breathing, so fragile she can barely walk and she continues to be concerned about others. I should not be surprised, my mother has always been the supporter and organizer of community life in our home and beyond. I remember vividly the many community gatherings at our family home – neighbourhood potluck dinners; work bees; food and clothing drives; office parties; town council and recreation committees; church group and fund-raising meetings; family and friends' birthdays, anniversaries, graduations. At the heart of all of these different gatherings is the care of others. Commitment to the community in all its forms—whether it is helping someone mark an important occasion in their life, fundraising to create a boardwalk on the beach, baking for families in need, building a new dock for the neighbour or organizing the yearly Santa Claus parade in town—has been at the centre of both of my parents' lives. My mother closes off her telephone call by letting her friend know that one of the girls will make dinner for her daughter this evening.

“Community,” Parker Palmer (1997) tells us, “is an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace, the flowing of personal identity and integrity into the world of relationship.” Remembering takes me back to that place of integrity, back to the stories that provide me with a lived understanding of community and how it has been at the centre of my life.

The rest of the world seems to have stopped as we all come together to surround my mother - the laughter and tenderness that fills our family home is palpable - the giggling of the younger grandchildren, the older ones watching on with a mixture of exhaustion and delight. Steadily the community begins to gather. My mother's oldest friends, who drove through the blizzards of Northern Ontario to be with her. The neighbours, for whom my mother and father have become surrogate parents, my parents embracing the role with all of their own children so many miles away. The family doctor, who lives on the farm down the road, checking in daily on his way home. Families - parents, children and now grandchildren - of our childhood, moving in and out of the house with ease. And in each visit the stories are told. Amidst much laughter we listen to my mother's friends talk about their antics as young teenagers in the small town in which we have all grown up, their time as young mothers, and the joys and challenges the 'four girls,' my sisters and I, gave our mother and father. Our home has always been a gathering place in the community. My parents generous hospitality made everyone feel at home. And an important part of being 'at home' was the constancy of story. Our lives have been full of story. They are stories of success and struggle, pain and loss, shared joy and love. They are stories that have given shape to our lives and provided a sense of direction toward the future. Even now as my mother is dying, the stories that are told look forward: the friends who will be waiting for her when she arrives at the 'pearly gates'; the significance of the family heirlooms and who they will be passed on to; the possibilities that await the grandchildren; the strength of community to support us in our loss. The stories told have a way of taking care of us.

In their book, Habits of the Heart, Bellah *et al* (1985) speak to the potential of story as a way for a community to stay in touch with its history. They tell us, “communities have a history, in an important sense they are constituted by their past- and for this reason we can speak of a real community as a ‘community of memory’ one that does not forget its past” (Bellah *et al*, 1985,p. 153).

*We are from the pride of our county
Let us dye it with the darkest Chinese red
The scented ink sinking into a story telling paint
We are from the sweetest mooncake
With moonlight*

*We are dancing the mid-autumn passion
Into the dream of midnight
We are from the breakable dewdrops
In our home town down the north
We are from the golden sunset shining
From the edge of Tian'anmen Square*

I listen as Chu Lei and her mother read their poem to the crowded gym. A hush has fallen over the room, all eyes intent on mother and daughter sharing the story of their home. Many of our families and their children have gathered together this evening to talk and write these poems. It is the culmination of a year- long project in our school. Over the past year, our students have written ‘I am From’ poems, an idea borrowed from Linda Christensen’s book, Reading, Writing and Rising Up. We saw this writing as a way to, as Christensen suggests, “bring our students lives into the classroom” (Christensen, 2000, p. 19). We hoped that by writing about their families and their lives outside of school we would strengthen the connections between home and school. Ours is a very diverse school community. We have over forty languages spoken. Many of the

stories our children and their families bring to us are stories of war, hardship, struggle and determination and yet their poems were also stories of joy and beauty as they remembered where they were from. It seemed, a natural next step to involve our students' families in writing 'We are From' poems together with their children. And so, here we find ourselves this evening, in a crowded gymnasium, parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles huddled together with pen and paper. The room is alive with conversations in Mandarin, Russian and Persian, Serbian, Farsi and Tagalog as families share their stories with each other.

*We are from beautiful sunsets on rooftops with the ocean all around
Exotic blooms at my doorstep
Childhood memories of a loving uncle, gone too soon
Flying home to snow capped mountains
And endless rain outside the window*

*We are from the most unforgettable night
Watching the full moon rise over the horizon
Stars that give us gracious gifts
We were the happiest family ever*

Bellah *et al* would tell us that "in order not to forget that past, a community is involved in retelling its story...these stories of collective history and exemplary individuals are an important part of the tradition that is so central to a community of memory" (Bellah *et al*, 1985,p. 153).

*We are from the hugs of Grandma Mukaram
Hugs that can lift our spirit higher and higher
Encourage us to never give up on something that makes us smile*

*We are from Muslim festivals
Dancing, praying and saying 'Mubarak'
The joyful voice of singing and music
It warms our heart*

*We are from the ancient war ruins that hold meaning to the whole country
It reminds us of our past
And what kind of future is ahead of us
Dubrovnik is a landmark that shall never be forgotten*

"People growing up in communities of memory not only hear the stories that tell how the community came to be...they also participate in the practices — ritual, aesthetic, ethical — that define the community as a way of life"(p. 154). Bellah *et al* call these practices of commitment, for they define the patterns of loyalty and obligation that keep the community alive. Only through the accounts of others have we come to know of our own unity. On the thread of our history as told by the others, year after year.

*We are from a country where a billion people
From different races and religions live in peace
We are from a place, where the holy river Ganges flows
Where no one is a stranger, an aunt, an uncle or a friend
We are from Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindrath Tagore
Where the word hatred is not found in the dictionary*

In a community of memory Bellah *et al* suggest that we "connect our aspirations for ourselves and those closest to us with aspirations of a larger whole. We see

our own efforts as being, in part, contributions to a common good" (p. 154). There was never any question in our home about us fulfilling these obligations—cooking dinner for my mother's sick friend, mowing the lawn of our elderly neighbour, canvassing for the Cancer Society, serving dinner at a church banquet. It was not just that it was expected. Living up to our responsibility to the community seemed natural. In small town Northern Ontario it seemed like the right thing to do.

Steffie, Steffie! I hear the call and turn to look as two young boys come running up to my sister. They hug her and join the rest of the group. We are waiting for the parade to start. I watch as my sister laughs with these boys, her performance troupe, stilt walkers and unicycle riders, encouraging them for the long walk ahead, letting them know she will be close by, watching on. I listen as she talks with the parents who have driven their children to this event on a summer Saturday. She speaks of her worry for the two young people who have not shown up today. She tells the story of her and her husband following one of the boys to the local drug pusher's house, letting him know she missed him at the last parade, how she was worried about his drug use. She wanted him to know she would always be watching on. They laugh together as they recount the many times that my sister has let these young people know of her tenacious commitment to their well being. My sister and I talk on the way home about her passion for this group of young people she has been working with. She and another friend in the community had been concerned about the growing drug use in this small town in Northern British Columbia and so they went to work.

They began to look at ways they could hook these young people into more positive activities. They wrote grants, went to service clubs, local bands and managed to find the funds to support their work. They brought in a performance artist they had seen at a local fair and he began to work with the group they had gathered. Stilt walking, as my sister said, made these young people feel twelve feet high. They were hooked. It has been four years now and this group has become an attraction in the local small town communities, invited to participate in local parades and celebrations. This work is her passion. My sister is committed to the community, to the common good. In small town Northern British Columbia it seemed like the right thing to do.

I think of my work in the large urban centre in which I live, so unlike the small town of my sister, of my own childhood and youth. I think of my response to the adolescents who were vandalizing in and around the school where I was principal. I began to try and connect, to chat them up whenever I saw them on the school grounds. Soon I learned there was little for them to do in the neighbourhood. They were too far from the local recreation centre and so their recreation was hanging out on the school grounds. They were eager for some gym space to play basketball. And so, with the support of our community school co-ordinator, we went to work to find the resources to support these young people. This work is my passion. Like my sister, and my parents before us, my commitment is to the common good.

Convincing my son to supervise the gym twice a week so they could play basketball was easy. As he said to a friend who questioned him when he realized

he was not getting paid for this work, 'this is what our family does'. He too had learned this commitment to community life, to the common good. In this large urban community it seemed like the right thing to do.

Speaking about life in postmodern western society, Bellah *et al* suggest that we "must learn to recover and respect...the traditions that small towns once embodied...to revitalize those riches so they can speak to our condition today" (p. 283).

It is late in the evening. My son and his friends have been moving furniture for several hours. BJ has responded to my call for help for the victims of the fire in our school community without question. Several calls to the city had enabled him to use their vehicle to move. A traditional bureaucracy had opened up to 'bend the rules' when they learned what it was needed for. The fire had been well publicized, in the newspaper, on the television. The story of these families, new to Canada, without family, without connections, without insurance, was well known. Our school had become their family, stepping in to support them as they found new places, as they collected the remains of their belongings to create a new life. I watched BJ and his friends as they hauled furniture up and down the stairwell to the apartment, as they joked and laughed together, somehow creating a social event of this occasion, as we gathered round in support of our community...

I drift back to the community of my childhood. The sound of hammers banging reverberates through my ears. Our father, together with other friends, has gathered together to help a neighbour rebuild a deck destroyed in the winter storms. My sisters and I run behind the house to escape the noise. Suddenly my father's booming laughter echoes through the air. The banging stops. We creep back around the corner of the house to watch. The men are gathered round, hammers lain to rest, eating the sandwiches that have just arrived. They are laughing and telling jokes, somehow creating a social event of this occasion, as they gathered round in support of our community.

As I write, I begin to understand how my commitment to working within and creating a community in the world of schools is deeply rooted in my "community of memory" (Bellah *et al* 1985). It is grounded in the rituals and traditions of this community where "people not only helped one another and enjoyed one another's company but also participated mutually in enterprises that furthered the common good" (p. 282). I read the newsletter I sent out to our community after this fire.

Dear Parents, Family and Community Members,

In our last school newsletter, I wrote about our community school. I wrote about how a community school is people working together to create a welcoming place. I wrote about how relationships are at the heart of a community school – relationships with children, with other adults, with friends and neighbours in the community.

The past few weeks at our school, these words have come to life. As you are all aware, several of our families were left homeless after a

fire destroyed their building. The support, kindness and care these families received from everyone in our community was extraordinary. The very first morning after the fire, one of our young students came to me and gave me his only Yugioh cards because he had heard one of the students had lost his cards. All week, children brought in toys, blankets, school supplies and books from their own homes to give to the children who had lost all of these items in the fire.

And that was only the beginning – every day, our community room and soon our gymnasium, was busy with parents and staff helping to organize the many items you sent in, school and community members organized fundraising, quilting bees, helped to deliver furniture, drove children to school.

This amazing generosity extended far beyond the walls of our school and community. We received hundreds of calls, offering donations, support and kindness. A group of students from a Vancouver school brought in donations and one student wrote, "...when I see these donations it bursts my heart." Another student said, "...this experience of giving made me feel like I was going to explode with happiness."

It is hard to believe that within such sadness, happiness can exist and yet this is what has happened in our community these past few weeks. From a tragic event came an incredible sense of community, care, generosity and kindness. As one of the parents who lost everything in the fire wrote in a thank you letter, "thank you for the clothing, the furniture, for helping us to find a new home, for driving my son to school every day...but most of all, thank you for the love."

I feel blessed to work in a community where such love and generosity lives.

Confucius extended the use of ritual "to include all the caring acts by which we fulfil our responsibilities to others in the community" (Confucius, translated by David Hinton, 1998, xxii). He saw ritual as a "dynamic process of interpersonal encounter and personal growth" (xxiii). Indeed he suggests that those who become proficient in the nuances of ritual "establish and enlarge others and themselves" (xxiii).



What are the rituals embedded in my history?

*In my community of memory? How have these
rituals influenced me, shaped me as I live out
my work in schools?*

I drift back to the many times we would be outside, telling and listening to stories, sitting by the lake, listening to the waves crash to shore, getting lost in the stories and the oceanic sound of the wind blowing through the poplar trees. The wind, the water, seemed to carry the words of the story. Words weaving back and forth, blowing in the wind, crashing to the shore, finding our way home. Stories, humming all around. Breathing in. Breathing out.

I think back to the storytelling that was so much a part of my family and community life. It seems we were always gathered together, around the fire in winter, outside overlooking the water in the summer months, listening to my father weave his magic spell of storytelling. One story would lead to another. Someone else would jump in with another story, then another and another. The stories surrounded us. These stories were told and retold, flowing among and through and between us, creating a stream of meaning. These stories continue to flow through me, like water, shaping who I am, how I live out my life in community today.

Story, Christina Baldwin (2005) would tell us, is a search for community. "As we tell each other who we really are, we find the people with whom we really belong. Story brings us home" (Baldwin, 2005, p. 20).

My day is spent in constant conversation with teachers, children, parents, other staff and community members. Often I will have the same conversation many times with different people, hearing the various perspectives on a particular child, a situation, a dilemma, a celebration. I very intentionally, like a troubadour, tell the stories of children and the community at meetings, in hallways, in classrooms, outside on the playground, in all the nooks and crannies of the school. I tell the story of the new family from Afghanistan, our custodian needing help with keeping the washrooms clean, the most recent publishing party, the playfulness of our grade 7 boys at lunch, the generosity of a recent donation, an 'aha' moment with a child. I celebrate a child's new learning with his teachers from years past, reminding everyone of their part in that success. I

laugh with teachers and parents about a child's insightful, often humorous comment that shifted my response. Working in this interconnected way, attuned to the pulse, living in the flow of the stories of school life begins to change the flow of relationships. We are all talking and thinking together, everything moves between around and among us. We are all participating. I remember a conversation I had with the Assistant Superintendent about this way of being in schools.

"It will be hard for you to teach as much as you do now when we move you to your new school. I know you are a real 'hands on' principal but you're going to have to change your style. There is a lot more management in a school of five hundred. You will have to spend more time in your office. You won't be able to be so connected to your staff, to the children. You will need to assume the role of Principal, to detach yourself a bit." I listen to the words of the assistant superintendent as we discuss my move to a new school in the fall. I cannot imagine myself in my office, separate, disconnected from the life, the flow of school life. I nod in agreement, not willing or ready perhaps to discuss my perspective, not sure if his words might prove true.

Since my first year as an elementary school principal I have spent most of my day in classrooms, teaching and working alongside children and teachers. This is where I feel most connected. It is here that the hierarchy is softened, the boundaries more fluid, as children, teachers and principal work side by side, learning with each other. It is here that the stories of classroom life are told and retold. As I sit beside a child to coach him through his writing, I hear the stories of his day, his world outside of school and through this I develop a

connectedness, a relationship beyond the traditional role of principal. I have these same conversations with the classroom teachers. As we work alongside one another we tell our stories. We talk about our hopes or our worries for a particular child or group of children. We talk about our own hopes and worries for our work in school, for our life outside of school. This connected way of working has enabled me to live in the middle, to stay attuned to the pulse of the school. I cannot imagine working any other way. And yet within the institution this connectedness is often met with questions and uncertainty.

"I really want to work in your classrooms. I love to teach writing and would be happy to come in and work alongside you or lead writer's workshop. Even though the last school I was at was much smaller, I still hope I can teach the way I want in this school too." It was the first day at the new school, the group of teachers who sat around me as I introduced myself, as the new principal did not respond to my offer. It took a few weeks for one of the teachers to come to me and ask if I would come in and teach writing in his classroom. "I wasn't sure at first if you were for real. I wondered if you had an agenda, if you might be checking up on me but I hear you can really inspire kids to write. I could use some help with that."

I am always surprised at this response, which is typical of many teachers when I suggest coming into their classrooms. Their initial responses range from curiosity, to discomfort, to suspicion as to why the Principal would want to spend time in their classroom.

The work of David Bohm helps me to understand why this may be so. Bohm asks us to "consider the organization of any sort of contemporary bureaucracy or

hierarchy... we know the person by his function – he is whatever you call him, a worker, a banker...that sets up the social hierarchy – people work in isolation from each other and the participation is very limited" (Bohm, 1996, p. 88).

In the traditional organization of schools the Principal is seen as the manager, the supervisor, separate from the classroom teachers. There are very clearly delineated boundaries between the work of the office and the work of the classroom. Except for the ritual of sending children to the office, or a request for help, there is rarely any flow or fluidity between these two spaces.

I can barely open the door to my office. I nudge it open and squeeze in. I delight in the sight that greets me. Nine students crowded into my small space, writing portfolios in hand, scrunched over the small chairs and desks. Some are writing, some are looking through the books on my shelf, others are creating poetry with the magnetic words stuck to my filing cabinet. "Our teacher sent us here to write" said one. "Can you read my story, Ms. Montabello, I'm stuck" asked another. I looked over at the pile of paper work on my table. It had been shoved to one side to create space for one of the students to write. I looked back to the student who has asked me for help. I sat down and began to read her story.

Later that day, the classroom teacher stops me in the hallway to ask about her students' progress with their writing. We discuss their growing strengths as writers and decide where we will begin with our next mini-lesson. I have been working alongside this young teacher and many others, teaching writing in their classroom for the past three years. A fluidity has developed to our conversations,

one building on the next as we talk and think together about how best to support our children's writing.

I think back to the Assistant Superintendent's words of advice as I was about to begin my work in a larger school. His advice at the time echoed much of the current thinking about leadership. "The management values now considered legitimate are biased toward rationality, logic, objectivity, the importance of self-interest, explicitness, individuality, and detachment" (Sergiovanni, 1992, p. xiii), what Sergiovanni called the "expect and inspect" Principal (p. xiii). No wonder so many teachers felt apprehensive about the Principal coming into their classroom. The 'expect and inspect' role of the Principal is built into the structure of the institution.

Many years have passed since that particular conversation. I have been principal in three different schools, each one larger in population than the last. I have not heeded the assistant superintendent's advice. The 'management' of the school comes not from my office but rather by living in the middle, in the classrooms, the hallways, the gymnasium, the playground, connected to the pulse, the energy of school life.

I turn once again to the work of David Bohm (1996) who in his book, On Dialogue, discusses the concept of participatory consciousness. Society, he tells us, "is not an objective reality —period. It is a reality created by all the people through their consciousness. Boundaries are not really separation" (Bohm, 1996, p. 88). Participatory thought, like the poetic, seems that "everything partakes of

everything else...." (p. 87). And yet, within the institution, we all too often return to the boundaries, the boxes, that Margaret Wheatley speaks of.

Western culture has spent decades drawing lines and boxes around interconnected phenomena. We've chunked the world into pieces rather than explored its webby nature... These rigid boundaries have been a way to control people and events. The neat lines define what goes on inside each box, and the natural messiness of interconnectedness disappears – at least on paper. We run the world by these boxes...over time people seek the protection of their box.

Wheatley, 2005, p. 205

One of the dilemmas that seems to plague public education is the tension between addressing the diversity of each individual community member, be it student, teacher or parent, and developing the cohesion and identity of the group that contains the individual. (Senge, 1990 & 2004; Sergiovanni, 1992 & 2001). The ministry of education, many school districts and principals have responded to this diversity by denying the multiple voices, by establishing standardized curriculum, objectives, evaluation, standards, policies, striving through rationality for homogeneity, for unity of thought and behaviour.

I think back to the words of the representative from the ministry of education. His spoke of test results, ministry audits, data driven goals, meaningful targets. He spoke in the language of homogeneity. The systemic response of striving for, indeed institutionalizing, homogeneity in such a rich and diverse culture has provoked quite the opposite effect. As Bateson and Neitzsche long before him suggested, we each have our own mythology, our own real possibilities to live out. The more the system pushes for uniformity, the stronger the response for

this individuality emerges. As each individual's unique possibilities at best go unheard, at worst are suppressed, "passion mutates into procedures, into rules and roles. Instead of purpose, we focus on policies. Instead of being free to create, we impose constraints that squeeze the life out of us. The organization no longer lives" (Wheatley & Rogers, 1996, p. 57).

Wheatley implores us to step outside the box, to move beyond the protection of our roles. "Our future depends upon whether each of us can step outside the boxes and participate intelligently in a complex world of interconnectedness" (Wheatley, 2000, p. 206).

I review the letter I sent out to all of the staff in our school community. My letter was an attempt to connect, to draw together the conversations and stories I had heard in the hallways and classrooms, in the quiet conversations in my office and the heated discussions at our staff meetings.

Dear Staff,

Over the past few weeks I have had conversations with many of you about your worries for many of your children. We all know that the month of January is often one of the most challenging for many of our families. When the hopes of the Christmas season have not come to pass, when children have grown tired of being enclosed in their small apartments, when families have no money left for food or clothing, our children return to school. We see first hand the results of the disappointment, worry, sadness and sometimes violence they have experienced during their time away from us. For so many of our children our school is their sanctuary, a place that feels safe and secure, a place where they can truly be children. I think we are all very aware of this and each, in our own way, has tried to respond.

The stories I have heard recently tell me that this January has been particularly challenging and intense. In just three short weeks, several heartfelt stories have emerged that have reminded many of us of the sometimes overwhelming sadness and complexity in the lives of our children and their families. The child we thought unmotivated we discover has suffered severe trauma. The child whose constant lying was exasperating us, we discover is the victim of abuse. The child who is stealing food we discover has no food in the home. The child who is aggressive and defiant, we discover has lost his mother. Behind all of these children, of course, are families who are suffering. Several of these families are families that have been part of our school community for a year or more. If only we had only known... perhaps we might not have insisted on that homework assignment, or chastised that child for losing his lunch envelope or pushed another to admit to lying, knowing the consequences that may await him.

In all of the conversations I have had with you, we all wondered why are we just learning about this now? I know this is a complex question with no easy answers but I also wonder if there are some things we could be doing to find out more about our children's and their families lives. Perhaps, as someone suggested, we return to our parent interviews in the fall, or at another time of the year where we can connect with each family. Perhaps, we organize a gathering, a pot-luck, or another event in our classrooms where we can begin to build the relationships with our children's family members. This is for me the key, the relationships and connections we build.

How do we tap into these connections? How do we strengthen our relationships? How do we create the opportunities for our families to tell us their stories so we can support them and their children?

This letter began as an invitation to think about our work together in support of our children and their families. It brought the individual stories into a collective story about our work together as a community. By moving the stories into the collective conversation, we were all participating, looking at ways we could together support our relationships with our families and in doing so we began also to strengthen our relationships with each other. As we listened to the stories of our children and their families, we also heard the worry, the sadness, the

struggle of each person who told the story. The stories merged, flowing together, the energy of our differences helping to develop an interdependent community.

Storytelling then becomes the water, the fluid conversation that connects, builds meaning. "So there is both an individual mind and a collective mind, and like a stream, the flow moves between them" (Bohm, 1996, p. 26).

A walk down the hallways of our school tells the story of our community. The 'inside outside' school. The boundaries between the inside and outside of the school are fluid. Children, families, community members, moving easily inside and out. Couches welcome you at the entrance way, creating a gathering space. In the morning, parents and grandparents sit with their children, talking and waiting for the day to begin. During the day many different groups of children come and go, some reading books, others working with a parent or an older student. Teachers talking in the hallway as they watch their students at centers...basketball, sand tables, skipping...the hallways are vibrant, alive with the sounds of children.

Just before three o'clock, parents, grandparents, day care staff begin to gather, waiting to take their children home. The couches are full, the hallways buzzing with noise—a hushed conversation between two women in the corner, sounds of laughter from a group by the door, a greeting between grandparents, a smile, a touch, a knowing glance between parents as they engage in the ritual of waiting. The halls are like a marketplace, a carnival of connection.

In the evening, the tone is quieter. The Indo-Canadian men gather, sitting on the couches, bare feet tucked under as they discuss the world events...their conversation interrupted by the squeal of laughter from the Brownies in the next classroom.

Slowly but surely the walls in the hallways have been transformed to reflect the vibrant energy of our school. Painted flowers on the wall, pictures of children and parents and teachers engaged in school and community life, plaques decorated by our students, artwork, displays, painted lockers...moving from institutional white to a world of colours. The mural at the entranceway sets the tone. It announces that you were entering a special place.

I remember the day we completed the mural at the entrance to our school...we stood back in awe at its magnificence...the whale swimming under the water looked so real you could almost reach out and touch it...the water merged into mountains, beautiful blue sky with birds flying everywhere...the sun/moon image stood in the middle, atop the mountain as the world of water moved through the mountains and transformed into a dragon breathing water into the tall buildings of a city which merged into a Chinese princess floating in the air surrounded by books, Spiderman, a land of fantasy. What struck me about this was the fluidity of the overlapping environments. Ocean moved into sky moved into mountains moved into city moved into fantasy. It was all connected, interwoven, the boundaries dissolved. Somehow, without intention, this mural had created an image of the fluidity of life in our school.

permeable boundaries

*don't establish the
boundaries
first,
the squares, triangles,
boxes
of preconceived
possibility,
and then
pour
life into them, trimming
off left-over edges,
ending potential*

A. Ammons, 1965

It is seven o'clock. I still cannot shake the emotions of the day. I come home, go into the garden and begin to dig. I transplant, weed, water, furiously trying to leave my head and return to my body. My mind races...perhaps I should just leave. I cannot do this anymore. I cannot continue to butt up against a system that doesn't make sense to me. This past week has been painful at school. I walk down the hallway. Children sitting. Five or six in a row...waiting for someone to give them a reprieve. Usually it would be me. They look at me longingly... waiting, waiting. I smile and walk by. My heart hurts.

At our last staff meeting several staff had once again raised their concerns about the hallways. "They are getting out of hand." "Kids don't listen" "There is too much chaos." "The kids are in and out all lunch hour." "We need to do something. Not just remind them but give them a consequence so they won't do it again." I had to agree that the energy in our hallways was high, the energy of five hundred children overwhelming at times.

When I first came to the school several years ago, the children were not allowed in the school at lunch, except to go the washroom. Even then they had to have a noon-hour supervisor walk them into the school

to ensure they did not wander in the hallway. I questioned this policy and soon the flow between the outside and inside of the school was more open, more fluid. The boundaries were not as rigidly defined. Over the years, this openness only grew. Children were in and out of the building over lunch, perhaps to play hockey or basketball, or to hang out and watch from the stage in the gym, some students went into the library or a classroom for games or crafts, some liked to sit on the couches in the hallway or in their classroom and talk. This flow seemed more natural, less institutional—more in keeping with the natural rhythm of life.

However, as will always be with children, their exuberance sometimes took over and we would see several of our grade 7 students chasing each other through the hallways with little or no regard for others, students and teachers, in their way. This was when some realignment was needed - a reminder, a request, a conversation - to restore the balance. For most students that was all that was needed. Some required more support, more guidance along the way.

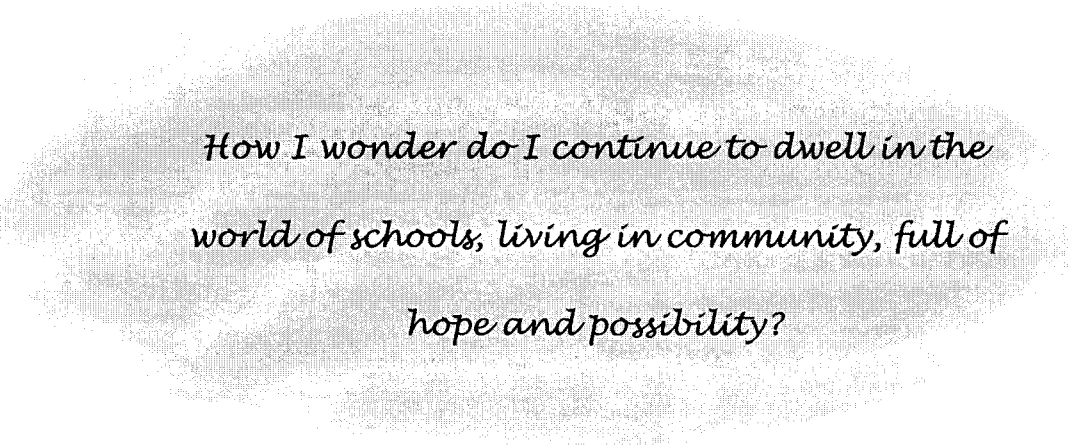
I was not sure how to respond to the concerns of our staff. I spent my time 'in the middle' of this activity, attuned to the pulse, the energy—the life of this world. And yet, I heard the frustration in their voices and knew there needed to be a response. As I listened I knew that I needed to, for the time being, step back and let them work out a solution to this dilemma. Consequences for 'being in the hallway without a purpose' were defined. If caught, students would be required to sit in the hallway for the remainder of the lunch hour. Everyone agreed to follow through. We would meet in a week to review our progress.

And so it began. Staff patrolling the hallways. Students sitting in rows in the hallway. "Our plan seems to be working," one of the teachers said. Working, perhaps, but for whom I wondered.

"I feel like a police officer" one of our primary teachers said to me as we walked down the hallway. "I can't keep doing this for much longer." As the week progressed I realized she expressed a sentiment shared by many others. "I was so excited when I was hired to work here" said another staff member. "I told my own children I was going to work at the inside/outside school." I looked puzzled. She went on. "I told my kids that the outside and inside of the school was the same, there was this flow, back and forth. The hallways weren't quiet, institutional, sterile, like so many schools I have worked in. They were noisy and joyful and playful. I loved it...what's happened? What are we doing here?"

"What are we doing here?" Her words echo in my mind as I continue to dig in the garden. I push the shovel in the ground. As I dig, I weep. The more I dig, the more I weep. "You dig in the ground because you want to see," (Lilburn, 1994).

"...instead of being free to create, we impose constraints that squeeze the life out of us. The organization no longer lives" (Wheatley& Rogers, 1996, p. 37).



*How I wonder do I continue to dwell in the
world of schools, living in community, full of
hope and possibility?*

Chapter 3

Dwelling In Reverie

*A noiseless patient spider
I mark'd whereon a little promontory it stood isolated
Mark's how to explore the vacant vast surrounding.
It launch's forth filament, filament, filament out of itself
Even unreeling down, ever tirelessly speeding them.*

*And you o my soul where you stand,
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to connect them,
Till the bridge you will need to be form's till the ductile anchor hold,
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere o my soul.*

Walt Whitman (ed. F. Murphy), 1986, p. 463

Walt Whitman's poem speaks to me as I once again sit down to write. It is the latter part of the school holiday and I return to my writing, anxious to complete a draft before I return to my work, knowing I will have little space to write once I am again immersed in the life of schools. I look at the web of paper lying on my kitchen floor, trying to find the 'gossamer thread of meaning' that will 'catch hold somewhere.'

I have been lost in reverie these past ten days and it seems I am, to use the words of Gaston Bachelard in the Poetics of Reverie, "facing the great universe of the blank page" (Bachelard, 1960, p. 6). Reverie is a space I move to easily at this time of year, particularly since the death of my mother several Christmas' ago. We had gathered together as a family, sisters, husbands, grandchildren, at our home by the lake in Northern Ontario. We knew my mother was dying. We were there to be with her and with each other. Together we waited in our home, cocooned

in snow and sadness. Together we waited, carrying on with the small rituals of the day and yet it was as if all of our lives were temporarily suspended. We were living in between, both detached from the world and yet deeply connected, connected to something that felt bigger than all of us. "Reverie, like grief, is a way of haunting the world, a kind of consciousness which has slipped from its usual moorings of everyday worries and concerns; it drifts in a mood of detachment among the things of the world" (Romanyshyn, 1999, p. 33). This is the reverie in which I now find myself.

Have I lost touch with the meaning? What was I trying to say? How do I find a space to enter this world of ideas again? How do I, like the patient spider in Whitman's poem, construct the bridge to make the connection between the voice of reason and the place from which I now write?

I feel lost in a sea of ideas — so many words, so many concepts to unravel, so many points to prove. I wrote them with such passion and focus only a few weeks ago and now the words do not resonate with the same authority. I attempt to draw myself out of this space. I review my writing, organize the pile of books on my desk, trying to claim a purpose to my activity. With a deadline looming, this state of reverie feels like a most idle way of being. And yet I cannot resist its lure. Watching the flames of the fire, listening to the wind chimes in the garden, watching the birds at the feeder — slowly, subtly, I find myself in this world of reverie.

I look up from my computer. It's snowing . The flakes gently falling, slowly beginning to cover the ground. The chickadees at the bird feeder, persistently pecking through the white to discover the seeds underneath. A quietness begins to descend. I stare out the window mesmerized, as the snow slowly covers the ground. The branches droop heavy with this unknown weight. Silence. I gaze out the window looking over the garden, now blanketed in white, the bird feeder now piled high with a mountain of snow. I am transported. I am no longer in Burnaby, gazing out my garden window. I am in Northern Ontario, my family home, gazing out the picture window as I watch the snow blanket the lake, the trees, picnic table in the back. Mountains of white everywhere. Silence.

Poetic reverie enlarges us, opening us up to the world. "We dream while remembering. We remember while dreaming (p. 102). And in this dreaming, we open ourselves to a "a beautiful world, to beautiful worlds" (p. 13), "which lets me live my secret of being in the world (p. 13). "This dreamed world teaches us the possibilities for expanding our being within our universe" (p. 8).

I have spent the past few days reading and re-reading, lost in the words of others. Reading and dreaming, dreaming and reading...I sit by the window looking out over the garden I watch the tall grass blowing the wind. I am enchanted by its grace. It bends and flows in the wind. Like the ebb and flow of water. Back and forth, to and fro. I listen to the wind chimes in the background. The sound stirs something instinctive. A shudder moves through me. The wind picks up. The tall grass tosses wildly, the tall blades quiver in the blast. Its roots hold strong. The grass dances. The chimes explode. A symphony. I am caught in the intimacy of this moment. It is as if I am breathing with the wind, quivering with the grass. A longing blows through me. My heart flutters. My reverie is the voice of the wind, of the grass.

In reverie we reacquaint ourselves with our world. In such moments we sense that we are truly part of a larger order. The world is opened to us and establishes us as members of this cosmic community. In reverie we are so close to things that we breathe them into ourselves.

*I wonder if reverie is a way of breathing
together with the world, and to what end we
might want to tap into this mood?*

*I was reading about rationalism
The kind of thing we do up north
In early winter, where the sun
Leaves work for the day at 4:15*

*Maybe the world is intelligible
To the rational mind
And maybe we light the lamps at dusk for nothing.*

Then I heard wings overhead.

*The cats and I chased the bat
In circles – living room, kitchen
Pantry, living room
At every turn it evaded us*

*Like the identity of the third Person
In the Trinity, the one
Who spoke through the prophet
The one who astounded Mary
By suddenly coming near*

Jane Kenyon, cited in Moyers, 1995

"Maybe," as Jane Kenyon suggests, "the world is intelligible to the rational mind" (Kenyon, cited in Moyers, 1995, p. 233). And yet the voice of reason places us in a different relationship with the world around us. It sets us up before the world leaving us a little less in the world. Caught in the language of abstractions we become focussed on explaining, articulating, conceptualizing, and in doing so, our words, our selves, risk disembodiment, detachment from the world.

As soon as you look at the world through an ideology you are finished. No reality fits an ideology. Life is beyond that. That is why people are always searching for a meaning to life...Meaning is only found when you go beyond meaning. Life only makes sense when you perceive it as mystery and it makes no sense to the conceptualizing mind.

Anthony De Mello, Parabola, 1997, p. vii

*Is this reverie that Bachelard speaks of a way
to stay deeply connected to this mystery, this
consciousness of wonder? And how might
reverie inform me as I write about and live out
the story of my life in schools?*

Philosophy as the ancients tell us begins in wonder. It is a wondering about our world and our place in it. It is not only the philosophy as written in books, it is the philosophy written into our lives. Richard Rorty characterizes “the mainstream of Anglo-American philosophy” as preoccupied with the epistemological question of “how to know truth” and contrasts this with “the broader question of how we come to endow experience with meaning” (cited in Bruner, 1986, p. 12). This is the question that preoccupies the poet and the storyteller. “If we hope to live not just from moment to moment, but in true consciousness of our existence, then our greatest need and most difficult achievement is to find meaning in our lives” (Bettelheim, 1977, p. 3). Narrative becomes, then, a way of making meaning, a way of knowing and understanding our world. To be a person is not only to have a story and to know that story, it is also to have a story to tell. We come to understand ourselves through our stories. My reveries return me to the stories that have shaped me, given meaning to my world.

It is a story we have heard many times over the years. Indeed for many years it was the only story we heard my father tell about his experience in the war. My father grew up in the army. He signed up when he was eighteen and returned from Europe five years later no longer a young man. Even though he spent such a significant part of his life at war, we knew little about his time there. I remember a picture of him sitting on top of the tank he drove but it was rare for him to speak about the war itself. The only stories we ever heard in any detail were the stories of playing football. He spoke fondly of the times with his team mates. It seemed like football was my father's

story of hope in an otherwise dismal time. The one story we did hear was the story of my father recovering the genie that now sits on top of our china cabinet.

It had been after a few very long and arduous days of fighting. They had managed to hang on to the piece of land they were protecting close to the border of Germany but had lost several members of my father's battalion in the process. They stopped at an abandoned farmhouse to rest. Once they were settled in my father went out into the fields to walk off the fatigue and devastation of the past several days. My father was a gifted storyteller and as he recounted this story I could actually picture him in the fields of northern Germany-his long, lean body moving slowly, methodically as he wondered what lay ahead for him after this brief respite. It was in this state that he saw it. He described it as a shimmer, the sun bouncing off its fragile white surface. He hunched down and peeled back the grass to find a figurine, a genie with a long pipe. My father told us how touched he was by this discovery. The fragility of the piece so out of place in the battleground in which he found himself. Somehow he wanted to protect this piece, in all its vulnerability. He went back to his tank and found his long underwear. He carefully wrapped the genie in the cloth and packed it away in his duffel bag. And so the story goes...two more years in the war. My father carried the genie in that duffel bag, wrapped in his long underwear stored in the bowels of the tank that was his home. Two more long years. And then he carried it home across the Atlantic to small town Northern Ontario. It moved from his parents' home, to our family home, and now here it sits on top of the china cabinet in my family home.

The theory of narrative tells us that our sense of our lives is embedded in what we make and remake of what happens to us. We live and invent our lives through stories. "Stories and narrative, whether personal or fictional, provide meaning and belonging in our lives. They attach us to others and to our own histories by providing a tapestry rich with threads of time, place, character...the story fabric offers us images, myth, and metaphors that are morally resonant and contribute both to our knowing and our being known" (Noddings & Witherell, 1991 p.1).

I watch my son BJ as he intently packs the figurine in his backpack. Slowly he wraps his t-shirt around it, then his sweatshirt. He places it in the centre of his pack ensuring there are clothes surrounding it. I watch his big hands move gently, tucking it inside, closing the zipper carefully. I catch my breath for a moment. My son's hands become my father's wrapping his long underwear around the figurine and packing it into his duffel bag. My son is taking no chances with the safekeeping of this sacred object. The story of this figurine is part of our family history. The genie smoking a long pipe has sat on top of the china cabinet in my family home as long as I can remember. My son has heard the story many times, how my father found this piece in the wreckage of the war, how he carefully wrapped it in his long underwear and carried it in his duffel bag throughout the war, how he brought it home as a reminder, as a remembrance. My father rarely spoke of his time in the war. It was only in the silences and the occasional nightmare that we knew he still carried the memories, the sadness of that time within him. This genie was the container for this remembrance. My father always spoke about the genie being passed on to BJ, his first male grandchild. Like my father, my son has not spoken about the significance of this

and yet I can tell as I watch him that he understands. It is caught in his gesture as he packs it so very gently into his pack. Perhaps in the same way my father packed it so many years ago in Germany. It is as if its very presence makes him feel more of a piece, as if the familiar genie, its delicate white china has formed some kind of bridge between past and present.

Story is the song line of a person's life.
We need to sing it and we need someone to hear the singing.
Story told, story heard, story written, story read
Create the web of life in words

C. Baldwin, 2005, p. 27

My son had heard the many stories from his grandfather about playing football during the war. In his expressive story telling style my father recounted stories of his team, the Fourth Canadian Armoured Division Atoms. He spoke of the hours of training, of their victory at the Utrecht bowl, of the pipe band that led them into the stadium and the crowd of ten thousand who cheered them on. Mostly however we heard him talk about his team mates, their strengths and successes as players, the jokes they told, the laughs they shared, the comradeship that existed amongst them and how this sustained them during difficult times. My son had heard how playing football during the war had eased the pain, the sadness around them. There were stories of friendship and connection. It seemed football was my father's story of hope in an otherwise dismal time.

A story is like water that you heat for your bath
It takes a message between the fire and your skin,
It lets them meet and it cleans you

Rumi, translated by Coleman Barks, 1995

I remember the summer my son came to ask me about playing football. It was the summer after our family divorce. I had worried about him as he had struggled to find his place at school that year. The first practice was next week he told me and all I had to do was go to the field and sign him up. As he continued to give more details about the football league I was only half-listening, for as he spoke all I could see was an image of my son fully suited in football helmet and pads—armoured against the world. I was about to share my thoughts on this game, a game that seemed to me too aggressive, too highly organized, too much of everything I did not want for my son, when I stopped for a moment. I saw in my child's eyes, the sparkle of his grandfather's eyes as he recounted his stories of football. I began to understand how, for my son, as for his grandfather, football was his story of hope. In a year that seemed so void of possibilities he was reaching elsewhere—toward his future, toward the story of his grandfather.

The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them. If stories come to you, care for them and learn to give them away where they are needed. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive. That is why we put these stories in each other's memories.

Barry Lopez, 1990, p. 41

The constancy of story in our family was enduring. Stories were a natural part of daily life. Story after story was told, weaving in and out of the events of our life. Stories of success and struggle, pain and loss, shared joy and love. Stories of a community, living, working, celebrating and playing together. Stories that made us laugh, stories that made us cry, stories that made us cheer out loud. Stories that have given shape to our lives and provided a sense of direction toward our future. Stories that took care of us.

It is morning. As I pull myself from sleep I remember where I am, the house of my childhood, my family home. I listen to the sounds of my sister in the bed beside me. She too is rousing herself from sleep. We talk quietly and for a moment it feels as if we are once again children whispering over the events of our lives. And yet we are no longer children. We now have children of our own. Together with these children we have gathered to help my mother die. It is very early, darkness still surrounds us. Perhaps it is too early to be waking and yet neither of us can sleep anymore. There is an uneasiness that fills me and drags me from my sleep. I move out into the darkness of the living room. I stop, captivated by the landscape that greets me. Trees dripping with snow, the lights of the town shimmering across the lake, a white blanket covers the ground. The snowman the children built yesterday looks tired. The world seems at peace. I slowly start to wake, stretching my body. I go to my mother's room. She lies there quietly in the dark breathing in time to the gentle purring of the oxygen machine. I can see why she wants it on all night. I too have come to find assurance in its sound. The constant humming noise acts as a reminder to all of us that my mother is still alive. I stand by her bed watching her tiny chest. I breathe in. I can almost feel the breath move through her fragile body. In, out, in, out, the rhythm mesmerizes. I breathe out. I return to my bed and find sleep.

My reveries take me away. They also “liberate (me) from the burdens of life” (Bachelard, 1960, p. 72). At the same time they also help me “inhabit the world” (p. 22). Nowhere in my life has this sense captured me more strongly than in the midst of the grief and loss I experienced during and after the death of my

parents. As Patti Lather tells us “mourning is about things neither present nor absent, times out of joint, haunting and ghosts” (1999, p. 136). Reverie, like Lather’s description of mourning, is a way of haunting the world, drifting in a liminal space of in-between. And yet, paradoxically, it is in these moments of feeling unhinged from the world that I feel most connected to it.

Sitting out here in the back of the garden I feel tucked away from the world, the arbutus leaves are falling in the gentle wind, the bush tits are swarming around the butterfly bush, their wings fluttering as they swoop in and out of the branches, I can hear the wind chimes in the background calling out to me. These past few days have been windy, the chimes have been ringing constantly, sometimes furiously. I close my eyes to listen, the wind blows across my face. I breathe out. I have returned to the lake of my youth, the chimes are ringing, the poplars are swaying in the breeze—sitting out here in the quiet of the early morning, the sadness that drew me out here subsides—outside the house nestled underneath this majestic tree, I feel part of something, connected to the world. I breathe out.

The mood of reverie it seems enables me to dwell in a moment where I am neither in a dream nor fully in the world. It is, like Kohak's (1984) time of philosophy, a twilight world of shadows and light. "Philosophy," Kohak tells us in his captivating text, The Embers and The Stars: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Moral Sense of Nature, "is most fundamentally, the art of intermediate vision, of the transition between daylight and darkness when the failing light mutes the insistent individuality of the day but the darkness of the night has not yet fused all in unity...its starting point and the condition of its distinctive possibility is the ability to see and grasp the sense of being" (Kohak, 1960, p. 32). In the softness of this twilight things appear connected and intertwined. There is no clear separation between myself and the world. Reverie becomes then, a way to uncover the interconnectedness, to soften the boundaries.

Kohak questions the abstract world we have created. "In our daily lived experience, the starry heaven above and the moral law within have been overly laid by artifacts and constructs...surrounded by these constructs we tend to lose sight, literally, as well as metaphorically, of the rhythm of the day and the night, of the phases of the moon and the change of the seasons, of the life of the cosmos and our place therein" (Kohak, 1960, p. x). He goes on to speak of the thinkers whose insight has withstood the test of time, "from Socrates to Husserl...they were perennial beginners...their stance was one of wonder, not of sophistication, the task they undertook was one of articulation - and their virtue was naiveté, a willingness to see before theorizing, to encounter the wonder of being rather than enclose themselves in cunningly devised theories" (Kohak, 1960, p. xi).

I too have taken on this task of articulation. How do I remain a “beginner” – to begin not merely as an action but as a frame of mind, a consciousness? As I write myself into a deeper understanding of my experience, the challenge it seems, is to not let language fail me. In order to truthfully record my experience, this text must show, not merely tell, the living out of these questions. The text must embody Heidegger’s notion that we are always on our way to understanding. The language must sing the world (Gadamer, 1975).

“Poets speak the language of the world,” (1960, p. 13) Bachelard wrote. “Poetic reverie is a cosmic reverie” (p. 13). “Poetry forms the dreamer and his world at the same time” (p. 16). It is a “state of mind” (p. 14), a consciousness of being.

*Poetics are primal
They erupt
Out of silence
Arise from one’s
Ontological core of being
Poetics are
Stories told
As whole fragments
Of parts*

Thomas cited in Nielsen, Cole & Knowles, 2001

Bachelard wonders what happens when our reveries are spoken. Referring to the one in reverie as a poetic dreamer, he suggests, “a spoken reverie transforms the solitary dreamer’s solitude into a company open to all the beings of the world. The dreamer speaks to the world, and now the world is speaking to him” (p. 187).

It's morning and I sit here again, revelling in the sun — another day has passed and my comfort with being here grows stronger. Each day as I spend time out on this dock, close to the water and the wind and the trees, I can feel my whole body softening—the armour I had erected to get me through these past few months is slowly, surely slipping away. I can once again hear the birds, the chimes ringing, the waves lapping to shore. I am drifting in and out of dream and reality. I can feel mom and dad's presence everywhere. The breeze blows through me. The wind seems to be talking to me, letting me know that mom and dad are still close. I stop writing for a moment. I feel the quiet. I feel the wind tug at my skirt, run over my skin, move through my hair. A calm envelopes me.

After the loss of both of my parents, I returned home to the landscape of my youth. I would sit on the dock by the water for hours on end. I listened to the waves lapping, crashing to the shore, the poplars swaying, breathing in the wind. The landscape held me in its arms. As David Abram tells us, “whenever I quiet the persistent chatter of words within my head, I find this silent or wordless dance always already going on—this improvised duet between my animal body and the fluid, breathing landscape that it inhabits” (Abram, 1997, p. 54). In my grief I was both in the world and unhinged from the world, I found myself in “that strange reverie which is written and indeed forms itself in the act of writing” (Bachelard, 1960, xv). It is the silence beneath the poetic experience, as the poet Howard Nemerov speculated, when we become conscious of the ‘first evanescent flickering of thought at the surface of things...as though the things themselves were beginning to speak” (Parabola, 1997, p. 67).

*Is this the silence I hear when I surrender to
my reverie? Is this the contemplative silence
that connects me to the world, opening me up
to listening, to the possibilities of living from a
deeper place?*

I read the words of Thomas Merton, which provides me with further insight into the strength of reflection and contemplation as a means of deep inquiry.

“Contemplation is the highest expression of man’s intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being” (Merton, 2002, p. 86).

Tim Lilburn speaks of the “cosmology of contemplation” as “a gradually growing familiarity; its deepest truth is a feeling-at-homeness, a grateful silence. It is a loving, a dwelling in, a resting, a being defined by a place, a branch, a river, a stone, a mountain, a lake (Lilburn, 1999, p. 37). He goes on to say that

...contemplation’s impulse is to understand the world...contemplation is inquiry into the nature of being...it is a style of holding oneself before the world resulting from an apprehension that the world cannot be known otherwise; cannot be known unless one lays down the task of knowing it while retaining the desire to know it....

Lilburn, p. 16

The poet says it best:

*You lie down in the deer’s bed
It is bright with the undersides of grass revealed by her weight during the
Length of her sleep. No one comes here; grass hums
Because the body’s touched it. Aspen leaves below you sour like horses
After a run. There are snowberries, fescue.
This is the edge of the known world and the beginning of philosophy.*

Lilburn, 1999

The lure of the poetic is about reclaiming this language of the body, the sensuous of which Abram speaks. It is being able "to see, to hear, to receive" (Kohak, 1984, p. xi). Poetry reaches beneath words. "Poetry works through ordinary feelings, familiar relationships, even when it sets itself a grand or historical challenge...it seizes on what is hidden from everyday view. The strangeness in our dailiness that we need to make meaning of...it remains unknowable because it works with the not yet known" (Geok-Lin Lim, cited in Moyers, 1995, p. 279). The knowledge poetry seeks is the most intimate...poetry in its incompleteness awakens a mourning over the easy union with the world that seems lost. It is about reclaiming all that has been lost in our quest for objectivity.

*I am tired of explanations.
Unless they are spoken by the best mouths.*

*Black bear coming up from sleep, growling in her happiness.
Nighthawks snapping their way through the dusk.*

*...Or the voice of the wind itself,
flailing out of any and every quarter of the sky.
Especially in summer.
Especially in the fields, close to the ground.
Listen!*

*Let the high branches go on with their opera,
it's the song of the fields I wait for,
when the sky turns orange and the wind arrives,
waving his thousand arms.*

*Or, autumn!
I hurry out in the middle of the field
and stand where the tough goldenrod,
seeded and tasselled, is vigorously tossing –
until something thankful rises from my own body...*

Mary Oliver, 1999

The words that flow from reverie are, I believe, more likely to hear this call of the body, more likely to go on foot with the body (Cixous, 1993). When we write from this place “it is everything that we don’t know that we can be that is written out of me” (Cixous, 1993). In writing, I perform an act of remembering. Bel Hooks expresses it beautifully: “that sense of sacredness of words, of writing, has been inside my mind, heart, and imagination for such a long time...calling me, calling me to come inside and to find what Rilke named the deeps into which your life takes rise”(hooks, 1999, p. xv).

My experience has taught me that writing creates this space to pause, to listen to the silence, to dwell in the philosophical, contemplative consciousness of which Kohak, Merton and Lilburn speak.

I am lost in the rich language of Susan Griffin's text, captivated by its beauty. Her words resonate. I am reading and dreaming, dreaming and reading. I look outside. The sun is shining. I can see the crocuses trying to force their way through the ground not yet sure whether it is safe to show their colours after the recent snowfall we have had. I am caught in the lyrics of Griffin's words which seems somehow to be echoing the beauty of the outside world. I am drawn in. I leave my reading and go outside to the garden. A breeze tugs at my hair. It blows through me. I can feel a softening in my body. My shoulders relax. I bend down to touch a pale white crocus, so soft, so tender. "The garden begins with my body. I am this place, though I feel it at the most attenuated level imaginable" (Lane 2004).

Perhaps this is reverie's plan for me — a pause, a moment, which enables me to be more fully present to the spaces, to the moments that move us beyond ourselves.

As I write, I am beginning to understand that the resonance of narrative, of poetry, runs deeper than merely providing form. Susan Griffin speaks to integrating the poetic into scholarship in her preface to Woman and Nature:

I found that I could best discover my insights about the logic of civilized man by going underneath logic, that is by writing associatively, and thus enlisting my intuition, or uncivilized self. Thus my prose in this book is like poetry, and like poetry it always begins with feeling. One of the loudest complaints which this book makes about patriarchal thought (or the thought of civilized man) is that it claims to be objective, and separated from emotion, and so it is appropriate that the style of this book does not make that separation.

Griffin, 1978, p. xv

This tension that Griffin speaks of, the tension that I am feeling as I write, is a tension deeply rooted in history. In Preface to Plato, Eric Havelock (1982) tells us that the "poetized tradition with its habit of passionate emotional identification was replaced with rules of principled, reasoned analysis as the basic mode of living" (Havelock, 1982, p. 44). Plato opens the Republic with a treatise against poetry. He sees poetry as a "crippling of the mind," "an enemy of truth", warning against "the powers of darkness" (p. 4). Plato seems to have been convinced that poetry and the poet had "exercised a control not merely over Greek verbal idiom but over the Greek state of mind and consciousness" (p. 46). He saw the poetic tradition, "with its self-surrender to the poetic performance and of self-identification with the situation and the stories related to the

performance," as the "chief obstacle to scientific rationalism, to the use of analysis to the classification of experience, to its rearrangement in sequence of cause and effect" (p. 47). Once poetry moved beyond purely oral communication and was rendered into the alphabet, more "rigidly standardized versions became possible for teaching purposes" (p. 5).

David Abram in his provocative book, The Spell of the Sensuous, examines the impact of the written word.

The ancient Greek psyche or soul was transformed from a phenomenon associated with the air and the breath into a wholly immaterial entity trapped, as it were, within the human body ... Only as the written text began to speak would the voices of the forest, and of the river, begin to fade. And only then would language loosen its ancient association with the invisible breath, the spirit sever itself from the wind, the psyche dissociate itself from the enviroing air...the air once the very medium of expressive interchange would become an increasingly empty and unnoticed phenomenon, displaced by the strange new medium of the written word.

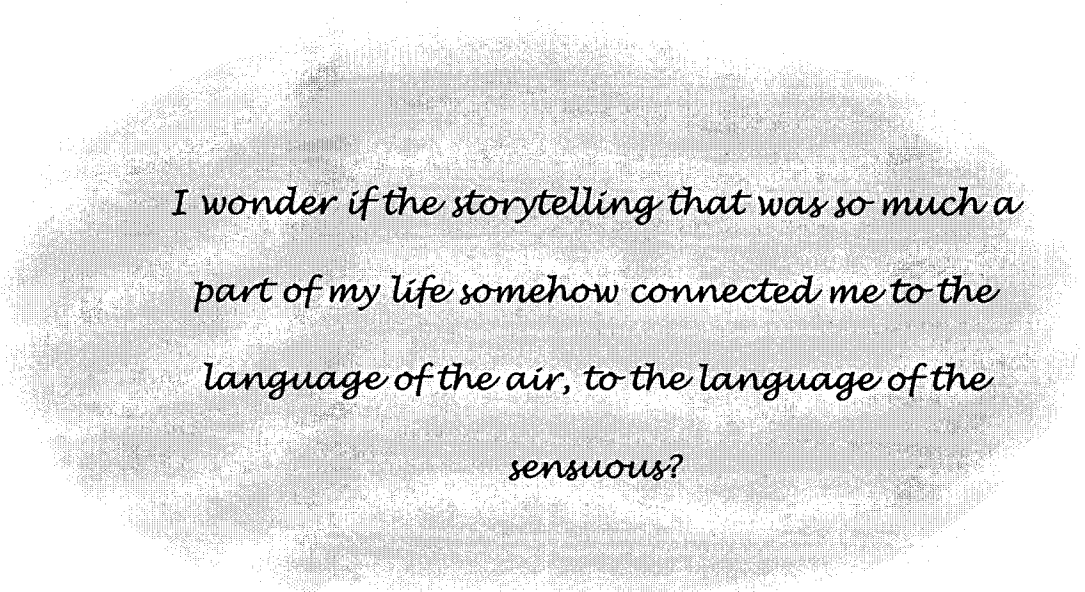
Abram, 1996, p. 254

The new sensibility that emerged from the written word, "comes to view itself as an isolated intelligence and can only be understood in relation to the forgetting of the air, to the forgetting of this sensuous but unseen medium that continually flows in and out of the breathing body, binding the subtle depths within us to the fathomless depths that surround us" (Abram, 1996, p. 255).

As I read Abram, my thoughts return again to the storytelling that was so much a part of my family and community life. I remember the many times we would be outside, telling and listening to stories, sitting by the lake, listening to the waves crash to shore, getting lost in the stories and the oceanic sound of the

wind blowing through the poplar trees. The wind seemed to carry the words of the story. Words weaving back and forth, blowing in the wind, crashing to the shore, finding our way home. Stories humming all around. *Breathing in. Breathing out.*

These moments of connectedness let us in on the secret kinship between us and the world, returning us to the “humility and grace that comes from being fully a part of that whirling world” (Abram, 1996, p. 270). We become connected to the language of the sensuous of which Abram speaks. We “enter into a reciprocity with the sensuous surroundings” (Abram, 1996, p. 271). We come full circle.



*I wonder if the storytelling that was so much a
part of my life somehow connected me to the
language of the air, to the language of the
sensuous?*

My writing comes to a halt, the flow of words has stopped...I go to the window and watch the snow falling, a haze of whiteness, a flurry of flakes...I stare out, pulled in by their constancy...I am captured...slowly the branches of cedar are covered in whiteness, the crocuses that were trying to find their way out of the ground have disappeared, finding protection from the damp and cold. I watch the flakes falling and falling, I stare out, mesmerized by their rhythm...the ground is soon covered with a blanket of white... the snow takes me back... the landscape of my youth returns...snow falling, covering the trees, the cold ground, the lake with its blanket of my white...I am at home, nestled by the fire watching on through the window...I hear the voice of my mother calling out to me.

Bachelard tells us that a moment lost in reverie is a surrender of the desire to know things so that we might once again, at least for a moment, be with them. It is from this place of reverie that we can inhabit the world more fully. It is in this state that we feel joined in oneness with each other, with a power greater than ourselves.

I wonder if reverie provides the space for me to reclaim the poetic, the sensuous, the consciousness that Abram speaks of in the world of schools. In a world where, as sociologist John Berger describes, "there is no continuity between actions, there are no pauses, no paths, no pattern, no past and no future... Nothing flows through; everything interrupts" (cited in Wheatley, 2000, p.15).

*"this is the beginning of sadness, I say to
myself,
as I walk through the universe in my
sneakers
It is time to say goodbye to my imaginary
Friends.
Time to turn the first big number.
It seems only yesterday I believe
There was nothing under my skin but light.
If you cut me I would shine.
But now when I fall upon the sidewalks of
Life,
I skin my knees. I bleed."
Billy Collins cited in Intrator & Scribner, 2003*

The room is hushed as I finish reading Billy Collin's provocative poem, "On Turning Ten." I am just about to invite the teachers in this summer institute I am teaching to talk and write in response to the poem when, RRRR-III—NNNG!!! We were all jolted out of the moment, the invitational tone in the room dissolves. People begin to shuffle papers, shift about as if getting ready to move. I stop the group and point out the change in tone after the loud ringing of the bell. We laugh at our conditioned response to the bells of school life. "Now I know what it feels like for children," one teacher comments, "I was so enjoying listening to the poem, thinking about myself at that age of ten, thinking about my students who are also ten. The bell jarred me, almost frightened me out of my thoughts and before I knew it I was getting ready to pack up my stuff. It was like I was one of Skinner's rats in the maze, responding to the bell. Why do we even have these bells in schools? "

Her question resonates with others. Why do we have bells? Where else in life are there bells? How can we get rid of the bells? This issue of bells struck a particularly strong chord for these teachers given the questions we had been exploring together in this course. We had been examining the work of Nel Noddings, Martin Brokenleg, Parker Palmer, Rachael Kessler, all who advocate the centrality of relationship, of building and strengthening community, of nurturing the spirit, the inner lives of children and teachers. Our conditioned response to the sound of the bells, the jarring impact it had on our thinking, our imagining together was a powerful reminder to all of us. The institution all too often gets in the way.

I encourage these classroom teachers to move outside to continue their discussions, to find a quiet place under the trees or in our school garden to reflect on the poem, on their work with children in schools. Once they are settled, I move from group to group, listening and joining in on their conversations. Several teachers have moved away from the groups and have found a space to

write. I can feel the cool of the wind, the warmth of the sun on my face. I can see the flowers blooming, children playing. I can hear the laughter of these teachers, of the children in the distance. I breathe out. We are once again imagining together. Our senses have been restored.

I return to the provocative work of David Abram who reminds me of the sensuous world we inhabit. Perhaps reverie can help us deeply connect to this world of the senses. Perhaps reverie can help us to remember that in building our worlds we too often lose the sense of connection with the cosmos. Reverie connects us to the ancient association with the invisible breath enabling us to tap a forgotten poetic consciousness. Kohak suggests that "if the solitude at dusk is not to be the place of self-loss but of discovery, it must be a place of remembering, not of forgetting" (Kohak, 1984, p. 34). Havelock reminds us that in oral cultures "the whole community from minstrel and prince down to peasant was attuned to the psychology of remembrance" (Havelock, 1982, p. 159). Reverie is a way for us to be attuned to the 'psychology of remembrance.'

Reverie helps us to remember.

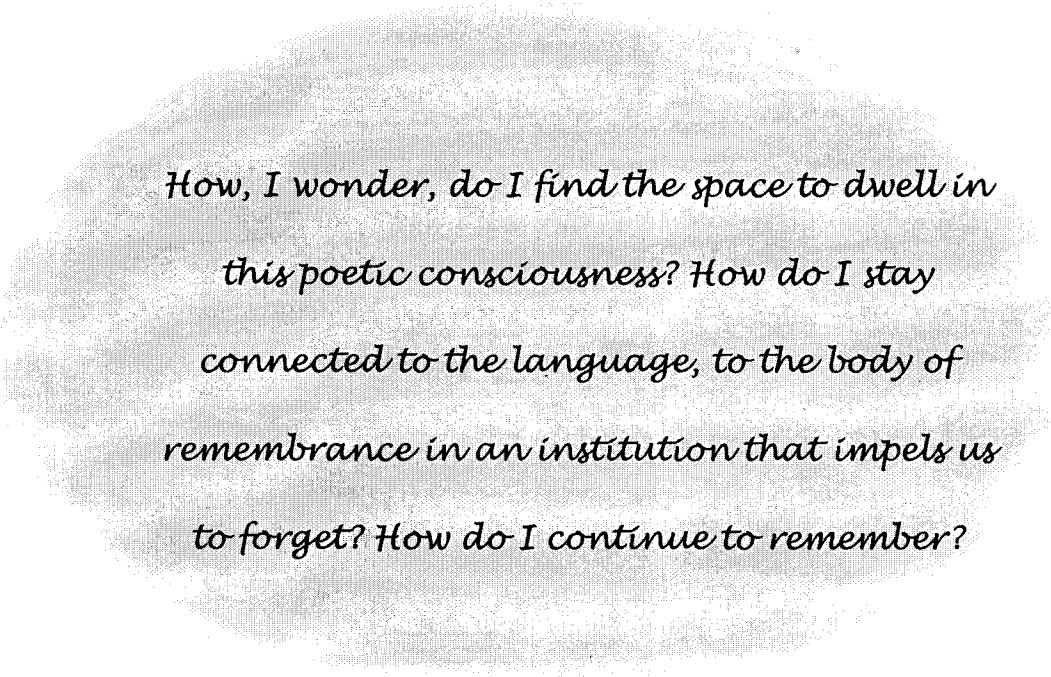
A longing, that is what I feel. A longing that runs deep and feels very ancient. A longing for what I'm not sure. It is a longing that the wind speaks of. Yesterday when I sat on the dock and the wind blew, caressing my face and hair, catching my skirt and brushing my bare legs, I felt it. The longing blew through me. While I am here all I want is to breathe this all in, breathe in the landscape—the water, the wind, the trees—I want to breathe in my mother and father—I can feel their presence, their history, their spirit, everywhere—I want to breathe it all in so it becomes part of me, carved into my body so I can remember.

It is easy enough to move into this space of reverie, sitting on a dock by the lake, tucked away in a garden, drifting in a boat on the water but how do we connect to this consciousness within the pressing demands of the institution.

I resonate with Celeste Snowber's call to live in a poetic way.

Poets and artists have long brought us to seeing the world with new eyes... But I would like to suggest that it works both ways. The poetic voice, which is also embedded in the physical and passionate, emerges from an erotic encounter with the world and others. This is not just for the professional artists but for humankind to be nourished in. It is the invitation to live in a poetic way.

Snowber, 1998, p. 121



*How, I wonder, do I find the space to dwell in
this poetic consciousness? How do I stay
connected to the language, to the body of
remembrance in an institution that impels us
to forget? How do I continue to remember?*

Chapter 4

Dwelling in Place

Dwelling is not primarily inhabiting but taking care of and creating that space within which something comes into its own and flourishes.

Heidegger, 1971, p. 151

Ms. Montabello, Ms. Montabello, the boys run up to me exploding with enthusiasm. You've got to come and see! You've got to come and see. Right Now! Right Now! We've found something so awesome. It's amazing. You've got to come and see! Come on! Come on! They grabbed my arm and began to pull me down the hallway. I could not help but smile. I was captivated by their energy, their total absorption with getting me down to the gym. I had not seen any of these boys so passionately engaged about life at school for a long time. I allow myself to be dragged along. All the while they are talking. "You won't believe it." "We've found a secret passage. It's under the gym floor" "There's all kinds of great stuff down there. No one knows about it. Just us!" "We found some names written on an old wall. It says 1967. That's over twenty years ago!" "No one has been down there since then. We are the first!" We go into the gym and they pull out the huge drawers that hold our gym equipment. I watch on as they crawl to the back of the drawer to an opening. "It's down here." "We go through down here." "Can we go? Can we go? Ms. Montabello, you've got to say OK! Who knows what we might discover down there." I smile. They are captured by the secretness of this place. They feel like explorers captivated by the possibilities of discovery. How I remember the appeal of these spaces. Groping

in the darkness, on hands and knees, fear and anticipation flowing through my veins as I edged my way through the cavern — the crawl space behind the furnace of our family home. I was usually at the front of the procession leading my sisters through the blackness, wiping cobwebs off our faces, breathlessly awaiting, anticipating what might greet us around the next corner. The excitement was palpable. A thundering groan from the furnace causes us to jump, scream and quickly scurry out of the crawl space. I look at the boys, waiting for my answer. "Of course you can go." They whoop with delight and scramble down the entry into the dungeon-like space underneath the gym floor. I stand in the gym listening to their voices echoing below me. I can feel myself drift back — the distant voices of the boy's laughter becomes my sisters' as they creep behind me in the darkness.

Being tucked into this space reminds me of the secret spaces of my youth, underneath the front porch, in the back of my parents' closet, down by the river, hiding among the tree, nestled, tucked away wrapped in the places of my imagination...

"You have to duck down to enter", I called out to the group arriving through the weathered gate. Silver lace vine and ivy cascade over the twig arbour, wrapping itself around the fence post, draping into the entrance so that all but the very small have to physically bend down to enter. Even still, you cannot avoid the stroke of the vine across your face, your hand, your bare shoulder. Once inside, any visitor to the garden is bombarded with a sensual explosion, a market place

of colour and smell. The elegance of yellow cone flower dancing in the breeze, brilliant red roses reaching for the sun, butterfly bush, its purple flowers yielding, a landing pad for the swallow tail butterflies who float around the garden. Tall grasses sway in the wind, water trickles in the pond, the smell of lavender, fennel and gilead intoxicate as you walk down the small path. Underneath the arbutus, its chartreuse skin peeking through the curled brown bark, an old wrought iron bed invites dreaming. "What a special place, everywhere you look, a surprise awaits you" one of the visitors exclaims. "You've created a secret garden." Tucked away, a refuge from the world outside.

"There are intermediate places that prepare us for life in a larger world"

(Noddings, 2002, p. 173). Gardens are among these places. "A garden is a real place imagined and, with time and care, an imagined place made real" (Lane, 2004, p.13). "Possibly no part of the house and its property is more associated with the dreaming described by Bachelard than the garden" (Noddings, 2002, p. 173). When we enter a garden we are drawn into the world of the sensuous. A garden opens our senses wide. We breathe in the sweet smell of the phlox, the brilliant yellow of the sunflowers, the caress of the long grass as you pass by.

The fragrance of the grass, speaks to me...and my heart soars.
Chief Dan George, 1989

I settle into my room at the back of the garden. Like the sparrows and chickadees that fill my garden, I have created a nest —branches from the arbutus tree wind around the walls of the old garage. I remember the day that I saved the branches

from the woodchopper. I heard the loud buzzing of a saw outside. I looked out into the backyard and saw the contractor for the house next door supervising the cutting of the branches. No care was being given to the task—with no apparent plan the young man up in the tree was hacking and sawing, pulling and tugging at branches. You could almost hear the arbutus cry out in anguish. I race out to the back yard. “What are you doing?” The three men who surround the slaying look at me, puzzled. What they are doing is very obvious. Plain to see. “You cannot cut this tree,” I go on, anxious to have them listen. “It’s a protected tree.” “Who is protecting this tree?” one of the men asks. I had read that this magnificent tree, a rare jewel this far inland, was in danger of extinction and was confident in my statement that they were now protected but by whom I was not sure. “By the people who protect arbutus trees” I replied confidently. One of the men, perhaps the supervisor of the young man up in the tree, slowly turned to look at me, butting his cigarette on the grass. He stared, not saying a word, and then looked up into the tree. “I guess that is enough” he called out. The buzzing stopped. Relief! “What are you going to do with all these branches,” I ask. He looks toward the wood chipper already chugging and sputtering, ready to devour the limbs of this tree. “What if I took them instead?” I ask. “Go ahead. They’re all yours.” They watch as I drag the branches over to my garage. The woodchopper sputters to a stop. And now here they are, winding throughout the nest I have created in ‘the fort’ as my son’s friends like to call it. Their red bark has dulled over time, the chartreuse skin beneath barely visible and yet their magnificence is still evident. Sitting in this nest brings a sense of security, a place to dream, “isolated between heaven and earth” (Bachelard, 1964, p. 97), away from the world and yet still be very much *in the world*.

*I have made 'an imagined place real' (Lane
2004) in my garden. How do we make 'an
imagined place real' in the world of schools?*

Gaston Bachelard in his book, The Poetics of Space, speaks of house as “ a nest for dreaming, a shelter for imagining” (Bachelard, 1964, p. 93). “When we examine a nest,” Bachelard tells us, “we place ourselves at the origin of confidence in the world, we receive a beginning of confidence, an urge toward cosmic confidence. Would a bird build its nest if it did not have its instinct for confidence in the world?” (p. 103).

As I sit here in the enclosure of this nest, caught in my reverie, I return to images of my own family home. “The way it appeared to my child’s eye, it is not a building, but is quite dissolved and distributed inside me: here one room, there another, and here a bit of corridor which, however, does not connect the two rooms, but is conserved in me in fragmentary form. Thus the whole thing is scattered about inside me.... like the blood in our veins” (Rilke, cited in Bachelard, 1964, p. 57).

I return to the kitchen, blue and white flooded in light, the screen door opening to the outdoors; the wind blowing through the poplars, the waves crashing to shore; the hallway at the back of the house beside the bedrooms, the glow of the night light as we navigated our way to the bathroom; the basement, dark and musty, full of family archives housed in the cedar chests scattered between the cots set up for the many visitors it housed; the foyer, a gallery of current family photos; the living room, its focal point the fireplace, the warmth of its flames fuelling the stories that were endlessly told in this space, its huge picture window opening up to the lake. You could not escape its lure even at the height of an engaging story. Its vista called out to you. As I think

about the house in this way, I am reminded how interwoven the house was with the environment, the boundaries between inside and outside blurred. There was always the sound of the wind. Winter or summer it was always there, blowing warmth in the summer and cold, bone-chilling, dancing with snow in the winter. The sound of the waves crashing to shore, the moaning of the ice in the winter. "The universe comes to inhabit the house" (Bachelard, 1964, p. 51).

"All really inhabited space" Bachelard writes "bears the essence of the notion of home" (Bachelard, 1964, p. 5). The word inhabit comes from a root that means to give and to receive. We inhabit a place when we give something to it and when we open ourselves to receive what it has to offer. "The inhabitant 'dwells', as Illich would say, in an intimate, organic and mutually nurturing relationship with a place" (Orr, 2005, p. 130).

How do we build the home of which Bachelard speaks? How do we enter into this reciprocity with a place, renewing "the humility and grace that comes from being fully a part of that world?" (Abram, 1960, p. 270). How do we create a place to dwell within the world of schools?

I read the letter from Tracy, a student I worked with for five years while I was principal. She graduated from high school several years ago and still writes me every holiday season.

Dear Ms. Montabello,

I just want to wish you a Merry Christmas and let you know that I still love you. I know it's been a while since we last saw each other—I miss you lots. I remember when you first came to Mary Street Elementary and you changed the office. We couldn't believe it! It looked like a kid's room. You didn't even have a desk! Those little chairs, even you sat at one, paintings, puppets, and books, and books, everywhere. It was such a cozy, little room, like a nest. We all wanted to spend time in there. It was like an escape from the rest of the school. As I got to know you as I have over these past many years, I have realized your office is just like you, or you are just like your office...cozy, warm, an escape from the world ... sitting with you in your office, somehow you always made me (and many others) feel as though there were a great deal of good things in life to look forward to.

Love Tracy

Tracy's letter speaks to how my very intentional creation of space has influenced those who inhabit it. "House" for Bachelard, is "one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind. ...Not only do we come back to it, but we dream of coming back to it, the way a bird comes back to its nest, or a lamb to the fold" (Bachelard, 1964, p. 6).

...a sacred space in the garden needs to be made with great love and great intention and commitment ...every garden requires love and vision – like a child it needs to be nurtured and understood for its own potential...

McDowell, 1998, p. 71

I am sitting at my table helping a student with her writing. I look up and see Josh, Wayne and Eddy standing there, big grins on their faces. Josh comes into my room and plops himself down in my worn out bean bag chair. "My favourite chair! He smiles and surveys the room. "How I miss this place! Couldn't you just move to the secondary school Ms. Montabello." He looks over at Wayne and Eddy who have settled themselves into the small chairs. "Don't you remember all the great times we had in here, all the talks? Ms. Montabello, you could get us to talk about anything." "The girls used to cry a lot," interjected Wayne. "That's because you were being mean to them," retorted Eddy. They all laughed together.

We care about places as well as people, so much so that we can say that caring belongs to places. We care about places in many ways, but in building on them—building with them, indeed building them—they become the ongoing 'stars of our life', that to which we turn when we travel and to which we return when we come back home.

Casey cited in Noddings, 2002, p. 167

When I first move to a new school as a principal, the first thing I do is transform my office space. I take out the computer, the desk and the office chairs. I tuck the official binders, handbooks and policy books away inside the filing cabinet. I bring in a small round table for my desk, small colourful chairs that students over the years have painted, pillows, stuffed animals and books everywhere. My shelves are lined with all of the children's books I have collected. Initially I thought of this design as an attempt to create a more child friendly space and yet I have learned it is something much deeper. The small chairs set the tone. It is a visual image as others walk into this space. It says I want to sit beside you, knee

to knee, head to head, heart to heart. It tells children I want to be with them. Vivian Gussey Paley (1989) talks about 'finding the child,' remembering what it was like to be a child so we can understand their world. The space I have created in my office has become a place to dwell in, a home. It speaks to my desire to find the child in them and in myself.

The images, the moments contained within my office space flow together, 'dissolved and distributed inside me.' So many children and youth come and go. So many stay. So many return, nestled in, embraced by its warmth. Within the institution, it provides for many the home of which Noddings speaks. "At home, sheltered, we can be ourselves...a child who is well sheltered, one who has a healthy home, can wander forth and, as Heidegger put it, dwell in the world" (Noddings, 2002, p. 150).

"Ms. Montabello, can we hang out in your office over lunch today." I look behind me to see three of our intermediate girls waiting for my response. I hesitate for just a moment knowing that the office staff sometimes finds the gathering of children in my office distracting. "Before you say anything. We know it's a nice day outside but there is no place to sit out there, no place to talk. We just want our own little space away from everybody else." I nod my head. The girls run off.

Bachelard writes of the house that is constructed in poetic memory. The house is a product of both physical place and the attentive love that one receives there.

"In time the boundary of the person and the place become almost indistinguishable" (Orr, 2005, p. 102).

"Good morning Ibrahim, hungry again?" I say as I walk into my office. Ibrahim has become a familiar sight every morning, his tall, lean body hunched over in one of my small chairs, eating the snacks I have tucked away. "You could always take the food outside or to your classroom if you wanted." "If it's okay with you I'll stay Ms. Montabello, things go better when I start my day here."

Bachelard goes on to suggest that "the house's virtues of protection become human virtues, the house acquires the physical and moral energy of a human body...come what may the house helps us to say, "I will be an inhabitant of the world, in spite of the world" (Bachelard, 1964, p. 6).

I am about to walk into my office when I notice the lights are off, I peek inside. I see Carrie, curled up in a fetal position, asleep on my bean bag chair. I look at the secretary somewhat puzzled. Carrie no longer attends our school. She whispers to me. "She's been on the streets all night. She came looking for you. I gave her something to eat and then she fell asleep." I look down at Carrie, sleeping the peaceful sleep of a young child. I close the door and let her find rest. The house holds childhood motionless in its arms" (Bachelard, p.8).

Schools are spaces where several hundred children and adults share a space in which they live with each other for five plus hours every day. How do we construct a place, a home that moves beyond merely a space to gather? Nel

Noddings speaks to this sense of place, this deep sense of home as an essential ingredient in the life of school. "It is the job of schooling to provide hope, to nurture talent, and to construct a place in which children can learn to see places as they might be...(Noddings, 2002, p. 167). "The need for home lies deep in the human heart" (Moore, 1996, p. 42), says Thomas Moore in The Re-Enchantment of Everyday Life. Moore deepens my understanding of and insight into places as they might be as he speaks about ecology's home.

Ecology is made up of two important Greek words, each of them a gateway to mysteries that lie at the very base of human life. Its etymology shifts attention away from science and focuses on emotion and mystery, religion and heart...eco an abbreviated form of the Greek *oikos*, means home...*oikos* embraces our emotional search for a home...at the deepest level, ecology involves the mysterious work of providing a home for the soul, one that is felt in the very depth of the heart...for ecology is a state of mind, an attitude, a posture that begins at the very place you find yourself this minute and extends to places you will never see in your lifetime.

Moore, 1996, p. 41

How do we create the home of which Moore speaks? How do we create a space for this ecological consciousness to thrive? How do we create a home for the soul?

"It's very late you two. You better think about going home soon. And so should I." "Just a few more minutes Ms. Montabello." Jason's visual journal is due tomorrow. We are just about done." I surveyed my room, paper was strewn everywhere. Magazines were spread around my small space. Felt pens, paint, glitter glue. Evidence of the work that had been going on for the past several hours as Sara had helped Jason complete his final assignment. We had all been working together in this small space. I too was completing some work that was due tomorrow. We had stopped only to go across to the mall and get a quick bite to eat. "I know but it's nine o'clock. It is time for all of us to go home." "But Ms. Montabello, this is our home, here with you." Sara looks up and smiles at me.

*The bumble bees
Know where their home is.
They have memorized
Every stalk and leaf
They fall from the air at
Exactly
The right place,
They crawl
Under the soft grasses,
They enter
The darkness
Humming.*

Mary Oliver 2002

Bachelard suggests we must look for centers of refuge in houses with many rooms. He quotes Baudelaire who said: in a palace, "there is no place for intimacy" (Bachelard, 1964, p. 29). There is little space for intimacy in the institution of school. My office creates a place for the refuge, the intimacy of which Bachelard speaks. Tucked away in the nest of my office, the children who inhabit it open themselves to the place, receiving what it has to offer. They are

nurtured in this space that, in the words of one student, “feels like heaven.” Infused with the spirit of the place, away from the institutional demands, they soften into themselves. Tucked away in this nest with them, I, too, soften. I can feel the pressure of policy, the rigidity of ‘zero tolerance’ melt away. I respond as a woman, a mother. I remember my own childhood, tucked away in the spaces of my imagination.

The children’s book, In the Attic, speaks to these places of childhood reveries:

I had a million toys, but I was bored.
So I climbed into the attic.
The attic was empty
Or was it?

I found a family of mice...
And a cool, quiet place to rest and think.
I met a spider and we made a web.
I opened windows to other worlds.
I found an old flying machine...
And I made it work.

I went out to look for someone to share what I had found...
And I found a friend I could talk to.
My friend and I found a game that could go on forever, but it was
time for dinner.

So I climbed out of the attic, and told my mother where I’d been all
day.
“But we don’t have an attic,” she said.
I guess she doesn’t know about the attic.
She hasn’t found the ladder.

Oram, 1984

All too often, as adults, especially within the walls of the institution, we cannot find the ladder. We lose touch with the spirit of childhood and all the possibilities it evokes. We lose our connection to the spaces and places where we can connect to these possibilities. In the world of schools, the bureaucracy, the

policies, the procedures, all too readily impel us to forget. I return to the story that began this chapter.

The laughter grows louder and quite suddenly breaks me out of my reverie. I look up to see several young children come racing through the gym floors. Tom, our day care worker, follows behind them. "We're just coming in to play in the gym. Is it OK?" He asks tentatively, wondering I am sure what I am doing standing in the middle of the gym by myself. A scream comes from underneath the gym floor. Tom looks at me with a puzzled face. I explain that the boys are exploring the space under the gym floor. "Is that safe?" Tom asks. "What if something happens down there? Wouldn't you be liable?" I am jolted back to reality by his response. What am I doing? I am not that young girl of my reverie. I am a mature woman, a mother, the Principal of this school. I am responsible for the safety of the children under my care. What was I thinking? What if something happened to one of the boys under the floor as Tom was suggesting? My mind jumps to a vision of me trying to explain Jason's broken arm to his parents, to the school board officials. What was I thinking?

I am abruptly reminded that schools as institutions live in the consciousness of rules, regulations and policies. The spirit of childhood my reveries evoked is perceived at best, frivolous or careless at worst, dangerous, unsafe. And safety in schools is of utmost concern. Too many stories of children hurt on the school ground, too many stories of complaints to the school board, too many stories of law suits has caused us to limit, to restrict the possibilities for our children. I wonder what has been lost in our quest for safety? Have we, as Nel Noddings (2002) would suggest, over-managed and over-protected our children? In

restricting their exploration, have we restricted their imaginations? Have we restricted our own?

I watch as the four young girls strain to throw the skipping rope over the soccer goal posts on the playground. They cannot quite reach it. Jackie bends down, scooping her hands together, urging Nancy to climb up using her hands as a step. Nancy shakes her head. They quickly change positions. Jackie jumps up, skipping rope in hand and throws it over the cross bar of the posts. They all cheer with delight. I watch with curiosity. What next I wonder? Is this the object of their game? Alice produces another skipping rope from her coat pocket. They begin to tie a series of knots, creating a loop at the bottom. Jackie jumps up, puts her feet inside the loop and begins to swing from the beam. The girls begin to laugh and start to push her. Higher and higher she goes. Squeals of laughter. I wander over. Jackie sees me. "Ms. Montabello, look at us, we've created a swing," she calls out as the other girls push her higher and higher into the air. There are no swings on this playground so these young girls have created their own. I smile at their creative construction. I continue to watch as each girl climbs up, throwing her head back with laughter as she flies through the air. I smile, remembering the joy I experienced as a young girl, flying through the air on our makeshift swing, the breeze blowing on my face, my mind soaring into the unknown places of my imagination. The school bell rings, awakening me from my brief reverie. I help the girls untie the ropes. We enter the school.

"Sue." I turn to see one of our teachers calling out my name. "Did you tell the girls they could swing on the skipping ropes? I told them they had to stop. It was dangerous. They could catch their hands or their feet. They could catch their heads in the rope. They could strangle! They told me you had told them it was okay. You didn't did you?"

I am once again reminded of my place within the institution. I begin to question myself. Was I being careless? Was I putting the girls at risk? I am once again enclosed within the pressing demands of the institution. These demands impel us to forget. We forget that we were once children, or the children we might have been—jumping off steep rocks, climbing tall trees, plunging into freezing water. We forget there is world outside just waiting to be discovered.

I look out the window and watch my son with his much younger nieces and nephews. The snow has fallen the night before. As far as the eye can see, the landscape is draped in white. They are all bundled in the clothes of winter, bulky parkas and snow pants, scarves wrapped tightly around their faces, toques pulled down, eyes peering out. Stumbling and fumbling in the white, my sister's children grab handfuls of snow and throw it at my son. He chases them, picking them up easily in his strong arms, throwing them playfully into the closest snow drift. They laugh and pull themselves out, running toward him, arms full of snow once again. He laughs and readies himself for the attack. Their laughter takes me back, seeping into my memories...my sisters running toward me, arms full of snow, laughing, falling, stumbling. I can feel the snow on my face.

“Some people are beginning to try and understand where they are, and what it would mean to live carefully and wisely, delicately in a place... (Snyder, cited in Jardine, 2000, p. 30). And yet, haven’t children always understood this? It is children who can help us understand. It is children who can help us remember. I read some of our students’ poems that speak so strongly to their sense of place in the world...

*I am from the bars in the playground that turned into my safari
I am from the trees and rocks that transformed into my plane and ammo
The sweet smell of victory whenever I won with my dad
And the bitter taste of loss whenever I lost with my friends
Then the call of my mom telling me it was time to eat*

*I am from the odd looking rocks
Which formed a man made mountain
That we climb everyday
Below it, a pond as green as grass
A zigzag bridge
The sweet taste of honey*

*I am from the joy when I caught
Dozens of firebugs and their relieved sigh
When they were released in the dim light
Making my face glow*

*I am from some secret club of kings and presidents and captains and
pirates
The laughter spluttering throughout the white
The arms of fig trees as my sweater turns pink*

*How do we instil this sense of place, this deep
connectedness to the sensuous in the world of
schools? How do we ourselves stay in touch with
this intimacy, this reciprocity with place?*

I read my own poem that speaks so strongly to my sense of place in the world...

I am from a land of solid rock and deep water

*A land of bitter cold and snow drenched trees
Steadfast poplar and weeping birches
Bending, dancing,
Breathing with the wind*

*I am from the land of stormy water
Waves crashing, breaking on the shore
Wind breathing through the poplars
Like an ocean,
The sound intoxicates*

*I am from the land of cold, sharp granite
rising up from the water
Bits of moss struggling to find life
Relentless, unforgiving
No place to hide*

*I am from the sounds of laughter
Our bodies screaming , plunging into the lake
..throwing ourselves into piles of snow
Silence, bitter cold
Our breath stops—frozen*

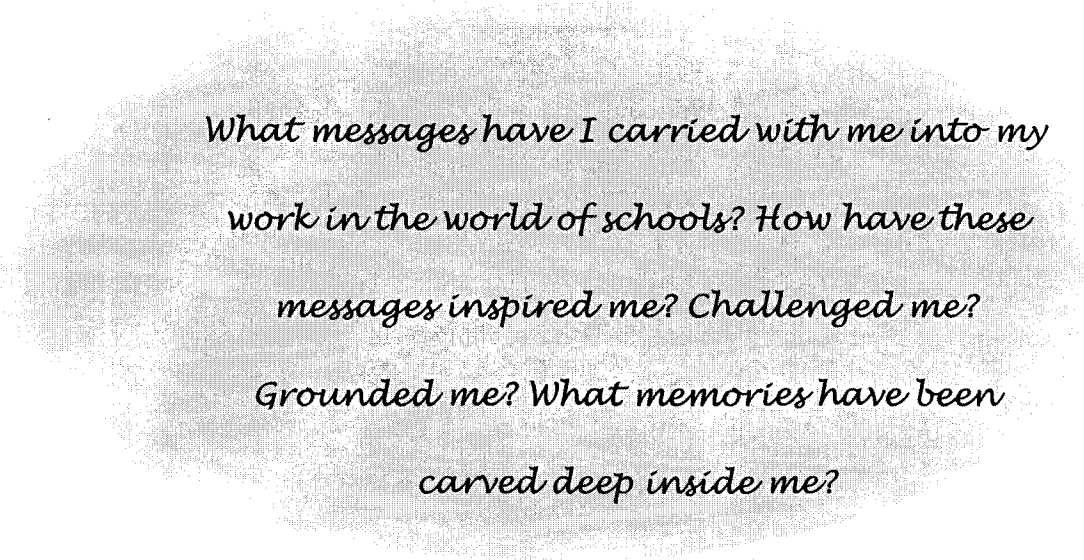
*I am from slipping, scrambling over rocks
Blueberry bushes cracking through
Barefoot, soft, rich clay
oozing through our toes
Life amidst the barrenness*

*I am from the call of the loons,
The whoosh of the ducks gliding across the lake
I am from smooth rocks weathered by relentless waves
Wind blows through
Cuts inside us*

*Poems and scattered thoughts,
Shining lights at night
Early mornings by the water
Dreams captured by the wind*

That water, that rock, that wind, still lives in me now.

Wallace Stegner tells us that “whatever landscape a child is exposed to early on, that will be the sort of gauze through which he or she will see all of the world afterward” (cited in Nabhan & Trimble, 1994, p.121). Listening to the messages of my land, I wonder how they have shaped me?



*What messages have I carried with me into my
work in the world of schools? How have these
messages inspired me? Challenged me?
Grounded me? What memories have been
carved deep inside me?*

James Raffan (2002), in his book Deep Waters, gives me some insight into the whispered messages of the lake that was my home. He traces the history of the lake initially through the voyageurs.

The commerce of Lake Timiskaming had all the colour and boisterousness of voyageur life...there were friendships made; rivalries between canoes; and stories of toughness and loyalty, told and retold, boasts mixed with trail wisdom and the wisdom that passed knowledge from old hands to new. From 1720 onward the lake's deep waters were alive with brigades of big bark canoes.... Romance aside, the lake was not something to be trifled with. Because of its high rocky walls, especially in the lower half of the lake, winds from almost any direction would be funnelled north or south, as if in a tube or a rifle barrel. Waves would build over long, straight stretches of open water...Voyageurs quickly learned from

stories and experience that Timiskaming was unforgiving...there was no place to hide on Lake Timiskaming.

Raffan, p. 13

"There was no place to hide." His words resonate. The lake's presence was a force in our life growing up. In winter, skating on its cold, impenetrable surface, listening to the heaving of the ice, the rumblings from deep below, miles and miles of white drifting along its rocky shores. In the summer, canoeing early in the morning when the water was like glass, swimming late afternoon to escape the heat of the sun in the summer, sitting by its shores at dusk watching the water glow. Even when we were inside the house, the lake continually announced its presence. The waves crashing to shore, the glistening of the water through the windows, the sound of the loons as they glided gently over the water's surface, the thunder of the ice heaving under its weight. Even in the nest of the house we could not hide. The lake revealed itself to us as a living being.

How does a landscape, its memory, get carved into you? How does it become part of you, part of the blood remembering that Rilke speaks of?

And still it is not enough to have memories. You must be able to forget them when they are many and you must have the immense patience to wait until they return. For the memories themselves are not important. Only when they have changed into our very blood, into glance and gesture, and are nameless, no longer distinguished from ourselves – not till then can it happen that in a most rare hour the first word of a verse rises in their midst and goes forth from them.

Rilke, 1975, p. 94

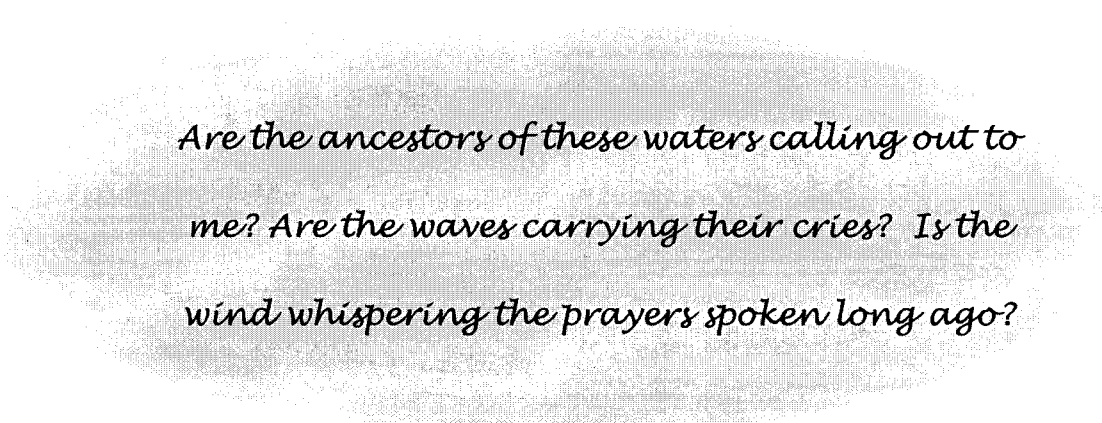
I remember hours and hours of staring out at the lake, sometimes alone, sometimes with others, not looking for anything in particular. There was no purpose to my reverie. I was not studying birds or the landscape or weather conditions but rather I was surrendering to the lake's beauty, its mystery, its sadness. "Once in a lifetime we ought to give ourselves up to a particular landscape, to dwell on it, wonder about it, imagine it, touch it, listen to it and recollect" (Orr, 2005, pg. 106).

*Deep, mysterious waters,
Waves rippling, building,
Swelling with the promise of another storm
Winds blowing, funnelling through the walls of granite
Steep, choppy waves
Rumblings deep below the water's surface
Cries drifting in and out of the wind
Falling into a column of black water
Into the depths below
A portal to the underworld...
Timiskaming*

Bachelard speaks of the femininity of reverie. "In each of us, man or woman, the best of our reveries come from our feminine element...there we gain the gentleness of living" (Bachelard, 1960, p. 92). My reveries by the lake returned me

to this receptive space. I opened myself up the landscape, surrendering the desire to know things, so that I might once again, at least for a moment, be with them.

As I read James Raffan's account of the mystery of this lake and the students and their teacher who drowned in its waters, the many voyageurs who, despite prayers and offerings, were consumed by the lake, I wonder what stories the waves might speak to me in my reverie?



Are the ancestors of these waters calling out to me? Are the waves carrying their cries? Is the wind whispering the prayers spoken long ago?

We are standing on the dock, my sisters and our families, waiting for the boat that will take us out to Windy Point. A quiet has descended. The wind has picked up, the waves begin to grow. The boat arrives. We climb in, carefully, tentatively carrying the urns, which hold the ashes of my parents. Yesterday we had a memorial service, a gathering of friends at our family home. These were my father's last instructions, to create a space for friends to gather, a place that brought them comfort. Our family home by the lake brought the solace we were all searching for. We could

sense their presence, in the feel of the wind, the sound of the waves. So much laughter, so many stories, caught in the wind, the oceanic sound of the poplars, the glow of the sun off the lake. We were embraced by the landscape. The laughter of yesterday has subsided, the stories now unspoken, caught silently in our memories as the boat moves steadily down the lake. We arrive. Windy Point, aptly named. The wind blows, the boat rocks, the waves break. Slowly, reverently, we each take a handful of ashes and throw them to the wind, into the choppy waters below. Timiskaming, deep waters, some say a portal to the underworld. The waves swell up, white foam licking at the boat. The wind blows through us, surrounds us, embraces us. The water begins to breathe. The experience of one being enters and becomes the experience of another. (Griffin 1995)

I return once again to the writings of David Abram who tells us

...the wind, was an uncommonly sacred power for most of the native peoples of North America... Wind existed first, as a person, and when the Earth began its existence Wind took care of it... Wind exists beautifully, they say. Back there in the underworlds, this was a person it seems... wind provided both breath and guidance. ...That which is within and that which surrounds one is all the same and it is holy.

Abram, 1996, p. 231

Because you are a kindred spirit –
Come –
And stand beside me upon this familiar
Hill – where the wind sweeps upward from
The valley – and touches us with its
Cooling fragrance –
Come –
And rest for awhile – and watch the brown grasses gently
Nodding – and hear the whispered music of
The oak leaves –
Here upon this hill – we

Are close to the things eternal – you and I –
Close to the essential things – the things of
The spirit – the unseen things –
Here upon
This peaceful hill – the wind sings softly
In the gathering dust – listen – listen – listen and
Let your troubled heart –
Sing with the wind

*It is late at night. The darkness has descended. I cannot find sleep. The events of the day still
flowing through me. I cannot shake the image of my sisters and our families huddled together in
the boat, rocking back and forth in rhythm to the waves, the wind scattering my parent's ashes.
They drifted away from us. I leave the house and step out onto the damp grass. It softens under
my bare feet. I move toward the water, listening to the poplar trees, the wind blowing through
them, creating a reassuring music with their noise. I am in reverie, embraced by the oceanic sound,
like a child in the womb. The wind. Woniya waken - the holy air— renewing all by its breath.*

A moment such as this, a moment lost in reverie, connects us to the ancient pattern, the rituals of the land. It lets us in on the secret kinship between us and the world. Ritual, according to Ellen Dissanayke (1992), helps to move us through the liminal phase “outside ordinary social life and then back to social reintegration in the new state” (p. 70). She refers to this liminality as “a state of being betwixt and between, neither here nor there” (p. 70). Perhaps reverie provides this alternate space- a necessary inbetweeness (Heilbrun 1999). Both Dissanayke and Heilbrun quote Turner (1974) who suggests that participants in ritual may well experience a “heightened emotional condition” in response to this liminal state. “Individuals feel themselves joined in a state of oneness, with

each other, with power greater than themselves, or with both—a sort of merging" (cited in Dissanayake, p. 70).

Even as I write Turner's words I am immediately drawn back to my wondering about reverie and its significance. In reverie we reacquaint ourselves with our world. The world is opened to us and establishes us as members of this cosmic community. In such moments we sense that we are truly part of a larger order.

...the snow is falling—softly, gently covering the ground—my mother and I are together in the bedroom, drinking coffee and discussing the “to do’s” of the day— buying cards for her friends, special ones that speak to her friendship with them, organizing dinner for the evening meal as my sister and her family arrive tonight, rearranging the dining room so that we can fit all the family in . It is important to mother that we all sit together to share in our family meal—she has always made sure that all the details are looked after—the table set, the gifts purchased and wrapped—all these details make up my mother’s life— and mine too, I realize. There is an intimacy to this moment, the two of us going over the details of the day together—her telling me what needs to be done, in which way. Later in the morning as I wrap her gifts, organize the food for the meal, set the table I find myself thinking of her as she lies in the bedroom, taking oxygen into her body to keep her breathing—as I quietly fold the napkins and place them on the table, as I wash and peel and chop the vegetables for dinner, I can feel her breathing, I can feel her presence.

Thomas Berry tells us that the "human community was energized by the cosmic rituals wherein ultimate meaning was attained, absolute mysteries were enacted, human needs were fulfilled" (Berry, 1988, p. 25).

Something so simple, my mother and I enacting the rituals of welcoming family and friends, preparing the food, setting the table, gathering everyone together. Something so simple and yet, as I have come to understand, so profound. It is as if I am connected not only to my mother but also in some unspoken way to something greater than both of us through these small rituals of daily life.

As Susan Griffin explains

...bound by little domesticities into closeness with my mother, we were being held in an ancient pattern through which rain, gravity, sunlight move particles of earth, energy, spores, leaves or water move from one place to another, composing and decomposing life....The idea of the world creating itself through small chores. The universe as a place of constant cooking and cleaning, merging and separation. Plant life taking nourishment from earth, fusing with the bodies of animals...Everything dissolving into the whole and then separating, resolving into being.

Griffin, 1995, p. 148

I am beginning to understand that the little rituals we as humans enact are part of an ancient pattern rooted in the land itself. "Fidelity to human order, if it is fully responsible, implies fidelity also to natural order" (Berry, cited in Jardine, 2000, p. 33).

I sit on the dock and watch as the waves crash to shore. The white foam leaps up over the rocks, worn smooth by the faithfulness of this ritual. One wave dissolves, another moves quickly in to take its place. I stay there for a long time, mesmerized, lost inside the constancy of the rhythm.

As I sat on the dock that day I was alone in our family home by the lake. I had gone home ahead of my sisters to begin to pack up the house, knowing that after the memorial service for my mother and father we would need to have everything cleared out so we could put the house up for sale. I had volunteered to do this. Indeed I had felt an urgency to do so

My desire to do this was not however coming from a place of efficiency but rather I knew I needed some time alone to be with the memory of my mother and father. My sisters had worried that it would be too painful to be there alone at such a time of loss. And they were right. It was painful. I was bereft, torn open. And yet

...there are periods one goes through when one is constantly aware of being bereft of something. When this feeling comes we have to watch over its purity and not misuse it. The feeling is itself authentic and is an indication of being near to something. One doesn't really feel deprived until one is close

Bennett cited in Housden, 1993, p. 17

And I indeed felt close. I opened myself to the landscape of my youth, breathing it in, letting the sound of the water, the rustle of the wind, the sweet smell of the poplars, the warmth of the sun wash over me.

The wind begins to blow, distracting me from my work in the garden.

I feel the warm breeze on my legs. The leaves in the poplars began

to rustle. I stop digging. I pause. I breathe it in. The wind tugs at my

hair, sends shivers up my shirt, surrounding me with its embrace.

The wind quickly picks up. The trees sway, the wind crashing

through their branches, an ocean of leaves. I stand in the middle,

entranced by the oceanic sound. I close my eyes. I breathe in. I am

in prayer.

The land in a sense became my church, my place of communion. Susan Griffin tells us “when the divide between the sacred and profane falls, every day life is graced and all that is holy is heavy with vitality. Communion is not only an isolated ritual; it is a matter of living” (Griffin, 1995, p. 151). She goes on to say “the experience of birth and death include the presence of all existence. And the boundaries of being are permeable. The experience of one being enters and becomes the experience of another. Daily one takes the very substance of the earth into one’s cells and also into one’s souls” (p. 68).

My bed began to tremble, the walls vibrated, there was a thunderous sound that shook the household awake. I ran out into the living room, my sisters and father quickly joined me. We all looked at each other, thinking the same thing, was it her? My mother had died yesterday, here in our family home with all of us around her...she could no longer speak. Was this amazing sound my mother, who now in a different life form found voice? No one spoke. We all stood there motionless looking out at the white blanket that covered the ground and the lake beyond, waiting, wondering if she would speak to us again. Nothing, we waited, still nothing. My father was the first to speak “it must have been the ice heaving from the pressure, it happens at this time of year in the dark of winter.”

The landscape of Northern Ontario is rugged and forbidding—the great Canadian Shield. Miles, and miles of jagged rock and untamed bush. The climate too is harsh—long, cold winters and short, scarce summers. The landscape was both magnificent and dangerous. When we looked out over the lake at our

doorstep we were reminded of the story of the thirteen students from a private school down south who drowned because they did not understand the wildness of the winds, the unforgiving nature of the granite walls and deep, cold water. At the same time we were captivated by the sound of the water, the feel of it on our skin, the way the wind caught the waves so they came crashing to shore. Daily the landscape reminded us that we were connected to something much bigger than ourselves.

As Thomas Berry explains:

...if we have a wonderful sense of the divine it is because we live amid such awesome magnificence. If we have refinement of emotion and sensitivity it is because of the delicacy, the fragrance and indescribable beauty of song and music and rhythmic movement in the world about us. If we grow in life vigour, it is because the earthly community challenges us, forces us to struggle to survive, but in the end reveals itself as a benign providence.

Berry, 1988, p. 11

The 'earthly community' that Berry speaks of is understood to be relational, ecological and interdependent. It is 'a historical community of interdependent beings.' It is a community of memory in the most profound sense.

It is the second last day of school before the Christmas holidays. Our school community is gathered together, crowded into our gymnasium for our annual concert. I look around. On stage I see the exuberant faces of our children. I see Jennie, one of our autistic children staring out at the crowd, her aide crouched down beside her, a pair of reindeer antlers on her head, trying to blend in with the children so that Jennie could be on stage, part of the community. I look at Russell and then catch his mother's eye. We smile knowingly at each other. It is

only through a great deal of behind-the-scenes massaging that Russell has managed to hang onto his key role in the concert. A gentle touch, a quiet reminder, a heart to heart talk backstage during practice, helped him breathe his way through the drama coach's demands. Our smiles confirm the shared care for her son. I look around at the teachers, sitting in front mouthing the words to the songs, straightening costumes, guiding the younger ones off stage, watching their students with the attentive eye of a parent. It has taken a lot of talk, a lot of compromise and concession to all be here today — the authority of teacher job action an ever present point of discussion. And yet we all acknowledged our concert as a significant tradition in our community. A quiet hush comes over the crowd followed by the sounds of 'oohs' and 'aahs', and the flashing of cameras as our kindergarten students arrive. It is difficult to describe what happens when our kindergarten students, always, the last to join the others, come on stage. It happens every year. The joyful, sometimes awkward, always energetic, out of step performance of the youngest members of our community radiates hopefulness. They take their bows to wild cheers and applause from the audience. Together all of our students on stage take their cue and begin to sing their last song. Their voices full of childhood and all its possibilities touch all of us. There is such a tremendous spirit in the room. Teachers, parents, grandparents, friends, all gathered together around our children. In that moment we are united as a community. We are collectively remembering, returning to the possibilities of the child, to our own possibilities. It feels that there is something greater than all of us at work.

"Childhood remains within us a principle of deep life, of life always in harmony with the possibilities of new beginnings" (Bachelard, 1960, p. 124). Bachelard urges us to "apply the spirit of childhood in our complex lives"(p.131). And yet all too often within schools, an institution with children at its center, we lose touch with this spirit. We too readily return to the rule-driven consciousness that permeates this world. We forget that childhood is a state of mind, a feeling, a disposition that is "within us, still within us, always within us" (p.130).

"What are those boys doing now! I have had it with their negative attitude. Look at them, they are terrorizing the kindergarten students." I walk around the corner to see what is happening to cause this strong response from one of our teachers. Our grade seven boys have been pushing the boundaries of everyone's patience these past few weeks. They have challenged us all year long but now as the end of the school year draws to a close, the anticipation of leaving their elementary school years behind has created almost constant tension. I worry about what might be waiting for me as I turn the corner. I walk around and there I see it, two large refrigerator boxes edging slowly down the hallway. I smiled, sure that our boys were inside these moving boxes. I listened to the teacher's frustrations as she described what had been happening. The boys had hidden in the large boxes and as our kindergarten students went to the bathroom they were sliding the boxes toward them, calling their names. Of course, many of our small five year olds assumed the boxes had come to life and ran terrified back to their classrooms. I understood the teacher's concern about the fear of the kindergarten students and yet I could not help but delight at the playfulness of this moment. The boxes continued edging down the hallway. Quietly, smoothly, stealthily,

inch by inch, the boxes glided away from us. Their journey was abruptly cut short as a class came bursting out of the gym, knocking over the boxes. Screams of delight, surprise, excitement filled the hallway. The boys fell out laughing, landing on their backs, legs splayed in the air, looking like upended turtles. The children began to laugh. The boys began to laugh. The kindergarten students came out of their classroom and they too began to laugh. The teacher looked at me. She smiled. I laughed. She laughed. She had remembered.

“Childhood,” Gaston Bachelard tells us, “is at the origin of the greatest landscapes. Our childhood solitudes have given us the primitive immensities” (Bachelard, 1960, p. 102). The child appears in our imaginations, our poetry, our mythologies as a symbol or divinity, sense of wonder and hopefulness. When a community gathers round the child we re-enter into possibilities which destiny was not able to make use of. We see the possibilities of the other as our own possibilities. We imagine the childhood we had, we re-imagine the childhood that might have been. “We dream while remembering. We remember while dreaming” (Bachelard, p. 102).

Borgmann (1984), in his book Crossing the Postmodern Divide , speaks about the kinship that develops when a group of people gather around a focal thing.

Whether this is a group of musicians or gardeners or artisans, when

...people are engaged in focal practices, they gratefully acknowledge the immediate and centering power of the focal thing they are devoted to...Focal things are in fact grounded in the underlying reality and focal practices are heirs to immemorial traditions.

p. 122

The land dominated life in our small community. We planned and organized our lives around it. In the summer we lived by the water, revelling in its warmth. We never travelled in the wildness of the bush on our own; we preserved the summer harvest for the long winter ahead, we always helped the farmer down the road get his crops in before the frost. In winter we could never be left out alone for long, we never passed someone on the road in a snowstorm, we always checked in on the neighbour who lived alone. We lived by the fireplace, revelling in its warmth. Our lives were centred around the land. The landscape was the focal thing. When the land itself becomes the focal thing, the focal practice that emerges from it is an intense commitment to this interdependence. It is a deeply felt embodied knowing that everything is connected.

I have been mesmerized by the snow late at night as I watch in the darkness. The snow is softly falling. I gaze out, watching it slowly cover the ground. The branches of my lavatera droop, heavy with this unknown weight. The branches glisten, the moon shines, all is quiet as I gaze out at this landscape. Caught in my reverie, time and space begin to dissolve. I am no longer at home in Burnaby. I am home in Northern Ontario, gazing out the great picture window overlooking the lake. Everything is so crisp, so clear, so silent. I can hear the lake heave under the weight of the ice. I am 51, but I could be 11 or 21 or 31. The moment stands still and yet is part of a seamless, fluid reality. How many times have I caught myself dreaming, mesmerized by the landscape, opening myself to it, letting it seep into my body. This landscape is my body. My body is the landscape.

As Susan Griffin tells us,

...wood in the table knows clay in the bowl. Air knows grass
knows water knows mud knows beetle knows frost knows sunlight
knows the shape of the earth knows death knows not dying. And
all this knowledge is in the soul of everything, behind naming,
before speaking, beneath words.

Griffin, 1995

Deep ecological awareness recognizes this fundamental interdependence. "It registers a kind of vision across boundaries" (Shepard, 1995, p. 13). The web of life is an ancient idea that has been used by poets, philosophers and mystics through the ages to convey this sense of the interconnectedness of all phenomena.

*There was a child went forth ever day.
And the first object he look'd upon, that object he became,
And that object became part of him for the day or a
certain part of the day,
Or for many years or stretching cycles of years.*

*The early lilacs became part of this child,
And grass and white and red morning-glories, and
White and red clover and the song
Of the phoebe bird,
And the third-month lambs and the sow's pink-faint
Litter, and mare's foal and the cow's
Calf...*

Walt Whitman (Ed. F. Murphy), 1986

*How differently would we live in this institution
called school if we affirmed this
interconnectedness? If we affirmed this
reciprocity with one's surroundings? How
might we dwell in the world of schools if we saw
our selves as constantly drawing on and
influencing the world around us? If the
boundaries between self and other were
softened?*

Rather than being self-protective walls, boundaries can become the place of meeting and exchange, using our differences to find new way of living together. In ecology, the boundary where two ecological systems interact and overlap is referred to as the 'eco-tone', a place where landscapes meet, like field with forest, grasslands with desert, land with ocean. There is increased richness and diversity where the two distinct and different communities co-mingle.

"What are you boys doing here?" I hear one of our parents yell at Larry, Deepak and Jorge from across the gym. They stop. "We are trying to get organized for this event. We're under a deadline and you will just distract us. You are certainly not here to help." I turn toward the boys, stunned looks on their faces. Their eyes drift over to me, pleading for help. "Well, actually Mary, they are here to help me set up the haunted house on the stage," I reply. "Well, I will believe it when I see it. Those boys have only caused trouble every time they are here!" She turns and goes back to setting up the tables at the far end of the gym.

I call out to the boys who have been waiting hesitantly at the doorway. "We have a lot to get ready here so let's get started." The boys race onto the stage. Before I can say a word they are flipping the lights on and off, jumping on and off the wooden boxes, hiding behind the curtain, ready to frighten the first person they see.

I am just about to refocus their energy when we hear a loud scream. "Stop it now! Right now!" We stop. Mary is marching toward the stage. "I told you these

boys would only cause trouble! Keep those lights on! We have work to do! Maybe you should all just leave!" "I need their help Mary. I can't possibly get the stage decorated by myself. They're just excited. They will leave the lights alone. Won't you guys?" The boys look at me through wide-open eyes and nod in compliance. I smile, reassuring them. "You are going to have lots of time to scare people once we have the haunted house set up, so let's get started. Larry and Deepak, can you start tearing up the sheets. We are going to put them downstairs to create a barrier for people as they come through the haunted house. Jorge, can you get out those cobwebs and begin hanging them in the entrance."

We work for well over an hour. Except for the occasional scream from the stairwell or from behind a curtain, the boys are focussed, intent on creating "the most frightening haunted house ever." Finally we finish and step back to admire our work. Mary and her volunteers have also completed their task. They move toward the stage. "This looks fabulous," says one parent. "Amazing, you boys have done a great job!" says another. "Could we test it out for you? Could we be the first to go through the haunted house?" asked one of the parents. "Wow, that would be awesome, come on in" cries Mike. The parents move inside the door, Mary, seemingly reluctant, comes in behind. The line of adults led by Larry, creep down stairs through the cobwebs, the torn sheets with fake blood. They stumble over the bodies, clothing stuffed with newspaper. They brush the hanging skeletons and ghouls away from them as they crawl through the maze the boys have created. They emerge with a flurry of excitement. "The kids are going to love this tonight," a parent gasps. "Forget, the kids, I loved it", cries

Mary. "Do you think my son could help you with this tonight?" The boys look at me with grins of triumph.

I turn to Margaret Wheatley who speaks about the possibilities of blurring the boundaries within living systems.

...boundaries are the places where new relationships take form, an important place of exchange and growth as an individual chooses to respond to another. As connections proliferate and the system weaves itself into existence, it becomes difficult to interpret boundaries as defenses; or even as markers of where one individual ends.

Wheatley, 2005, p. 48

I think back to my story about my students entering the space underneath the gym floor. When they came to me pleading for permission to enter the cavernous passage, their sense of discovery tapped into my own experience, my own reveries of place. The boundaries blurred. I was no longer the Principal of their school but a child who loved the allure of hidden places, a mother who loved to watch her child crawl into those same secret spaces. Even though I did not enter into the depths of the basement, I was with them and they knew it. There were no words spoken to that effect but the boys could see it in my smile, hear it in my laughter, feel it in my gentle touch as they began their descent. The memories of my own experience in these secret spaces washed over me as I listened to their squeals of delight. The boys knew I was there as both the adult watching over them and the child crawling through the passage alongside them. We reached out beyond the boundaries of our selves, entering the dance of exchange. In this moment, we were moved by the encounter with this place, both imagined and real. We were moved by the encounter with each other.

I watch the small group of Indian women, grandmothers and mothers of children in our school, dancing, moving sensuously back and forth in time to the rhythmic music. Their arms move through the air like water, their hips sway, their saris floating behind them like a river. Sahil's grandmother approaches me, laughing, motioning me to come and join her. I shake my head. She moves closer and takes my hand, pulling me into the mix of women dancing. The women clap their hands together when they see me. We laugh together.

We have just finished our school celebration of the Guru Nanak Dev Ji's birthday. This celebration has become a tradition at our school since one of our Sikh parents had approached me several years ago. He explained the significance of this day for his and the many other Sikh families in our community. "We'd like to feed the children in our school in honour of this day and in keeping with the spirit of generosity that Guru Nanak embodies," he told me. And so the tradition began.

As I walked into the gym on the day of our first celebration, the sight before me took my breath away. It was as if we had been transported out of the institution into another world, like a crowded market place in India. The energy, the vitality in the room was palpable. Banghra music pulsed over the sound system, hundreds of children, talking and laughing as they waited for their meal to be served, women and men moving quickly from the kitchen carrying huge stainless steel pots steaming with rice and curry, spooning it onto the waiting plates. A cacophony of sound, a visual symphony for the eyes.

Soon after the crowd had been fed, the dancing began. In one corner of the gym, the grandmothers usually began with other women joining them as they finished eating and cleaning up, young children ran around the tables while many of our children still finished their feast. The dancing would often last for an hour, sometimes longer. I am drawn into this dance by the gentle tugging of a grandmother, who holds my hands and swings them in the air, all the while smiling at me. She does not speak English and yet there is no need, ours is a language of the body.

"What's going on in here, I thought everything was finished by now." My trance is interrupted. I turn to see a teacher with a group of small children standing at the door of the gym, ready to begin their class. "Where am I supposed to teach?" she asks as I move away from the dancing and towards the door. "Perhaps you could go into the other half of the gym for now until the dancing has stopped," I suggest. We both look over, the dancing shows no signs of coming to an end. "Can't you just tell them to stop, after all, school has started again and we need to teach." I realized that while I had been wrapped in the embrace of the music and movement, the school bell had rung and children had returned from lunch hour and moved into class. "I'd rather not," I reply, "these women have been at the temple since early morning, cooking for all of us. They are enjoying themselves right now, let's leave them for a while." The teacher looks at me with frustration and moves her students to the back of the gym, clearly separating themselves from the dancers. I leave to thank the secondary students who have helped today. We talk in the hallway for several minutes before they return to their school down the street. I go back into the gym.

I smile at the sight that greets me. Young children, boys and girls, moving energetically amidst the slow, rhythmic movement of the women. They move together, back and forth, to and fro. The children and the women, young and old, ebb and flow. The class has joined the dancers, the dancers have joined the class. The teacher looks at me and smiles. She had remembered.

"Communicative meaning," Abram tells us, "is always, in its depths affective, it remains rooted in the sensual dimensions of experience, born of the body's native capacity to resonate with other bodies...meaning sprouts in the very depths of the sensory world, in the heat of meeting, encounter, participation" (Abram, 1996, p. 75).

No words were spoken to precipitate the shift that occurred in the gymnasium that day. When I left, the two groups were quite distinct, the lines on the gym floor clearly delineating the boundaries, the division between them. The women, immersed in their dance, were quite oblivious to the frustration of the teacher. The teacher spoke to me later, explaining how the children, many of whom had recognized this dancing as part of their community, became entranced with the women dancing. They edged closer and closer, tentatively at first, seemingly waiting for admonishment from the teacher. The lure of the dance, its powerful pulse, drew them in and soon the children were overlapping, dancing and laughing with the grandmothers and mothers of their school mates.

...a living thing acquires its energy by means of exchanges across a boundary so that the living thing remains distinct from its environment, yet interacts continuously with it. The lining surrounds the cell; the bark surrounds the tree; the skin surrounds the animal.

Ricou, 2002, p.154

Together they moved like water, flowing into each other, overlapping, softening the boundaries. Separate but flowing together with a rhythmic cadence. Water has often been associated with the feminine principles of receptivity, vulnerability, sensuality. Deeply sensuous, water covers whatever it touches. We can easily lose sense of our boundaries when we're in contact with water and feel our bodies in flowing sensuality-*'in the heat of the meeting, encounter, participation'* (Abram).

This image of water resonates deeply as I think about my work in schools. All things are held together by water. Water connects us. There is a fluidity, a softness, a patience to the ebb and flow of water and yet the hydrogen bond, scientists tell us is an embrace so powerful that it holds the world together (Suzuki, 2002).

Timiskaming, deep waters, some say a portal to the underworld. The waves swell up, white foam licking at the boat. The wind blew through us, surrounded us, embraced us. The water begins to breathe. *Breathing in...breathing out.*

Chapter 5

Dwelling in Intimacy

We can be human only together.

Desmond Tutu, cited in Wheatley, 2006, p. 21

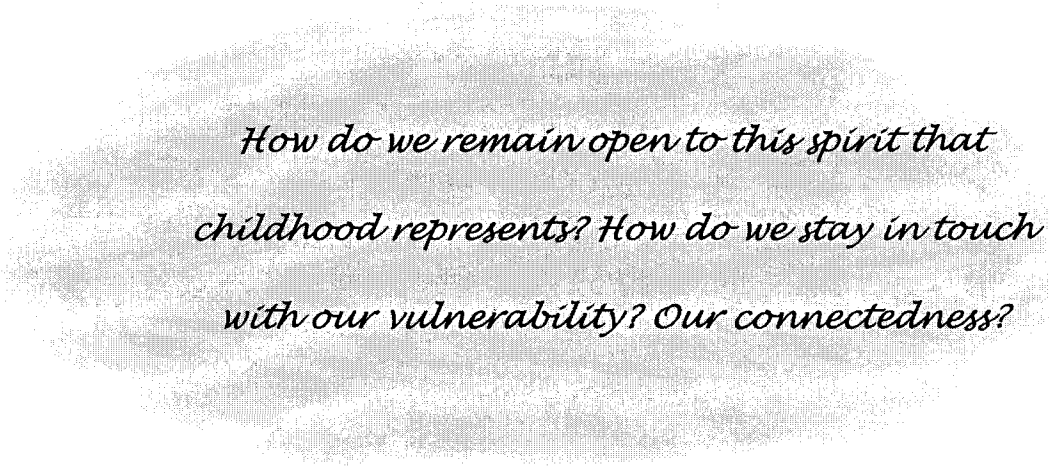
It is evening and I sit, nestled into the couch in the reading corner, quietly talking to Sara and Aida about their worries with their recent move to secondary school. The tone is peaceful, the conversations hushed. Our moment is suddenly interrupted with the loud honking of a car horn. We look outside and laugh at the sight that greets us. The boys have piled themselves into my old, grey Mazda. Ali sitting behind the wheel, barely able to see over the top, a shock of brown streaked hair grows out of the top of the dashboard. He turns the wheel, to the right, to the left, pretending to drive. He waves at us as we move towards the window to get a clearer view. I smile. As I watch, I am for a moment, transported back in time to the image of my own son, sitting in the same car, playing at driving in much the same way as Ali does now. Young boys on the cusp of adolescence, so many possibilities waiting...

The child calls us out of our singleness (Levinas, 2002), opening us to the world in all its possibilities. It is through the child that we can imagine “the possibilities of the other as our own possibilities” (Levinas, 2002, p. 513). And yet how do we remain open to this call? How do we hear the call of the other? For Emmanuel Levinas it is the face to face encounter that compels us to think of our response in terms of otherness. “The face is a living presence; it is expression...the face

speaks" (Levinas, 2002, p. 514). Levinas' provocative notion, the face speaking, presents itself in the movie, "To Kill a Mockingbird." Atticus, the genteel, compassionate lawyer stands for justice and integrity in his life as a single father of two children and his work where he has taken on the complex case of defending Tom Robinson, a black man accused of committing a crime against a white woman. The scene that speaks to Levinas' notion of the face to face encounter is when Atticus has positioned himself outside the local jail to protect Tom Robinson from the potential of a lynch mob. His children Jem and Scout go to watch. Atticus sets himself up outside the jail with a lamp and a book. He calmly opens the book and waits for the crowd to arrive. And arrive they do. As the children watch on they see their father try to reason with the angry crowd. He is unsuccessful in using the power of his words to influence the mass of faces in the crowd. The crowd heats up. The children become afraid for their father and rush into the mob. Atticus ask Jem, the oldest boy, to leave, reassuring him that all is well. The crowd too urges Atticus to get rid of his children, knowing they put an all too human face on what is about to occur. The children are about to leave when Scout looks out into the sea of faces. She comes upon a face she knows. "Hey, Mr. Cunningham," she calls out. Mr. Cunningham pulls his hat down over his face, trying to avoid the gaze of this young girl. Scout ignores the attempted shun. "Hey, Mr. Cunningham, don't you remember me, it's Scout, I go to school with your boy Walter." Mr. Cunningham once again tries to avoid her gaze. Scout keeps looking at him. Mr. Cunningham looks up and meets her face to face. He looks into her eyes...wide-open, innocent eyes. She meets his gaze. "I didn't mean no harm Mr. Cunningham," Scout tells him. "No harm taken young

lady," he replies. He looks to the crowd around him and tells them to disband. The group leaves.

It is a powerful scene. What happened here I wonder? How did the crowd shift so dramatically? Was it the face to face encounter between Scout and Mr. Cunningham? And if so what was it about that encounter that enabled such a turnaround? Obviously Mr. Cunningham was touched by the otherness of Scout. The innocence of a child. And yet it seems there was something more at play. Mr. Cunningham responded to the openness of a child and yet the child also responded to him. Somehow Scout picked up on the nuances of expression of Mr. Cunningham's face when she tells him that she meant no harm. His face spoke. There was an openness, a vulnerability, a connection seen only by a young child.



*How do we remain open to this spirit that
childhood represents? How do we stay in touch
with our vulnerability? Our connectedness?*

Bachelard would tell us that, this consciousness, this cosmicity of our childhood remains within us, always within us. It reappears in our reveries. The poet, the storyteller awakens this cosmicity. Nowhere is this spirit of childhood more felt than in an eloquently written children's book. It calls us out of ourselves.

It's very early in the morning—too early to begin the rituals of preparation for the day. I try to find sleep but cannot. I am fighting a feeling of emptiness. I can feel in the pit of my stomach, in the hollows of my shoulder, in the back of my neck...I can't shake it. My body is speaking, remembering for me. I pick up a book from my night table, hoping to read myself back to sleep. It is the book my sister has sent my son on the first anniversary of our father's death. I will give it to him tomorrow. I begin to read. I am reading and yet also dreaming, wandering off into a place of reverie once again. It is a story about a young boy and his grandfather. It seems so very right for my son who was so connected to his grandfather...my son who in some cosmic way seems to grow more and more like my father every day. I drift in and out of reverie. The words of the story carry me away.

When I was little, my Grandad was my best friend. Being with him always made the world seem just right, Granddad and I like to go for walks in the woods together. We didn't walk very far. Or very fast. Or very straight.

While we walked, I would ask him questions about things I wasn't sure of." "Why is it, Granddad...? I would ask. And "What if...?" And "Does it ever...?"

One day I asked my Granddad about prayers. For a long time, Granddad was quiet. He didn't say anything until we came to the tallest trees in the forest. And then he answered with a question. "Did you know, boy" he whispered "that trees pray."

I listened closely but I couldn't hear them." "See how they reach for the sky," he said. "They reach and reach—for clouds and sun and moon and stars"

Wood, 1999

This beautiful story pulls me in. It reads like a poem that speaks to the ancient sense of loss, to the emptiness I am feeling in my body. I can feel myself softening...to the words, to the language of the story, to the images it evokes. The story continues as the grandfather teaches his young grandson about the many different ways the land prays to the earth...

My granddad and I went for many walks, after that one, and I often listened for the prayers of the earth, but was never sure I heard them. "Then one day my Granddad was gone. And no matter how hard I prayed, he didn't come back. I prayed and prayed and prayed until I couldn't pray anymore....

Wood, 1999

I stop when I read this. Tears well. How I prayed my father would return. How just for one moment I could see him again. How I long to hear my father's voice, reassuring me, gently helping me find my way through the world. I read on...

Until one day I went for a walk. I found a big rock under some tall trees and sat down on it. Overhead the branches swayed and a breeze whispered in the leaves. I heard a stream flowing nearby, and a robin singing from a honeysuckle bush. And I heard something else too—something in the sounds of breezes and birds and water. I heard prayers. The earth was praying just like my Granddad said.

Wood, 1999

I hear the wind chimes in the back garden. Their sound is so familiar. The wind blows stronger. For a moment I am back on the deck of my family home beside the lake, listening to the waves crashing to shore. I breathe in. The wind is blowing. The chimes are ringing. I am lost in reverie. I can feel my father's presence. I can hear his voice in the wind. I am reading and dreaming, reading and remembering...my father and I are sitting by the lake, watching the waves crash to

shore, feeling the wind whip at our bodies, listening to the sound of it as it blows through the trees above us...neither of us speak, we stare out at the water, breathing it in. We are in awe of the landscape that rises before us.

I breathe out. I close the book, turn out the light and find sleep.

"It is no accident," Bachelard tells us, "that in a tranquil reverie, we often follow the slope which returns us to our childhood" (Bachelard, 1960, p. 99). Reverie becomes a way to remember, to remain in touch with this sense of wonder, this spirit. These reveries take us beyond ourselves. They do not chain us to the past but liberate us into the present where we are more attentive to the beauty of the moment. In reverie "we inhabit the world better because we inhabit it as the solitary child inhabits images" (Bachelard, 1960, p. 102). We remember what it was like to be a child.

I hold my breath. I can feel my sister's body close to me as she searches to find me. She passes and moves behind the house. I scramble out from under the porch, wiping the cobwebs off my face. "Susie, watch out, she's coming." I see my other sister calling me from her hiding spot behind the garage. "Hide again, quickly, before she finds you." I look around, quickly trying to find another place before Steffie comes back around the house. I dive into the patch of Queen Anne's lace, hoping their tall flowers and bushy green foliage will hide me from my sister's watchful eye. I can hear her footsteps. I burrow into the soft pillow of green. I breathe in. I listen carefully, waiting for her to pass by once again. I hold my breath. I wait. I scream. A hand has reached out and

grabbed me from the safety of my hiding space. "I caught you," my sister yells out with glee. "You're it!!"

In reverie we connect to this spirit of childhood not from the place of rationality, of intellect but from a felt, embodied response to the world around us. We return to the world of the senses. The boundaries of time and space are blurred, enabling us to dwell in this moment, remembering the pulse, the vitality of childhood.

I am on my way to the gym to visit with the youth who attend our evening group when I see Mitchell hiding behind the boy's washroom door. I am about to say hello when he puts his finger to his mouth, urging me to say nothing. I stop and move closer to him. "I'm hiding from Frank," he whispers. "Don't tell him where I am. We're playing a game of hide and go seek." His eyes light up. He smiles at me with delight.

Mitchell was arrested last week. His father has chased him out of the house. His mother came to the school, looking for him. We went out together to try and find him. While in the car she received the call from the police. He had been in a fight and sprayed mace at another young man. She needed to come to the station and pick him up.

Now here he is, playing hide and go seek, like the child he is, like the child he should be, like the child I once was. A partnership of possibilities.

Through the child we are opened to this partnership, this dance of possibilities. We are, at once, called out of and returned to ourselves. Being with the child in this way, enables us to breathe out, letting us in on the secret kinship between our world and ourselves. Dwelling in this moment grounds us in the sensual, in the erotic encounter with the world. Terry Tempest Williams defines the erotic, as being in relation...those “deep relations that engage the whole body – our heart, our mind, our spirit, our flesh. It is that moment of being exquisitely present” (Williams in Jensen, 2002, p. 310).

I hear loud sobbing and crying coming from the next room. I stand up, leaving Jacob, his defiance and anger silently bouncing off the walls. I walk by Sam, grabbing at my arm to let me know he is anxious to talk to me after his intense outburst yesterday. I continue into the room adjoining mine and see Jesse spread out on the floor crying. Through the sobs he tells me his teacher wouldn't give him his treasured toy. “All I want is to have it back...it's mine” he gasps through ever increasing sobs. I sit down beside him saying nothing. I know Jesse, who is new to our community this year, lives with many complexities in his life outside school. His crying may be much less about his toy than his world.

I crouch down on the floor and begin to rub his hair, comforting him with quiet words. “It's okay, Jesse” was all I say as I continue to rub my hands through his hair. As I sit beside him soothing him with my gesture, the sobs begin to subside. I look up from Jesse to the doorway of the room and I see both Jacob and Sam standing there, watching us. “Is he okay” Sam asks, the gentleness of his words

letting me know he is genuinely concerned. Jacob says nothing but his body has softened as he watches. We stay there for a moment, me on the floor beside Jesse comforting him, Sam and Jacob standing at the door, watching on. Jesse's sobs subside and he sits up, looking at the boys, waiting for them to come to him. Sam smiles easily in return. Jacob shrugs his shoulders and forces back a grin, not yet willing to let down his guard. I also feel a softening in myself.

Moments earlier, I had felt my own growing frustration with Jacob's anger and his seeming unwillingness to talk about it. Even though I knew so well that Jacob needed the space to work it out, the sand table was often a place he found refuge in, I could feel the pressures of the institution growing in me. There needs to be a serious response to Jacob's actions. He physically hurt another child. What about our school district's policy of "no tolerance for violence"? What about "the victim" of the slashing? I could feel the pressure of solution. I was beginning to respond to Jacob as the Principal until Jesse's cries had pulled me away.

I came to Jesse as a woman, a mother trying to soothe a troubled child. The gesture of rubbing his hair, gently soothing him, returned me to that place I had been so many times before with my own son. The walls that were beginning to build up to ready me for my 'official response' to Jacob fell away. No words were spoken to that effect but we all recognized it. I got up off the floor and Sam reached out his hand to help me up. Jacob moved into the room, picked up a foam ball and threw it to Jesse. Jesse laughed.

The intimacy of this moment is still with me as I write. Jesse's cries evoked in me a felt, embodied response. I came to Jesse as a mother. I came to Jesse as a child who was once comforted. I remembered the soothing gesture of rubbing my son's hair, of my own hair being rubbed as a child in need of comfort. The rhythmic gesture of stroking Jesse's hair had returned me to my body. "The experience of one being enters and becomes the experience of the other" (Griffin, 1995, p. 68). A moment of being 'exquisitely present.'

I go to the edge of the dock, readying myself to take the plunge into the icy water. It is early July, the water still carries the memory of the cold of winter. I breathe out. It is calm this morning. The sun shimmers off the water. I breathe in. I stop. I breathe out and dive in. The cold water startles, waking my body out of its early morning haze. I surface. I breathe in, stretching my arms as I begin to move through the water. I move quickly at first trying to fight off the cold. As the silky fluid surrounds me, I slow down. I breathe out, my face submerged. The water caresses me as I move through its embrace. As I slide through the water I can feel its softness. Deeper and deeper I move into its fluid sensuality. I breathe in. I breathe out.

I return to the writing of David Abram who reminds me of the sensuous world we inhabit. "We must," he says, "begin to speak of the sensuous surroundings in the way that our breathing bodies really experience them – as active, as animate, as alive... it is something our children can help us remember" (Abram, 2000, p.88).

I am on the telephone. Dustin wanders into my office and sits down on the couch. I smile up at him. I watch him as I listen to the message from the school board office reminding me that the school organization form is due today. Dustin sits motionless, his hat pulled down over his eyes. I hang up the telephone. "What's up Dustin" I ask. He looks up, his eyes barely visible under his hat. "It's my teacher," he grumbles. I am trying to listen but find myself mentally going through my 'to do's' of the day, the school organization form now moved to the top of my list. "What about your teacher?" I ask. "She won't listen! I just wanted to wear my hat in the school picture. That's all! No big deal. But she won't listen to me." I was beginning to feel restless, my mind still adding up the number of tasks to be done before the day's end. "I guess you're worried about hat hair" I said, remembering how much my son disliked taking his hat off when he hadn't planned on it. His hair flattened to the top of his head like a pancake. Dustin smiled. "I am mad about some other stuff too," he said. He had turned his hat to one side so I could now see his face. I looked into his eyes, pools of blue water, open, moist, clear. I stopped. *I breathe out.* "A lake is a great tranquil eye – it makes us stop at its edge" (Bachelard).

"In the stop, the body surfaces...the stop brings awareness back to the surface out of hiding...in the arrest of energy that follows the pathway of habituation, intellectual construction of the world comes to a stop" (Appelbaum, 1985, p. 83).

I stop. *I breathe in* and return to Dustin's gaze. He goes on to recount the troubles he was having at home with his mother, his absent father. I feel a shift in my body as I listen. The mental list making has stopped. *I breathe out*.

Together, tucked away in the intimacy of my office, away from the demands of the institution, Dustin and I share a moment in time. A moment, "not simply as a transition between before and after, but as the miracle of eternity, ingressing into time" (Kohak, 1985, p. 85). It is Dustin's eyes, his face that compels me to stop — the face to face encounter— bringing me back to myself. As I gazed into his eyes, I feel an emptying, a dissolving into this child sitting beside me in all his vulnerability. "The soul empties itself of all its own content in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is in all his truth" (Weil, 1951, p. 115). In that moment, I move outside the constant chatter inside my head, away from the detachment of intellection and into my body. I see in Dustin the child he is now, the child I once was, the adult he might become. A moment, a miracle of eternity.

*How do we stay connected to these moments,
these miracles of eternity of which Kohak
speaks? How do we remain 'exquisitely present'?*

The wind catches the leaves of the arbutus and they quietly rustle...a leaf floats to the ground...the sun shines through, creating dappled images, the sky above is a sea-like blue, wide open. I feel nestled in this garden space, safely tucked underneath the dense branches of this majestic tree, hidden behind the brightly coloured phlox and anemone. I am surrounded. I watch the wasps dip into the water in the bird bath, they spread out, looking as if they have drowned and yet momentarily they are airborne again, dashing around the garden from flower to flower...a breeze comes up, I feel its warmth on my face, the prayer flags blow, sending their messages up to the heavens...a moment, a miracle of eternity.

"The human," Kohak would tell us, "is a dweller in time, though not in time alone. He dwells at the intersection of time and eternity" (Kohak, 1984, p. 82). "The moral sense of nature is that it can teach us to stay open, "to cherish (this) time and look to eternity within it" (Kohak, 1984).

In reverie we are connected to this consciousness of which Kohak speaks. In reverie we gain a heightened awareness of the interconnectedness of all things. It is as if, in this moment, we are breathing together with the world, merging together with something larger than ourselves.

*Is it reverie that creates the space, the openness
to cherish this time, these miracles of eternity?*

*What if these moments of intimacy, of
connectedness, of being exquisitely present were
as valued as the rational consciousness that
pervades school culture?*

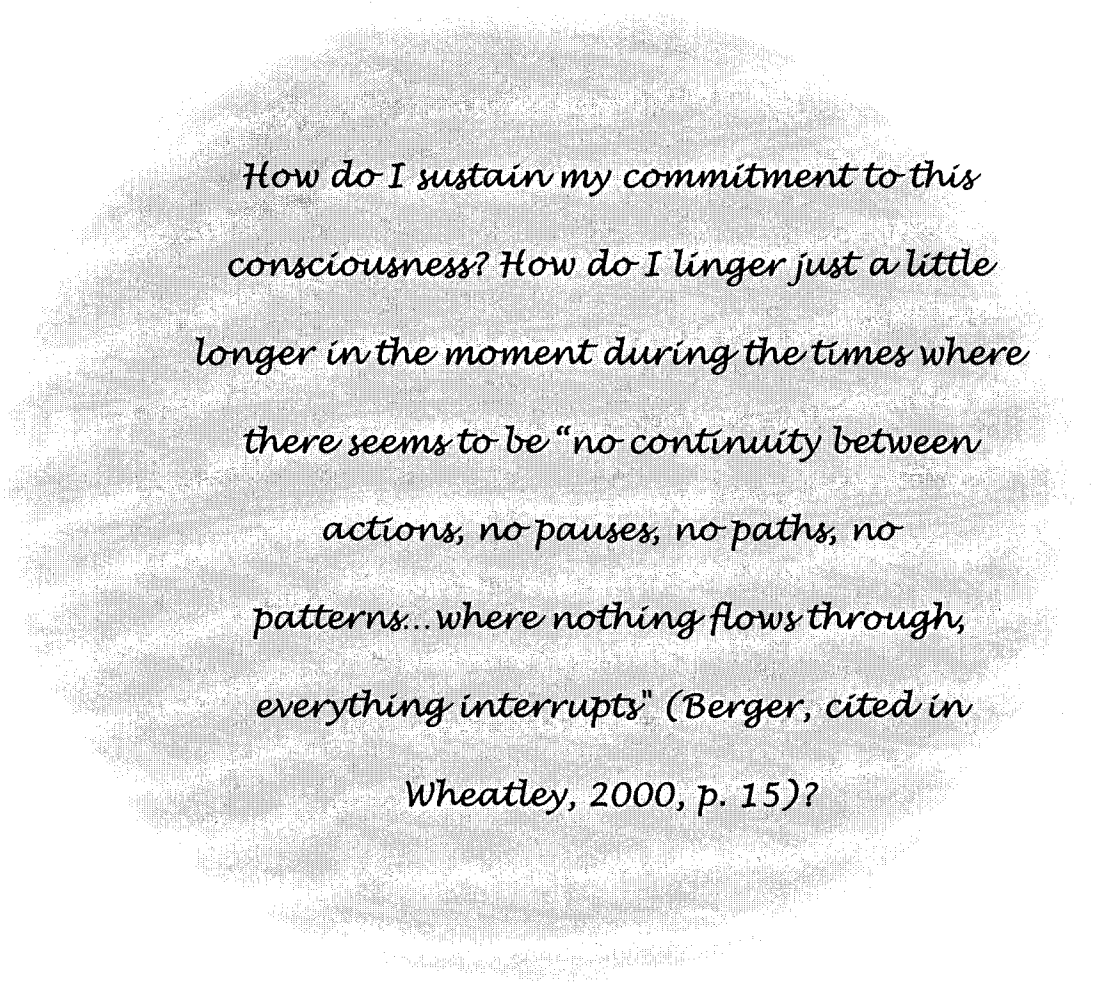
I wander down to the reading corner. All is quiet. I turn to go and then I hear, "Hey Ms.Montabello." I turn and look in the direction of the voice. There, nestled into the soft pillows of the couch is Ali. Even though I have only been at this new school for several months, Ali and I have made a connection. I have spent most of my lunch hour these past few months with Ali and another group of grade seven boys anxious to play hockey in the gym. I have watched Ali's temper escalate quickly and dramatically, calling out angry words to anyone who gets in the way...myself included. I remember his response after the first time he lashed out at me and I walked away. He raced up to me. "Where are you going? What are you doing? Aren't you going to do anything?" "What would you like me to do Ali?" I asked him. "Get mad! Yell at me! Tell me it is inappropriate. That's what you are supposed to do!" "Says who?" I ask. "Says everybody!" "Well, it's not what I am going to do. I am going to walk away. I hope we can talk later." Ali was taken off guard by my response and at the same time it had opened up a door between us.

Almost daily since he has been moved to a foster home Ali comes to visit me. Sometimes asking me for spare change for the sky train, sometimes just to sit for a moment or two. Our conversations usually focus around my son and his friends on the university football team, wondering what will be their fate in the upcoming CFL draft. More recently it is about his desire to go to a different high school than his classmates. He has soccer friends who attend Westside and he is convinced this is the best place for him to go. Occasionally, we will talk of his mother, her illness and how much he wishes he could be home with his family.

"What's up Ali?" I ask as I sit down on the couch. "Nothing much" he responds. We sit side by side, nestled into the cushions of the couch. "I was just thinking. I want to go home to be with my brother until my mom returns. You need to call the social worker and get her to get up off her ass and do something." I smile at Ali's words as I too have had a similar response to this particular social worker's inaction. "I'll see what I can do." I begin to pull myself out of the softness of the couch to return to the office when Ali looks at me. I stop. I look into his face. There is an urgency to his gaze. I stop myself from getting up. "What is it Ali?" I turn toward him and wait for his response. "Why is it that some people in the world have to suffer so much?" *I breathe out.* I settle back in. I am not sure Ali, that's a tough question. I am not sure there is an answer to it. "Have you suffered?" he asks. Before I have the chance to respond he speaks. "I bet you did when you divorced." "Yes, actually I did." "And what about your son? Did he suffer too? How old was he when you divorced? What was it like for him? How did you help him?" The questions came pouring out of him. He was anxious to find an answer to his worries. "Yes, he did suffer Ali. His dad left him." "You mean you were dumped!" "Yes, I guess that's one way to put it. It was hard for both of us. I think that is one of the reasons he understands other people's hurt, he has been there and so have I. I think that is what suffering can do." "Yeah, I know my mom tells me that suffering leads us to a higher god. You know in some religions, suffering is the way you get to heaven. But right now all I can think about is that my dad is dead and my mom is in the hospital. I am tired of all this...right now I don't care about any one else, I just want to go home. I am tired of suffering." I stopped. *I breathe out.* My eyes filled up. I looked at Ali. Our

eyes met. We sat there, nestled in side by side, on the couch, silent. A moment of being exquisitely present.

It seems more natural to connect to these 'moments of eternity', to linger just a little longer in these intimate moments when sharing a quiet moment on the couch, when tucked away in the refuge of my office space, or when talking late into the evening after darkness has settled in and all is quiet in the school.



How do I sustain my commitment to this consciousness? How do I linger just a little longer in the moment during the times where there seems to be "no continuity between actions, no pauses, no paths, no patterns...where nothing flows through, everything interrupts" (Berger, cited in Wheatley, 2000, p. 15)?

It is November and the sheer intensity of my work in schools has caught up with me. The lunch hour alone tells the story. The boisterous noise of children surrounds me. I am on the floor playing a game with a child. Others around us are talking, laughing. "Leave me alone" I hear from the corner of the room. I look up to see two students slapping each other, one older, the other much younger, fighting as a brother and sister might. I go over and suggest this to them. They look at each other with a grimace, then smile and the arguing stops. I return to the game and the welcome noise that surrounds me, lost for a moment amongst the children. The noon hour supervisor comes into the room, "You need to get to the gym right away, Kate needs you." My moment has been interrupted. I look out in the hall to see two teachers coming toward me to discuss a problem that had occurred before lunch with their students. They were eager for a response, an answer as to how we might solve the problem. I asked them to walk and talk with me on the way to the gym. We are hardly at the door when Brian comes in soaking wet. He is upset because he cannot find Marlee. I urge him to go to Sara, our youth and child care worker's room, and tell him that we will talk about this later. He moves on reluctantly. I feel like I have dismissed him, not given him the time he wants or needs and yet I also am pulled by the urgency in the voice of the noon hour supervisor to get to the gym. I continue down the hallway, all the while talking to the teachers about the problem in gym class, trying not to move too quickly to solution, to let them talk about the needs of their students and the options that might fit for them. We arrive at the gym. I look at Kate, the supervisor in the gym. George sits beside her, brooding. As I walk in Jas comes up to me. "Ms. Montabello, Ms. Montabello!" Jas is always teasing me, playfully challenging my authority. It is a playfulness I usually enjoy but at the moment it

feels like another interruption. "Just a minute Jas!" "But, Ms. Montabello!" "Just a minute," I repeat. "You need to listen" Jas shouts. "Is it urgent Jas? I need to talk to George over there." "Yes, Yes...Jason is in the school. You have to get him out right away." I look over at the doorway and see Patrick standing there, waiting for me to respond. Jason was a student who used to go to our school and has been harassing Patrick after school hours. The police have been involved and have told him he is not to come into the school. I stop for a minute. I look at Kate and George and see that there is calm for a moment. I go to the door to look for Jason but there is no one there. "I saw him. I really did!" said Jas. "I believe you Jas but there is no one there now." "I saw him walk through the school," Jas tells me. "He was with those other guys, the bad ones." Jas was referring to the other boys who have been involved in their intimidation of Patrick. I had seen them walk through the school at the beginning of lunch hour but without Jason. I had felt a twinge of sadness as I had seen one of these boys Paul, now in high school. As they had walked past me Paul had smiled hopefully at me waiting to see my response. He knew the police had spoken to me and had banned him from our school because of his trouble with Patrick. I smiled at him. He smiled back. I had wanted to stop and talk and yet I had just heard my name called over the pa system to come to the office so I had to move on, missing this opportunity to connect. I leave the gym and see the teachers still waiting. We agree to meet after school to talk. On my way back to the games room I see Brian. He has left to once again find Marlee. When he saw me, he ran into the boy's washroom and began to yell out from behind the closed doors.

David Bohm reminds me that during these times when “everything seems to go to pieces, when there is trouble, instead of condemning ourselves, we’ve got to find out how that distraction was a part of the same process...it is crucial to see things in the presence of distractions as well as in a quiet place... We need to stand firm in a distracting environment. We need to be strong enough to look at the infinite” (Bohm, 1999, p. 94). And yet he suggests “the infinite might be so powerful that its effects would distract you if you looked at it too quickly” (p. 94). He goes on to say that in order to tap into the infinite we need “an empty space of time or place, where there is nothing occupying you.” (Bohm p. 94) His words resonate.

My writing has once again come to a halt. I have spent the past two hours struggling with the flow of my writing. Maybe I should abandon this piece. Maybe it has taken me in the wrong direction. Where am I going with my thinking? I reread what I have just written. The words do not resonate. The language is stilted. The voice is not mine. I look out the window and notice it has stopped raining. I put on a coat and head out with my clippers in hand, ready to get busy, hoping this will clear my head. As I step outside, the wind picks up. The cedars rustle, the phlox sways, the arbutus leaves fly to the ground. The wind blows through my hair, caresses my face, tugs at my scarf. It whispers into my ears. It catches me off guard. I stop. *I breathe out.*

I return to my writing, revisiting the story of Jamie and Malcom of which I had previously written. I begin to see it with very new eyes.

When I had asked Jamie to be with Malcom, he had looked up at me questioningly then nodded his head. I left the room listening as Jamie tried to talk Malcom out of his constant sobbing. I returned twenty minutes later having finally tracked Malcom's mother down. She was on her way. As I entered my office, all was quiet. I saw Jamie rubbing Malcom's back, quietly talking to him. I looked at Jamie. His face now red and blotchy from the tears he had shed. I saw the mixture of panic and remorse in his eyes. His body hunched over, exhausted from the output of emotion.

In that moment I saw my own son in Jamie. I knelt down beside them both. Malcom smiled weakly at me. His finger surely broken, almost detached from his hand. "Don't suspend Jamie Ms. Montabello. He has suffered enough with me."

Susan Griffin tells us "there is an Eros present at every meeting...whether we know it or not, we exist because we exchange, because we move the gift" (Griffin, 1995, p. 150). I wonder was this the exchange that had occurred between Jamie and Malcolm? I had not thought of it in this way before and yet this new insight resonates. In that space of time where the two sat huddled together in my office there was an exchange of vulnerability. They had suffered together. Together they had shared a moment, an encounter that went beyond words. Malcolm himself gave voice to something that I could not name. "Jamie has suffered enough with me." "The experience of one being enters and becomes the

experience of the other" (Griffin, 1995, p. 68). To think of the encounter between Malcolm and Jamie from this sense of Eros implies a sacredness, a state of communion.

Where is this insight leading me? I return to Bohm's imperative, that we must be strong enough to look at the infinite to ground us in those times that distract us. Perhaps this is where the infinite lies, in these miracles of eternity, these moments, the encounters that move us beyond ourselves. And perhaps it is these encounters that create the path, the threads of connection, linking time and space. Moment to moment, like water flowing in and through, connecting everything, an embrace so powerful that it holds the world together.

As I turn the corner I see them. Sam has Gerry in a headlock. Ibrahim is punching the wall with his fist. Tan is laughing at all of them. I place my arms around two of the boys and begin to guide them down the hall way with me. "Come on, let's get out of the hallway. Come into my room." Reluctantly, they move with me, the others following behind. I close the door, not sure where to take this next. A fight in the hallway needs a response.

We all sit, huddled together in the little chairs. Several of the boys have grabbed the stuffed animals from my baskets, hunched over, they hang onto them, holding them tightly against their chest. An image of my own son flashes before me – huddled in the closet, surrounded by his stuffies, weeping for the loss of his father. I sat beside him, rubbing his back. No words were spoken. The image fades. I look up. My room is quiet. No one is speaking. I can feel the energy, the

anger, the frustration, the confusion of adolescence pulsing off the walls. I say nothing. I reach out and touch Sam's shoulder. Tears begin to well in his eyes. He begins to cry, a release of emotion. The others soon follow. Together we sit, clutching the softness of the stuffies into our embrace, tucked away from the world, weeping.

"Communion is not only an isolated ritual; it is a matter of living...to exist in a state of communion is to be aware of the nature of existence. This is where ecology and social justice come together, with the knowledge that life is held in common. "...we exist because we exchange, because we move the gift"(Griffin, 1995, p. 150). Time, if one pays attention, is filled with such meetings.

"Can we work in your room Ms. Montabello ." I look up from my conversation to see Rahul, Hera, Imran and Ahmad standing beside me. "Of course, I'm just on my way down there." We leave the class and head down the hallway. "Ms. Montabello..." I hear a quiet voice beside me. "Could I talk to you about a problem I am having." I turn to see Hera, a suddenly serious look on his face. "Of course, Hera." "It's not really a school problem, it's a family one...I need to talk to someone about it." "Do you want to talk here?" "No, let's go to your room, it's better to talk there." "What about the other boys who are coming with us to write in my room?" "It's okay, I don't mind if they hear us." Once inside my room, nestled into the intimacy it provides, Hera begins to talk. "My grandmother told me about her children, one died when she was very young. She told me this a year ago but it didn't really bother me...but I have started thinking about it now. I'm not sure why. I almost started to cry at recess today."

A quiet pause. "My mom cries all time," Ahmad interjects quietly. "She lost four brothers in the war, every time she sees the news or any stories about Iran on the television, she cries and cries. I don't cry very much about it...I hardly knew them...I had a dream the other night that my sister was kidnapped. I woke up crying." "I saw someone shot in my country," whispers Rahul. "I was really little. I didn't cry. I don't know if I can cry." "My father's brother was tortured in Iran." Imran is speaking. "The Muslims didn't like our religion, that is why we moved here so we could be safe. I don't think about it much but my mom and dad talk about how we could have been killed if we had stayed." Hera slowly rocking, Imran's head is nestled into the pillow, Rahul's feet tucked underneath the throw...a quiet has descended the room. I looked at Ali, his face so often tensed, on the verge of anger, had softened. "Are you afraid of dying Ms. Montabello...do you ever think about it?" Hera rocks back and forth in my rocking chair, the same rocking chair I used to rock my son back and forth when he was a small baby, comforting him as he cried, as I cried. I am caught in this moment, "a miracle of eternity." I breathe out.

The soul empties itself of all its own content in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is in all his truth

Weil, 1951

My old wicker chair rocks back and forth, back and forth. There is an urgency to the rocking. "He threw me up against the wall...I'm scared to go home." The words tumble out. The rocking grows more furious. Tears stream down his cheeks. He clutches my big, overstuffed rabbit to his chest. He cries. He rocks. Tears stream down my face. I reach out my hand to touch him. I lay my hand

over top of his. I can feel the strain of his knuckles as he hangs on tightly to the arms of the chair. My hand moves with his in time to the rocking. We sit huddled together like this for a while. Time passes. The rocking slows down. I breathe out.

I sit by the window looking out over the garden. I watch the tall grass blowing the wind. I am enchanted by its grace. It bends and flows in the wind. Like the ebb and flow of water. Back and forth, to and fro. I listen to the wind chimes in the background. The sound stirs something instinctive. A shudder moves through me. The wind picks up. The tall grass tosses wildly, the tall blades quiver in the blast. Their roots hold strong. The grass dances. The chimes explode. A symphony. I am caught in this moment. I breathe out.

Perhaps as Terry Tempest Williams would tell us, “our lack of intimacy with each other is in direct proportion to our lack of intimacy with the land”(Williams, in Jensen, 2002, p. 319). To know a person, to know a physical place, you must become intimate with it.

*I am from...
the smell of hay
the sweetness of the poplars blowing in the wind
the sound of the water lapping, swelling, crashing over the rocks,
birds singing good morning,
loons calling out from the lake at dusk
the feel of
cold, grey granite on calloused bare feet,
the warm caress of sun on my face,
the wind, always the wind,
moves inside me*

And yet, what seems key, is not merely to know the place but to become vulnerable to that place, to open yourself up to encounter the place. “If you open yourself up, you can build intimacy...there’s little difference between growing into the love of a place and growing into the love of a person. Love matures through intimacy and vulnerability...” (Lopez, cited in Kumar & Mitchell, 2000, p. 25).

I am just about to leave the house when the telephone rings. I hesitate, already late for my appointment, but something stops me from locking the door. I go back in and answer it. “Hi, Ms. Montabello.” I pause for a moment, not sure I recognize the young voice on the other end of the phone. “It’s me, Jessica.” I smile in response. “Are you home?” I ask. “No, I’m calling from Ontario. I was

thinking about you. I just wanted to hear your voice." "It is good to hear your voice too Jessica. I have thought a lot about you. How are you doing?" As we speak, my mind drifts back to one of the last times I saw Jessica.

I heard a loud crash echo through the hallway. Loud screams followed by silence. As I walked toward the group of girls crowded around, I saw an overturned garbage can with all the mucky remains of the day's lunch spread across the floor. "What's happened here?" I asked. "It's Jessica, she kicked it over," one of the girls replied. "She just left out the back door," another said, anticipating my next question. "I watched what happened," called a voice coming down the hall. I turned to see the teacher of the classroom closest to the mess walking toward me. "I spoke with Jessica," she continued, "she's upset. She is worried that you are angry with her because you wouldn't talk to her this morning." I remembered the brief interaction with Jessica earlier in the day. She had stopped me on my way to a class to tell me she needed to talk to me. She knew I had been out looking for her last night. I had received yet another frantic telephone call from her mother. Together with our youth worker, I had gone out looking for Jessica. Up and down the sky train route, stopping at the stations where we knew kids were likely to hang out. We ran into several young teens we knew. "Have you seen Jessica?" We asked one after the other. Each time the response was the same. "No." We were beginning to get worried. Even though this young pre-teen girl was tough and resilient, she was also sweet, vulnerable to the call of the streets. There were certain stops that caught me by the throat. Everywhere I looked there were young people huddled together, smoking, laughing, crying, talking, others looking lost, trying to find a place for

themselves. They seemed, like Jessica and many of the other young people I work with, caught in time, somewhere between youth and adulthood, searching for who they might become.

"I just want to talk to you about last night Ms. Montabello," Jessica had told me. I had recognized an urgency in her voice and yet I had a class waiting for me to begin teaching so I put her off until later. As I stood there looking at the mess all over the floor, I regret having done so.

"Here she comes now," said the teacher beside me. I looked up and there was Jessica walking tentatively down the hallway, with every step, there was a slight pause, awaiting my response. I walked up to her and put my arm around her. "Ms. Wallace told me you are worried I might be angry with you. I am not angry, I am worried, deeply worried for you Jessica." She sunk her head onto my shoulder. "I heard you were out looking for me last night." I nodded my head. I could feel her softening into my embrace. I took a breath in, drew her close and continued. "Jessica, you need to know that nothing you will ever do will stop me from loving you. You need to trust that. I will not stop caring for you because of what you do, or where you go or whom you are with. I will worry for you. I may feel afraid for you. But I will never stop loving you." "I know," she whispered. We walked arm in arm down the hallway, our eyes full of tears. I breathe in. I breathe out. I had returned to my body. I had remembered.

My mother and I are walking, arm in arm, down the city streets. My father and sister up ahead.

"I'm sorry I was so upset last night Susie," my mother whispers. I nod my head. I have heard this

before. She goes on, "I didn't mean the things I said." "I know," I whisper back. She stops. She breathes in. "I think I've always been a bit angry with you." I stop. I breathe in. She continues. "Your dad and I always encouraged you to move outside our small community. But then, you moved all the way out here and soon two of your sisters followed. It was hard enough having you so far away. I felt like you took your sisters away from me too." But... she turns to look at me, "I've never stopped loving you." I breathe out. We walked arm in arm, our eyes full of tears. The intimacy of this moment is still with me, locked in my memory, caught in my body. I breathe in. I breathe out.

"I've been thinking a lot about high school," Jessica continues on the telephone. "I have a lot of time to think here, there's not much to do at my grandparent's place. Remember our conversation in June. Remember what I said. I can't go to Western High. I won't be able to be myself, the person you and my mom know I can be. The person I want to be. You know I have a reputation. Everyone will expect me to be that person. I want to be someone different. I want to be the kind of person who will become a kindergarten teacher, just like you always said I could be. My mom got the papers from Western High. I am registered there but I don't want to go there. Remember when you said I could go to the secondary school near where you live. Remember you said that we can tell them I am living with you so I can go there, so I can have a new beginning." I can hear the urgency in Jessica's voice.

I get off the phone and call my friend May who teaches at the secondary school closest to my home. I tell her Jessica's story, my story. Our stories, both spoken and unspoken, are intertwined.

"So," May says slowly, "let me get this right, you've already spent hours and hours with this kid, problem solving, breaking up fights, looking for her on the streets, talking to her mom, trying to mediate between her and her mom. Now you are telling me you want her to come and live with you or at least tell everyone that she is living with you, which is taking on almost the same responsibility. Do you think you've gotten too close Sue? It seems to me you need to create stronger boundaries around this kid. I get that you want to help but after all we have to keep our distance. We have to have professional boundaries."

*Boundaries: between the geese and me, between the crickets and me.
Yet the longer I listen, the more I hear.
I hear in the wind in the grass.
I hear the creak of tree hole, and the hollow rapping of a woodpecker.
I hear pine needles whispering.
The heat of the wild eludes me.
Yet I come close to it.
It turns in my own heart, like a key that unlocks wonder, and reverence.*
Beth Powning, 1998

I listen, but May's words about boundaries sound empty. All I can remember is the urgency in Jessica's voice. All I can remember is looking for her amongst the sadness of the young people at the sky train stations. All I can remember is holding her, communing through our tears....

Paul Shepard speaks of "the self with a permeable boundary...constantly drawing on and influencing its surroundings, whose skin and behaviour are soft zones contacting the world instead of excluding it..." (Shepard, in Rosak, Gomes & Kanner, 1995, p.13). And yet, this intimacy, 'the self with a permeable boundary' implies a vulnerability. It means, "embracing the liquid mystery of our connectedness" (p. 14).

I see Jordan on the playground, shooting hoops with several primary children. I smile. His large, gangly body towers over the younger children. The bell goes and children scatter. As Jordan moves toward the door, I walk up to him. So, I ask, what did you think of the film?

Earlier in the day, Jordan and several other grade seven students had watched a video depicting the life of drug addicts of East Hastings Street. It was a hard-

hitting video and yet, Patrick, our youth and child care worker, and I had felt it would provoke some important discussion with these young boys about their known drug use. Patrick and I were worried about Jordan. His brother was a 'pot head' and we knew Jordan was headed in that direction.

"It was gross but I knew it would be, my brother had told me about it." "It must have freaked you out a bit...a life on the streets like that would be pretty tough." "Yeah, I guess so but I'm getting ready for it...he paused for a moment...I know that's what my life is going to be like." He looked right into me. Deep brown eyes. Penetrating. Tears filled my eyes...and his. *I breathe out.*

The wind begins to blow, distracting me from my work in the garden. I feel the breeze on my legs. The leaves in the poplars began to rustle. I stop. I watch as the leaves flutter to the ground. Tints of red and gold, sure signs that fall is on its way. The wind tugs at my hair, the cool breeze sends shivers up my shirt. The wind quickly picks up. The trees sway, the wind crashing through the branches, an ocean of leaves. I stand in the middle, entranced by the oceanic sound. I close my eyes, breathing in the final days of summer in the north. A sadness descends. Sadness amidst such beauty. The bittersweet sadness and beauty of northern summers. The unknowable sadness of children. *I breathe out.*

We sit quietly in the waiting room of the hospital. Hushed conversations, knowing smiles, nurses scurrying between beds, faint crying in the background. We are waiting together, Joseph's mother and I, waiting to hear news of Joseph from the attending doctor. Joseph has collapsed at school and we called emergency. He was taken to the hospital. I had followed with his mother. She came reluctantly when I called her, sure that her son was overreacting. I am not sure what I am going to do with him she told me over the phone. Now we sit here, neither one of us speaking, staring out at the institutional white walls. I am not a very good mother she whispers. I turn. Our silence is broken. I am not a very good mother she repeats, this time more clearly. I don't really care for my son. I am silent, not sure how to respond to this acknowledgment of what Joseph has been telling me for months. How can a mother not love her child? How is this possible I wonder? I can feel my body stiffen as I take in her words. She continues in a quiet voice, not looking at me, her gaze fixed on the wall in front of us. I did not raise Joseph. I left him when he was three months old to live with my family. I went to Hong Kong first. I worked there for nine years and then came to Canada. I sent for Joseph this year. She speaks dispassionately. How can she call herself a mother? I want to shake her. Does she know what she is doing to her child? How can she be so selfish? I say nothing. I could not stand to look at Joseph after he was born she quietly continues. He reminds me of his father. My family wanted me to fix it before he was born because of what happened you know. I couldn't. Perhaps I should have. My heart stops.

I have arrived home from the hospital late. I drove Joseph and his mother home, the silence bouncing off the walls of the car. I go outside to water the garden,

parched from the hot sun of June. I cannot shake the sadness. Sadness for Joseph, sadness for his mother, sadness for a world that has come to such grief.

The wind blows and the leaves of the arbutus tree fall around me. I
feel the wind on my face. It caresses my skin. It gusts through my
hair. It wraps its arms around me. I stand there under the
comforting branches of this ancient tree ... and I weep...

The tears won't stop. I try to talk, to speak to what is in my heart. But every time I try, the tears take over. "I have to go now," I whisper into the phone. The tears pour down my face. It is Sunday morning and I have just heard from a parent who has called to tell me of the violence that broke out in the family home of one of our students. She and I have spoken many times about our growing worry for the safety of these children and their mother. I cannot shake the image of the violence just described to me. I cannot shake the image of these children for whom I care so deeply, hiding, terrorized by the violence of their father. My weeping quickly turns to sobbing. I breathe out. I try to shake away the tears. I cannot. I weep for these children. I weep for their mother. I weep for the stories I have carried with me these past weeks: the young boy who was left alone while his father left the country to visit his dying father; the high school student who is living on the street; the kindergarten child whose mother is struggling with mental illness; the young woman involved in street fighting; the adolescent who carries bear mace to protect himself on the street; the mother desperately trying to keep her daughter away from drugs; a refugee family trying to create a new beginning for themselves after enduring more than words can know...*My heart is broken open.*

*How do I continue to stay open to these
encounters, these moments of shared
vulnerability? How do I continue to embrace
the 'liquid mystery of our interconnectedness'
without losing myself? How do I keep my heart
open and not become a container for this grief
and sadness?*

I sit underneath the arbutus tree, wrapped in its protection. The tears spill out...tears of exhaustion, tears of sadness, soon turn to tears of loss as I drift back in time...I remember standing on the dock on the lake of my youth, drinking in the landscape I about to leave behind. I can feel the waves crashing to the shore, the wind blowing through me, calling out the voice of my parents. My entire body is caught in this grief. I cannot contain this sadness. Tears flowing, tears streaming, tears that ease the heart. Tears moving through me like water cleansing, purifying.

*How do I contain this sadness? These tears? Or
should I even try? Perhaps they are meant to
spill over?*

Joan Sutherland in "Body of Radiant Knots" tells of learning the traditional Lakota way where people in grief are considered sacred. She says, "it is in this place of the broken heart, the broken spirit, the broken body where we are if we can see it, cracked open to the mystery" (Sutherland, in Friedman & Moon, 1997, p. 6). In our moments of breakdown and loss we hear the lament of the world. We move down into a world of grief which is not just our own. We are breathing together with the world, opening ourselves to the deep sense of loss that seems to inhabit all things. We are alive to the 'liquid mystery of our interconnectedness.' Sorrow becomes, as Tim Lilburn would tell us, "the way back, sorrow the return" (Lilburn, 1999, p.64). "Sorrow... delivers one awkwardly, unexpectedly, uncertainly to the infinite" (p. 65).

I am sitting on the dock, tears flowing. I watch as the teardrops fall into the water, creating a ripple. I watch as the ripples move gently outward, ripples connect to other ripples then slowly dissolve into the softness of the surrounding water. I look up. The water stretches out before me as far as the eyes can see. It goes on for miles and miles until the lake becomes a river, moving out to another lake, to another river, toward the ocean. Interconnected, flowing, merging together. The boundaries of one become another. I breathe out. This tiny ripple...an embrace so powerful it holds the world together.

*The deeper that sorrow carves into your being,
the more joy you can contain*

*When you are joyous,
Look deep into your heart
And you shall find that it is,
Only that which has given you sorrow
That is giving you joy*

*When you are sorrowful
Look again in your heart
And you shall see that in truth
You are weeping for that
Which has been your delight*

Kahlil Gibran, 1923

The room is silent, punctuated only by the quiet sobs of Victor's father. Together we sit, huddled into my little chairs, tucked away in the intimacy of my office space. Victor sits with his eyes cast downward, occasionally peering up to gaze at his father. His mother's eyes look toward the floor, the walls, the window, any place to avoid the sight of her husband, head in hands, shoulders stooped, heavy with the burden of his grief. Victor's father was here reluctantly. His wife insisting they come to meet with me, to talk about what we were going to do next. Two days ago, she had sat in this same space, quietly weeping as she told me the story of her son's involvement with the police over the weekend. As she spoke her voice was full of worry, fear of what might come next. "The police did not treat this easily. They handcuffed my son...like a common criminal." There was desperation in her voice. "What do we do? What do we do?" "My husband wants to send Victor back to our country. This is not the answer. I know you can help us." She reached out and grabbed onto my hand. Together we sat, side by side, our hands clenched, no longer Principal and parent but two mothers, sitting together in our sadness and worry. Since her visit two days ago, I had been in

contact with the police, convincing them to follow an alternate path to laying charges. I had spoken passionately to them about the possibilities of this young man and the impact a criminal record would have on him living into his potential. They had listened. We agreed on a restorative approach, working with Victor, helping him to give back to the community he had let down. We were gathered today to talk about my discussions with the police and to look at what Victor might do to restore the situation, to restore himself. Victor's father walked into my room, agitated, anxious. Before he had even sat down he began to talk. "I was too embarrassed to come here today. My wife had to convince me that it was okay. My son, brought home by the police. We moved to Canada for him. We wanted him to have a better life. A life without war, without fear. We gave up everything for him. And now look at how he has repaid us.!" He looked at his son with disgust. Victor's father continued on " Look at what he has done to you! After all you have done for us, for my son and now look at him. He has destroyed everything." I looked over at Victor, his long, lanky body folded up into a tiny wicker chair. He looked up at me. His eyes were full of tears. He dropped his head to his knees. *I breathe out.* I put my hand out to touch Victor's shoulder. I let it rest there as I began to speak. "He's a young boy. He made a mistake, a serious one, but it is just that, a mistake, a mistake in judgement. He has not destroyed everything. We need to put our hearts together and think of all the successes he has had this year. We need to try and erase the memory of him being brought home by the police in handcuffs. We need to remember the image of him speaking so strongly in front of the whole school at our last assembly. We need to remember him scoring the winning basket at our basketball game. We need to remember him kneeling down to help a primary student tie his shoes.

We all need to hold these pictures in our mind." "Especially you Victor," I whispered. I could feel Victor's shoulder soften as I spoke. He did not raise his head. His father's head was still buried in his hands. "I have spoken with the police and they have agreed to let us work it out here. They will not be involved any further. We can work this out and together find a way for Victor to give back to our community." Victor's shoulders began to shake. Tears welled up in his mother's eyes. His father held his head in his hands and began to weep. My eyes fill up. The room went quiet. The squeals of children laughing outside echoed through the silence. We sat together for a long time. Sitting together with suffering, bearing witness, letting their experience enter my heart. "He has been afraid," his wife whispered breaking the silence. "In our country the police would have punished our son severely. They might have even taken him away from us. We could not have lived if that had happened." Victor's father lifted his head out of his hands. "Thank you..." His voice is almost inaudible. I lean forward, so close I can feel his tears. "This is why we moved to Canada...this is why we moved here... for our son so he could live without fear." The room went quiet. Victor pulled his head up. His mother smiled weakly. Tears streamed down our faces. We sat together in silence, vulnerable, receiving all the sadness and love that filled the room. Bearing witness to a world that had come to such grief. Bearing witness to the potential of a kinder, more gentle world. Bearing witness to the child in all his vulnerabilities, in all his possibilities. A moment, a miracle of eternity.

Victor and his family left as the shadows of the evening were slipping through the window. I sat in the glow of the dusk, in awe of what had just come to pass

in the intimacy of my office. In awe of the humanity that still pulsed off the walls. In awe and gratefulness, for this exquisite moment, for the many such moments that I have shared with others in the world of schools. It is in these moments beyond time and yet fully present, that we return to ourselves. Sitting together in this way, becoming one with the story, breathing together we remember. We remember what it means to be human in all our frailties and possibilities.

There is, I have come to understand, a sacredness to these meetings. A communion, a gathering together, in all our human vulnerabilities. Vulnerability comes from the Latin to wound. The potential for being wounded is both the challenge and the wonder of living with an open heart in the world of schools. Sitting together, bearing witness to suffering. Bearing witness to love. Reweaving the world into wholeness. And holiness. Staying in touch with the wonder, the awe, the reverence and joy of being human. Staying in touch with the suffering, the sadness, the grief and longing that lives deep within us all. Living at the crossroads of suffering and wonder.

Take your well-disciplined strengths and stretch them between the two great opposing poles of suffering and wonder, because inside human beings is where God learns.

Rilke, 1981

Epilogue

I sit at my computer, re-reading my final page. It feels as if I am finished, the Rilke quote seems a fitting end and yet there is still something waiting, something pressing its way into my thoughts. A cacophony of sound interrupts me. I look outside the window. I am in awe of what greets me. Birds, there must be a hundred, of all sizes and species, feasting on the plump red berries of the arbutus tree in my back garden. The sound overtakes me. I leave my desk. I climb into my rubber boots and head outside. My presence startles them. A dark cloud rises above me as they soar away. I stand under the arbutus, this great magnificent tree. I feel comforted. I sweep the leaves off my old wicker chair and sit down. I watch as the leaves of the arbutus fall to the ground. They spin through the air on their descent to the earth. I survey the garden. The vibrant colours of the summer have faded. The tall grasses droop, heavy with the rain of the past few weeks. The branches on the fig tree are bare. One lonely fig stands out. The once dazzling golden coneflowers bend down toward the ground. A flicker of yellow still catches the sunlight. I have neglected this space. My weekends have been spent writing or cocooned inside during the heavy rain of the fall. I have been waiting to get outside to do my regular fall clean up, clipping, dragging, replanting. I now have some time to do this. The sun is out. The rain has stopped. And yet, I still sit. I have no desire to begin the necessary tasks. The urgency of it has somehow faded. I sink into this moment. I stop. I breathe out. I am struck by the sadness I feel, sitting here. Everything around me is dying, fading away for the winter. I am surrounded by loss. I bend down to

pull back the dead leaves from the balm of gilead, the smell lingers on my finger,
the leaves crumble under my touch.

*How can I bear my sorrow?
I am sick at heart...
I am wounded at the sight on my people's wound,
I go like a mourner, overcome with horror.
Is there no balm in Gilead...*
Jeremiah (8:18-8:22), cited in Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1988

... I bend down and tentatively pull back the dead leaves. Buried deep inside I
see a tiny green shoot nudging its way through the hard ground.

*There is a balm in Gilead,
To make the wounded whole.
There is a balm in Gilead,
To heal the sin-sick soul."*
Negro spiritual, cited in Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1988

The wind picks up. The branches blow, berries drop, leaves gust to the ground.
The wind tugs at my hair, whistles through my ears. I can feel its breath—
caressing my hair, flowing, rippling along my skin. I can feel its embrace,
spiralling deeper and deeper and deeper into its breath. Breathing in...Breathing
out. The wind blows...a healing balm. 'Spirit, life, breath, renewal, Woniya
waken' (cited in Abram, p. 225). The holy air—its spirit blows through me. I
listen to its oceanic sound blowing through the poplar trees. My family's stories
caught in its eddies. Stories weaving back and forth, blowing in the wind,
crashing to the shore, finding my way home.

And the world cannot be discovered by a journey of miles, no matter how long, but only by a spiritual journey, a journey of one inch, very arduous and humbling and joyful, by which we arrive at the ground of our feet and learn to be at home

Berry, cited in Stone & Barlow, 2005, p. 121

And what have I discovered on this journey? I return to the words of Thomas Merton who tells us that "our real journey in life is interior; it is a matter of growth, deepening, and of an ever greater surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts" (Merton, 2002). I reflect back to the questions that began my work.

How, I wonder, do I continue to maintain my integrity in these extraordinary times? How do

I dwell with an open heart amidst the relentless consciousness of policies, rules and standardization? How do I stay open to the possibilities of the child, of the community, to my own possibilities? Where, I wonder, can I find the courage and faith to continue my work in this institution called school?

These are indeed extraordinary times. "We live in an extraordinary moment on earth," Joanna Macy would tell us. "We possess more technical prowess and knowledge than our ancestors could have dreamt of...At the same time we witness destruction of life in dimensions that confronted no previous generation in recorded history" (Macy, 1998, p.15). "Things are getting better and things are getting worse" (Senge *et al*, 2004, p. 214). In schools we live at the crossroads of this cultural paradox. We live daily with the humanity of it all. We live with the suffering, the sadness of families, of children, the longings of a world that has come to such grief. We also live in the joy, the wonder, the delight of learning and living alongside children and their families. Daily we receive the gift of encounter with others, with otherness. So how do we live in this paradox? How do we stand our ground in the places we love? We can hide in our rationality, in our intellect. We can protect ourselves from the vulnerability or we can open ourselves up to it. We can fortify ourselves or open our hearts. I have opened my heart. Writing this dissertation has enabled me to bear witness to both the suffering and wonder, to open myself up to the humanity, the vulnerability of living in schools. "As a writer, this is my work. By bearing witness, the story that is told can provide a healing ground. Through the art of language, the art of story, alchemy can occur. And if we choose to turn our backs, we've walked away from what it means to be human"(Williams, 2002, p. 321).

As I have written, I have surrendered the desire to know things so that we might once again be with them (Bachelard,1960). In a world that runs on rapid time, we forget to pause, to stop and go deep, to let our wondering and suffering take hold of us. Writing from reverie has enabled me to do this, to pause, to open the

doors to past history, present moments, to the deep sense of place and landscape, to the sadness and wonder, the joy and grief of life in schools. I have inhaled it, letting it become a part of me, inhaling, exhaling, breathing together with this world.

“All the senses awaken and fall into harmony in poetic reverie...and the poetic consciousness must record it”(Bachelard, 1960, p.6). In reverie we “renew the reciprocity” (Abram, 1996, p. 271) with our sensuous world. We recover “the humility and grace that comes from being fully a part of our whirling world” (Abram, 1996, p. 270).

In writing from this space of reverie I have come to understand that the way through ‘the relentless demands of the institution’ is to let the humanity of it all become a part of me. Breathing in every encounter, sharing our breath, merging with something larger than ourselves. The wind blows...a healing balm. *I breathe in. I breathe out.*

Reverie enables me to stay attuned to the spirit that Bohm describes.

What is spirit? The word is derived from a Latin word meaning ‘breath’ or ‘wind’ – like respiration or inspiration. It is suggested by the trees moving with the invisible force of the wind. We may thus think of spirit as an invisible force – a life-giving essence that moves us deeply, or as a source that moves everything from within.
Bohm, 1993, p.4

It is from this place of spirit that we find our way home to reverence. We come back to reverence when we recover a sense of humanity in common with others. Reverence for life calls us to live in the world attuned to the liquid mystery of our interconnectedness. It is a way of living, a way of being in the world, living with an open heart. This reverence for life brings me more fully to my work in schools. In reverence, I am connected to the infinite, to the eternity in each moment. It is what makes it possible for me to stay in touch with the suffering and wonder in myself and in others. It enables me to bear witness, to sit with others in all our humanity.

Indeed, I have come to understand this is at the heart of my work as a principal in the world of schools, living full of reverence, seeing the seeds of reverence in others and helping them grow, awakening and uniting the community in reverence.

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