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# Awakening to Place

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## **Awakening to Place**

Lauren Ridder, Western Washington University

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### **Abstract**

*I had such a rich, transformative experience in the North Cascades because I was awakening to the teachers all around me and intentionally tuning into the lessons that they had to give. I would like to share my process of awakening with you and provide a space for reflection on your other-than-human teachers. I encourage you to carry those lessons with you and take note of how your teachers influence your life on multiple scales. Awakening to my other-than-human teachers enriched my life. Reminders to be flexible, yet strong and to laugh and be silly shifted my perspective on the world. I feel a deep connection to the North Cascades because this place held space for me to process all of these lessons. I believe everyone should have the opportunity to experience the world in a deep and rich way. I strive to be the kind of teacher that holds this space for others, and allows them to awaken to their own reminders of healing, strength, flexibility, self-awareness, laughter, and empowerment that connect us to place and to each other.*

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**Keywords: environmental education, other-than-human teachers, natural history education**

I have been to the most beautiful place, and it's not that far from here.

There is a valley high in the mountains of the North Cascades where the brilliantly white Colonial Glacier flows down between two prominent peaks. Over thousands of years, the glacier has carved out another world that takes the form of a hanging valley. This small, shallow valley is perched high above the floor of the larger Skagit River valley, which was formed by the recession of the continental ice sheet. The steely ice of Colonial Glacier is pocketed with crevasses that reveal the subtle cerulean that is characteristic of incredibly compacted ice. Even this solid glacial ice is susceptible to the forces of climate change though, and now Colonial Glacier gives way to a pristine glacial lake. Full of ice slabs from the receding glacier, the jade-green lake nearly fills the hanging valley between Colonial Peak and Pyramid Peak.

I had the chance to explore this otherworldly place in the fall of 2014 with my friend Brandon. After a long and meandering climb up the flanks of Pyramid, we camped overnight in that hanging valley by which I compare all other hanging valleys. We left early the next morning, confident in our scrambling skills (which we actually possessed) and glacier travel skills (which we did not possess). In



order to summit Pyramid, we had to walk around the lake and across Colonial Glacier, and then find the route to scramble to the top. However, neither of us had crampons, hiking poles, or any idea what we were doing. We made it halfway across the glacier to a boulder field in the center. I was really uncomfortable at this point. My entire body was tensed from slipping every few steps, narrowly avoiding gaping cracks in the ice, and running through multiple worst-case scenarios in my head in which Brandon or myself slid into the freezing lake and died. Brandon was surer of our abilities, and attempted to talk me into continuing, but every atom in my body was telling me to get off that glacier. I had not earned the summit yet.

But I want to start at the beginning.

I acknowledge the Sauk-Suiattle and Upper Skagit people who have lived on and learned from this land since the recession of the continental ice sheet. I want to thank my family for their unconditional support and being my first teachers. Mom, thank you, you are the reason that I'm here today. Thank you to my brothers, Joe and Kevin, for continually inspiring me to find my calling and then pursue it. Immense gratitude to Joshua Porter, Nick Stanger, and Lindsey MacDonald for teaching me how to teach. Thank you to my cohort, you beautiful land mermaids. I love you, and I am so grateful for all of your unique spirits. Learning and teaching with you made me a better person. For all those that I did not individually name, thank you. Know that you have my eternal gratitude for all of the ways in which you influenced my journey.

Earlier, I shared a piece of my introduction to Pyramid Peak, one of my more influential teachers in the North Cascades. I am going to talk more about the teachers that shaped my time there. I had such a rich, transformative experience in that place, because I was awakening to the teachers all around me and intentionally tuning into the lessons that they had to give. I would like to share my process of awakening with you today.

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### **Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*)**

Please allow me to introduce my first teacher, **Yarrow** (*Achillea millefolium*).

Yarrow is a fairly common plant in the Pacific Northwest. It grows between 10 and 100 centimeters tall on a long, thin stem with feathery, semi-evergreen leaves that start at the base of the plant and then grow in an alternating pattern along the stem (Pojar & MacKinnon, 1994). *Millefolium*, or 'thousand leaves', refers to the many tiny leaves that give this wildflower a somewhat ferny appearance (Rehm, 2016). Yarrow has the numerous compactly clustered flowerheads that are characteristic of the Aster family, which also includes sunflowers and daisies. The wild flowers are usually white or pink, though cultivated yarrow comes in a large range of colors from yellow to deep magenta. Yarrow found at higher elevations tends to be hairier and more darkly colored in order to conserve moisture and protect the plant from higher levels of

ultraviolet radiation in the alpine environment (Pojar & MacKinnon, 2013). The leaves and flowers are highly aromatic, and have been described as smelling ‘spicy’ and ‘pungent’, especially when rubbed between the fingers (Pojar & MacKinnon, 2013).

Yarrow has a large range and does well in most habitats. It is an early successional species, meaning it will be one of the first plants to grow in an area that has seen a disturbance such as fire (Winslow, 2006). Yarrow spreads quickly both rhizomatically and by seed. The rhizomes (an underground stem that produces roots and lateral shoots) also allow Yarrow to form dense mats, which helps secure soil in areas with high erosion (Rehm, 2016). Yarrow thrives in full sun and prefers thin, sandy soil (Winslow, 2006). It can be found scattered among sagebrush, in open forests, or high in a subalpine meadow.

Yarrow’s history is as vast and varied as its habitat. People have interacted with Yarrow since ancient times. The plant was found in a burial site in Iraq dated back to 100,000 years BCE (Sommer, 2015). Its genus, *Achillea*, is named after the Greek mythical hero Achilles, who used the plant to stop the bleeding of his soldiers during the Siege of Troy (Pojar & MacKinnon, 2013). In the Pacific Northwest, native peoples have long recognized the medicinal value of yarrow, using the plant for a variety of ailments including sore throats, small skin wounds, and childbirth pains (Pojar & MacKinnon, 1994). More recent clinical studies have confirmed the anti-inflammatory, anti-anxiety, antiseptic, and styptic (blood-clotting) properties of yarrow (Applequist & Moerman, 2010).

I recognize these medicinal qualities in my personal interactions with Yarrow. Yarrow connects me to comfort, home, and healing.

Thanks to my mom’s incredible talent and passion for gardening, the yard of my childhood home in Tennessee is about eighty percent flowerbed. On multiple occasions, my brothers and I came home from school to find an entirely new garden that our mom had excavated that day while we were in class. My favorite of her gardens was the ‘Big Garden’ in the backyard, which was a large rectangular patch of dirt with a rotating cast of gourds, marigolds, strawberries, morning glories, cosmos, carrots, and tomatoes, among other things. But there was always Yarrow. I remember wandering out to the garden to tell her about my day at school, finding my way to the Yarrow, and burying my nose in the sweet, yet spicy blooms. I would proclaim to my mom, “All these other flowers are real pretty, but this one’s my favorite because it smells so good!”

Whenever I spot Yarrow while exploring my newer home in the North Cascades, I stop to bury my nose in the blooms or rub the leaves between my fingers. The scent evokes memories of joyful, sunny afternoons at home. I began to associate those comforting memories with the new life I was building in the Northwest. Yarrow had this funny way of appearing whenever I needed a reminder of home and healing the most. When I was feeling unsure or tired or homesick, there was Yarrow with its healing lesson. Yarrow taught me that just because I am physically far from home, that

does not mean I am disconnected from family, comfort, and safety. Home is wherever I need it to be, because home is my family, and I carry them with me wherever I go.

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### **Vine Maple (*Acer circinatum*)**

My next teacher also hails from the plant kingdom: **Vine Maple** (*Acer circinatum*).

Vine Maple is a deciduous shrub-like tree, with strong, supple boughs and a sprawling, winding growth form. The Vine Maple grows between one and eight meters tall, and is easily recognized by its green bark, which browns with age (Favorite, 2006). The green bark also marks the presence of chlorophyll, meaning the Vine Maple can photosynthesize through its bark. Its leaves grow opposite each other along the branch and have the typical palmate maple shape with seven to nine points (Pojar & MacKinnon, 1994). In the fall, the leaves of Vine Maples growing in the shade turn a glorious golden hue while those trees growing in full sun change to a bright fiery red. The small flowers of the Vine Maple are white and red, and they grow in clusters at the ends of branch shoots (Favorite, 2006). Vine maple blooms in spring with fruits present in the summer through the fall. The winged fruits, or samaras, are green and pink and grow in widespread, almost linear pairs (Pojar & MacKinnon, 1994).

Vine Maple propagates both by seed and a process called layering, which occurs when its rambling branches take root and sprout new colonies (O’Dea, Zasada, & Tappeiner II, 1995). Because of this ability to clone itself, Vine Maple can form large and impenetrable thickets. It can be found in a variety of habitats, but occurs most frequently in moist nitrogen-rich soils along stream banks or other wet places where some sunlight reaches the forest floor (Favorite, 2006). It is a common understory species in the Pacific Northwest and one of the longest-lived understory trees. One group in Oregon was found to contain individuals of up to 142 years old (Tashe & Schmidt 2002). This tree species does not just take resources from its surrounding environment without giving anything in return, however. The Vine Maple greatly contributes to nutrient cycling processes due to the high nutrient content in its leaves and a heavy annual leaf fall (Tashe & Schmidt 2002). The tree also plays host to “diverse and abundant epiphyte communities” throughout its entire life cycle (Ruchty, Rosso, & McCune, 2001).

In addition to giving back to its other-than-human neighbors, the Vine Maple provides for humans, too. The dense wood of Vine Maple is flexible when fresh, and can be used for a variety of household implements such as baskets, snowshoe frames, spoons, and axe handles (Pojar & MacKinnon, 1994). The wood was also used medicinally as a treatment for dysentery and polio by burning the wood and mixing the charcoal with water and brown sugar (Moerman, 1998). Finally, the sap contains a small amount of sugar that can be used as a drink or boiled down into a syrup (Facciola, 1990).

I initially connected with this tree during my first fall at the Environmental Learning Center when the luminous yellow leaves filling the forest made it look as if the trees were glowing from within. As we dove into our Natural History practice and I learned more about the trees of the Northwest, I especially appreciated how the Vine Maple's branches formed fractal patterns that ensured it caught every drop of sunshine. However, the lessons of this tree were not obvious to me at first. It took an invitation to look deeper at the beings surrounding us.

As our year in residency came to an end, Joshua invited my cohort to a Council of All Beings. The Council of All Beings is a ritual created by deep ecologist Joanna Macy. It is an invitation to step outside our human identity and speak on behalf of another being. Through spontaneous expression, the council aims to bring our awareness to our interconnectedness with all life (Macy, 2002). During this particular council, we were to embody the being that most resonated with us in the days following the invitation, and then share their words of wisdom and support with the members of Cohort 14 as they transitioned from the North Cascades to Bellingham.

As I thought on whom I would represent at the council, I realized that I had already been chosen. The Vine Maple had been reminding me all year to be flexible, yet strong, like it's winding boughs. To be steadfast and rooted in my values, yet willing to adapt and be open-minded. To be resourceful and gather energy even in the bleakness of winter, and to return energy to the system when I had energy to give.

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### **Northwestern Garter Snake (*Thamnophis ordinoides*)**

Please allow me to introduce my next teacher, the **Northwestern Garter Snake** (*Thamnophis ordinoides*).

The Garter Snake is the most common snake species within its range, which covers most of the land west of the Cascade Crest from the tip of northern California into British Columbia (Nafis, 2017). The Garter Snake can be difficult to identify due to its extreme variations in color and pattern. A relatively small snake averaging around 12-24 inches long, an adult Northwestern Garter Snake is typically black, brown, or olive with a pale belly and a stripe running down the back of the snake. The width and occurrence of the stripe varies. Some individuals have stripes down their sides as well, with black spots between the stripes. The stripes and spots can be any number of colors, with the most common being yellow, white, red, green, turquoise, orange, or blue (Reptiles of BC, 2017).

The behavior of the Garter Snake varies depending on its coloration. A brightly striped snake will flee when pursued by a predator as the stripes make it difficult to tell what direction it's moving in and how fast it is travelling, while a snake with a subtler pattern will remain completely motionless, relying on camouflage to avoid detection (Reptiles of BC, 2017). When attacked or handled, Garter Snakes will "defend

themselves by releasing the contents of their cloaca and musk glands then smearing this pungent foul smelling mixture over themselves and their attacker” (Hallock & McAllister, 2009).

These mostly terrestrial snakes emerge from their winter den starting in March and remain active into early November. Garter Snakes typically breed in the spring in late March to early April and again in late September to early October (Hallock & McAllister, 2009). In between mating, snakes will disperse to summer foraging areas, where they feed on small, sedentary prey such as slugs, earthworms, and occasionally snail (Nafis, 2017). Look for Garter Snakes in open grassy areas, forest openings, and on the edges of coniferous forests (Hallock & McAllister, 2009).

The lessons I learned from the Garter Snake are ones commonly associated with snakes: shedding and rebirth. However, that did not make those lessons any less potent for me. The reminders came at a time when I desperately needed them. I was in the process of shedding away the unwanted burdens of heartache and self-doubt, and I was uncovering my true self. I felt like I was sifting through layers of uncertainty to uncover my core identity and become more self-aware.

At times, it was tempting to avoid the process entirely because it left me feeling exposed. Each time I saw the Snake though, I was reminded of the power of living from an authentic heart space, and that the shedding process is temporary. I found that once I did the work to clarify the vision I have for my life, I felt stronger, more authentic, and better able to connect to those around me because I could speak from my heart. This process was not a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence though, and I will always be growing, learning, and changing. The lesson of the Snake is to recognize the profoundness of the shedding process and to honor that time.

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### **Northern Flicker (*Colaptes auratus*)**

Please allow me to introduce my final teacher, the **Northern Flicker** (*Colaptes auratus*).

The Northern Flicker is a large, brown woodpecker with a gentle expression and dapper black-scalloped plumage. Upon its chest, the Flicker wears a black bib over a white belly covered in black spots (Cornell Lab, 2015). The Flicker has a white rump that is conspicuous in flight and often visible when perched. The Northern Flicker has the characteristic undulating flight pattern of woodpeckers during which it flaps its wings a few times and then glides. Flight also reveals the brilliantly colored underwings of the Flicker: yellow in the Eastern United States, and bright red here in the West (National Geographic Society, 1999). This coloration marks the difference between subspecies – Yellow-shafted and Red-shafted. Male and female red-shafted flickers look similar, except for the red moustachial stripe on the male (National Geographic Society, 1999).

The Flicker can be found in a variety of habitats, from open fields and forest edges to city parks and suburban lawns. Unlike most woodpeckers, the Flicker prefers to forage for food on the ground, using its long, barbed tongue to lap up ants and other insects. At times, the Flicker will even go after ants underground, drilling into the soil like other woodpeckers hammer away at wood (Cornell Lab, 2015). The Flicker also seeks out berries and seeds, especially during the winter, and can extend its tongue up to two inches beyond its beak to ensnare its prey. If startled while foraging, the Flicker will take flight and perch horizontally on a branch, rather than clutching to and looping around a tree trunk like other woodpeckers (Cornell Lab, 2015).

During breeding season, two male Flickers will face off in a ‘fencing duel,’ while a prospective mate looks on. They will face each other on a branch and draw figure-eights in the air with their upturned beaks while calling rhythmically at the same time (Cornell Lab, 2015). Both male and female Flickers help with nest-building. They will carve out a cavity about 13-16 inches deep with an entrance hole that is about three inches in diameter. Nests are generally placed in dead or diseased tree trunks about 6-15 feet off of the ground, though the nests can sometimes be as high as 100 feet in the air. Northern Flickers are one of the few woodpecker species to reuse nest cavities from previous years (Cornell Lab, 2015).

Flickers communicate in several ways. In the spring and early summer, when pairs are forming and birds are establishing territories, you will hear the loud, rolling rattle echoing across the forest. This call is similar to that of a Pileated Woodpecker. When Flickers are closer together and displaying, they will make a quiet, rhythmic *wick-a, wick-a* call. In place of a song, woodpeckers will drum, with the goal of making as loud a noise as possible. The Northern Flicker’s drumming sound is clean and precise. It lasts about a second with the bird striking the tree around 25 times! Finally, Flickers also make a loud, single-note call, that to me, sounds like a laser gun (Cornell Lab, 2015).

It is this last call that always reminds me of the lessons of the Flicker.

For me, the Flicker marks place, time, and growth. My personal history with the Flicker began about three years ago in Southwestern Colorado. I have a specific image in my mind’s eye of when I first saw a Flicker. I was on my way up to a trailhead with a close friend. The mood was playful and hopeful, as we joked and made plans for the future. We drove up a dirt road through a ponderosa forest with the windows open. Fresh air and warm sun poured into the car. All of a sudden, a flock of birds startled to our left, and I watched spellbound as bright flashes of orange swooped away into the forest.

I learned the Flicker’s name about a week later, when I was tasked with developing a lesson plan on the common birds and mammals of the Colorado high desert. As I taught the Fur and Feathers lesson over the next few weeks, I saw my students’ eyes light up every time I brought out the feathers of the Flicker. Maybe it was my excitement over sharing the first bird that I connected with, maybe they found the fiery



orange feathers as captivating as I did, or maybe it was none of those things, but through these experiences I was already learning from the Flicker as I began to take note of what sparked my sense of wonder and how it felt to share that wonder with others.

I did not think on the Flicker much after that until about a year and a half later when the bird re-entered my life. On a walk through the woods surrounding the Environmental Learning Center with my cohort and the one and only Joshua Porter, I heard this strange laser gun sound. “What was *that?*” I asked, and Joshua identified it as the Northern Flicker. I was instantly taken back to the flashes of orange among the ponderosas. I was surprised (and a little proud) that I already knew the Flicker. Another Flicker answered, *pew!*, from across the forest, and a huge smile lit up my face. I could do this. I could learn an entire new ecosystem, and I could have a ton of fun doing it. Hearing the Flicker reminded me of how happy and whole I felt in Colorado when I was learning and teaching about the incredible high desert landscape. It reminded me of how I had felt empowered to take control of my life and my education and apply to graduate school, and now here I was living the vision that had previously felt so far away.

At the end of our yearlong North Cascades Institute residency, my cohort and I transitioned from living in a small, mountain community to a fast-paced city. Our transition was even more abrupt and intense than we were anticipated since it took place in the middle of a wildfire evacuation. During this time, I leaned on the teachings of Flicker more than ever. Catching sight of the red-orange flash on the bike ride to campus in Bellingham re-ignited my sense of wonder. Its call brought joy and silliness back into my life. The Flicker centered me and reminded me of my intentional decision to build an authentic life aligned with my values. And for that, I am forever grateful for this teacher.

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### ***Let me return to that hanging valley.***

Brandon and I gathered on top of a boulder in the middle of Colonial Glacier to plan our next steps, with the tantalizing summit of Pyramid Peak in full view. We had maybe 100 yards of glacier left to cross, but my entire body was tensed from slipping every few steps and narrowly avoiding gaping cracks in the ice. I knew I had not earned the summit yet. I had not respected myself or place enough to fully prepare for the climb, and Brandon and I were paying for that naiveté now. Disappointment set in. We had failed.

Then, the teachings of Northern Flicker came to mind. We realized that we were taking ourselves entirely too seriously, and with that hint of silliness, I felt empowered to own my nerves and my decision to turn back. The tension in my body released. I felt a layer of uncertainty fall away. Here was Snake to reassure me in this transformative experience.

Skittering back across the glacier towards camp, we decided to spend the rest of the morning in the hanging valley. Time expanded as we split up to wander down the paths that were calling to us. Yarrow's reminders of comfort and healing were close at hand as I walked along the lake, skipped rocks, and sunbathed. I eventually found my way to where Brandon was lounging underneath the waterfalls pouring over Pyramid's shoulder. Laughing and scrambling and splashing and throwing rocks down into the lake, it felt like we were the only two human beings for thousands of miles. There were no animals or birds that I remember, but the place was still full of energy. Vine Maple reminded me to accept this energy that was being gifted to us. Eventually we left that sanctuary, and hiked home.

I gained a new respect for the mountains that weekend, and Pyramid challenged me to have more respect for myself. I learned the importance of honoring true emotion and honoring place. Though we did not summit that day, I felt whole in knowing that I learned more from failing on the mountain than if I had stood on top of it. Through failure and challenge, I found power. I awoke.

Pyramid is the larger teacher for me as it holds the lessons of Yarrow, Vine Maple, Snake, and Flicker and many others within it. Every time I see Pyramid Peak or am in its presence, I am reminded of the lessons of healing, strength, flexibility, self-awareness, laughter, and empowerment that all inform my respect for self and place.

We do not often have the time to bring our awareness to the teachers surrounding us, so I would like to provide a space for reflection on your teachers today. I will give you a series of instructions, and you will have a certain amount of time to complete each task. You will need paper, a writing utensil, and a timer. I invite you to engage at whatever level you are most comfortable.

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**Activity – Who are the other-than-human teachers in your life?**

- What comes to mind? Take a moment for someone to float to the surface.
- Write down everything you know about them. (3 min)
- Draw your teacher. (3 min)
- BE the teacher. Act! Dance! Use your body! (3 min)
- Free write (10 min)

I encourage you to carry those lessons with you and take note of how your teachers influence your life on multiple scales. Awakening to the other-than-human teachers all

around me enriched my life. Reminders to be flexible, yet strong and to laugh and be silly shifted my perspective on the world. I can communicate more empathetically, and I am more certain of my choices and myself. I feel a deep connection to the North Cascades because this place held space for me to process all of these lessons. I believe everyone should have the opportunity to experience the world in a deep and rich way. I strive to be the kind of teacher that holds this space for others, and allows them to awaken to their own reminders of healing, strength, flexibility, self-awareness, laughter, and empowerment that connect us to place and to each other.

Thank you.

A handwritten signature consisting of the letters 'S2SS' in a cursive, flowing style. The signature is positioned on a light blue, diamond-shaped background that is slightly tilted.

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