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# Rare or Well Done? A Waitress Wonders How to Best Serve Environmental Education

Katherine Renz, Western Washington University

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## Abstract

*Environmental education (EE) promises to facilitate the transformation of attitudes and behavior on a broad scale. Yet the field has not fulfilled its potential. This article takes an auto-ethnographical approach in considering the reluctance of environmental educators to discuss environmental problems. How is the discipline weakened by equating critical thinking and ecologically motivated despair with a negative attitude rather than honestly acknowledging the grief and promoting resiliency and empowerment instead? Through the lens of a professional waitress, this article argues that the service industry offers a privileged though overlooked venue for EE. Rather than framing EE as an isolated event in the faraway, vaulted wilderness, practitioners should take advantage of non-formal, frequent opportunities to re-contextualize nature as part of the experience of everyday life.*

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**Keywords: Activism, empowerment, perspective, environmental education, critical pedagogy, trickster, spirituality, sense of connection**

*Hi! Welcome! Do you have any questions about the menu? No? Great! Can I take your order? How would you like your environmental education done today? Over easy? With a side of sustainably-raised bacon? Some organic veggies mixed in? Yes, we can do that, no problem. Oh, you want to change your order to sunny-side up? And add some cheese? Sure! Okay hon, your environmental education special will be ready in just about 10 minutes. I'll be right back to touch up your coffee!*

Pop novelist Tom Robbins offers a paean to the over-educated food-serving women of the world:

*Of the genius waitress, I now sing.  
Of hidden knowledge, buried ambition, and secret  
sonnets scribbled on cocktail napkins; of aching  
arches, ranting cooks, condescending patrons, and eyes  
diverted from ancient Greece to ancient grease; of  
burns and pinches and savvy and spunk; of a uniquely  
American woman living a uniquely American compromise,  
I sing. I sing of the genius waitress.... (Robbins, 2006, p. 68)*



As both a career waitress and recent graduate with a Masters in Environmental Education degree, I feel I often helped people connect to the world around them better in the former endeavor than the latter. Whether I was gently teasing diners about their guilt over eating fried potato chunks but not about climate change, or attempting to get a whole patio of patrons jazzed on spiders weaving orbs in the shrubs around them, harnessing teachable moments with a non-captive audience of customers was typically more satisfying than chasing children around the woods, trying to focus their attention on glaciers and moss while secretly praying none of them poked their eye out.

Yet I chose to transition from one profession to the other. Why? Environmental education (EE) was my clarion call, the panacea. Give this waitress any contemporary problem, and I could dig down to its root cause: a severed connection to the natural world. Today, after nearly two years of intensively studying and teaching in the field, I am disillusioned as to EE's efficacy. Perhaps this is a simple consequence of my immersion in the discipline, a teenage rebellion as I come of age in my explorations. Perhaps. Yet the common, accepted practice of EE as a smattering of team-building activities performed outside, sprinkled throughout with some ecological concepts, demonstrates a lack of depth (Bowers, 2001; Palmer, 2003), reflective critique (Bowers, 2004; Jickling, 2013), and impact (Short, 2009) that is regrettable for a movement that could create exceptional change on a personal and political scale.

My twenty years of employment in a variety of jobs encouraged the realization that "all education is environmental education," as author and educator David Orr writes (2004, p. 12). As a novice environmental interpreter, I would've been happy to share a compelling anecdote or factoid related to ecology with anyone who looked over my shoulder as I scrubbed toilets or sold cheeses. This sense of ubiquity was confirmed on the second day of my university course, "Foundations in Environmental Education." The class discussed how anyone has the capacity to be a teacher, and how our environment is everything in our surroundings, including us. How lucky, then, as the opportunity for EE is everywhere! Orr, however, is referring less to this sort of constant, ambient EE and more to the idea that all curricular education is essentially environmental education, that nothing in schools can be taught disconnected from ecological lessons or apart from the natural world (2004). In contrast, Steve Van Matre, founder of The Institute for Earth Education and a former professor of environmental education, strongly critiques how this assumption of omnipresence can lead to a shallow, ultimately ineffective and counterproductive version of formal EE (2004). In this model, teachers attempt to "infuse" classroom curriculum with a hodge-podge of discrete environmental activities, never offering a complete integrated view of ecology and humans' roles in nature. Despite the criticisms Van Matre's arguments have drawn for their acerbic appraisal of the direction EE has taken over the past forty years, and while recognizing their limitations, his complaint remains an important one: EE has become supplemental and aimless. Still, the ability to link any situation or topic to the

broader ecological or environmental reality is powerful to me. I have been successful in shifting peoples' perspectives equally well from a barstool as a tree stump.

As practiced today, much EE is seriously flawed and yet still possesses the potential for deep and lasting change. To the discipline's detriment, the reluctance of United States-based environmental educators to discuss environmental problems is infantilizing and misguided; due, I propose, to the culture's obsession with optimism (Ehrenreich, 2009). This critique is supported by an examination of the higher purpose of education: to facilitate the mastery of one's self, with the end goal in service to the collective good. How could such a lofty ambition be integrated into EE to offer a counterpoint to the less critically engaging "team building in the faraway outdoors" model? Ultimately, I consider where I might want to reside in the EE world, concluding that the venue is irrelevant: Connecting people to their soul, as opposed to their ego, is education for the natural world, even if it is not explicitly about or in the natural world. My approach is indebted to Bill Plotkin's *Nature and the Human Soul* (2008), in which he outlines "ecocentric" human development in contrast to the "egocentric" version. An ecocentric approach is an attempt to use education to combat, as writer and mystic Thomas Merton once said, "the mass production of people literally unfit for anything except to take part in an elaborate and completely artificial charade" (cited in Orr, 2004, p. 11).

This is not the only path toward a richer, more honest EE; adequately addressing ecological catastrophes will necessitate a multitude of approaches. Like a fire-breathing dragon threatening the village, it is unlikely to be stopped by one magic, revolutionary arrow to the heart, but by being weakened through thoughtful attacks from every direction.

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### **Eco-Honesty: Restoring Realism to Education**

"The human empire is the greatest threat to what remains of life on earth, and you are part of it." Paul Kingsnorth (2014, ¶ 72)

*Hi! I'm Katherine, I'll be your server! Tonight we're excited to offer our house special: nuclear annihilation with a side of braised have-nots from the Global South, topped with a Superfund reduction and drizzled with the sixth massive extinction crisis! (I know, right? We haven't had that one for a while! Yum!) For dessert, the eight billionth human baby! What's that? Oh yes, of course, it's all organic! And local!*

As a waitress, I tried hard to not come off as phony to my customers. I never introduced myself unless asked. I was neither the diners' chum nor their servant. Rather, I'd use the hour or so I had with a table to establish a rapport and ephemeral friendship, if opportunity allowed. My success revolved around this nuanced sincerity.

This adherence to the “comfortable genuine,” as I call it, did not last long upon my foray into EE. In a reflection paper written the summer before becoming a graduate student-cum-instructor for an outdoor experiential education program in the Pacific Northwest, I pondered how I would connect to my students to the degree I’d hoped:

*How am going to convey the ideas I consider vital? Are they even appropriate? While gathered along the riverbank at friend’s homestead in the Methow Valley, he mentioned his frustration around communicating with kids on a deeper level because of their short attention spans. The lesson becomes about conveying ecological principles through a series of games rather than discussion. This makes sense, of course (most kids like games!), but I struggle when trying to imagine how I would ever elucidate the headier ideas – the ones I believe are the biggies regarding the root causes of environmental destruction – to a group of ten-year-olds through playing games. Concepts like: we are in and of the earth, not on some inanimate object “Earth;” that war on each other is war against the planet and thus, ourselves; that death is as vital to life on earth as is life; that we have the power to create our own reality even when we feel completely disenfranchised.*

My apprehension was valid. Though I remember when a fifth grader mentioned, unprovoked, that war on each other is a war on nature, too, and I had conversations with scores of students about the importance of decomposition, the overarching feeling at the facility was one of unbridled optimism. A healthy sense of self-esteem and fun is wonderful. Encouraging solutions and a hopeful attitude is great. Yet when high fives, thumbs up, and buzzy taglines – *Transformative experiences for youth!!!* – prevail at the expense of ecological knowledge and connection at an environmental education institution, it can feel more akin to a high school pep rally than a heartfelt attempt to cultivate deep change. To question this approach, either through our lessons or within the adult community, was discouraged.

Realism is not synonymous with negativity. In his work on ecological identity, the “personal introspection that drives one’s commitment to environmentalism,” writer and professor Mitch Thomashow describes the imperative of navigating this distinction:

*Environmentalists carry a profound dual burden: how can they at once convey a sense of wonder and appreciation about the natural world, and also be the harbingers of impending doom, warning the world about ecological catastrophes?....This extraordinary psychological and philosophical challenge is a critical agenda for environmental organizations and is the basis of reflective environmental practice. (1995, p. 5)*

If we are ignorant to a problem, remain unaware of its scope, and refuse to examine it, then we do not have a solid basis upon which to reflect upon a solution. No educated diagnosis? No potential action. Like all binary modes of thought, a reliance on the “either/or” is misleadingly simple. Rather, the answer resides in the “and/both”:

Solution and problem, positive and negative, light and dark. One is meaningless without the other; like a yin yang, each side contains elements of its complementary opposite (Latour, 2004).

What if environmental educators embraced the task of supporting students in what Brazilian educator Paulo Friere called conscientization, or education for critical consciousness, to promote empowerment beyond the fear rather than forcing a superficial sense of positivity on both the EE practitioner community and the students (Christens, Collura, & Tahir, 2013, p. 170)? Friere surmises that a deeper comprehension of oppressive and unjust social systems involves conversation, action, and reflection to generate an understanding of the underlying causes of these issues (2013). Then, and only then, can plans be developed to deal with these problems.

To create a better world, the systems preventing this change need to be scrutinized with a clear eye. A positive outlook can coexist with careful judgment. In fact, it becomes stronger alongside deep thinking that adds support, substance, and context. Critical thinking does not necessitate hating everything, but it does require a commitment to delving in. “This prevailing belief that we have to protect ourselves from depressing news and distressing thoughts establishes a self-defeating strategy,” writes Buddhist philosopher and anti-nuclear activist Joanna Macy (Macy & Johnstone, 2012, p. 68). As we become decreasingly confident in our ability to deal with a problem, the more we try to avoid it. This avoidance becomes habitual, the default mode, not just for individuals but for entire cultures. This community-based insecurity builds a barrier against bringing “gloom and doom” knowledge into the public sphere: Collectively, we’ve decided, whether consciously or unconsciously, that we just cannot bear reality. So instead, we screen it out, avoiding action and trying to circumvent the more insidious act of contemplation. Lack of knowledge and lack of concern are not the primary problem. Rather, our socially sanctioned silence has an emotional basis; we protect ourselves inside a fortress of constructed denial (Norgaard, 2012).

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### ***The Biggest Tragedy: Denying opportunities for growth***

“A degraded habitat will produce degraded humans. If there is to be any true progress, then the entire life community must progress.” (Thomas Berry, 1988, P. 169)

*Hi... So, the kitchen 86'ed the Soupe des Solutions. Sorry about that. But instead we have a savory plate of ecological knowledge served with a side of heartbreak and bitter greens. Will that work for you?*

Does Macy’s argument mean we have to take off our affective armor, exposing ourselves – and our children – to harsh realities all the time? Of course not.

This is not a call to be routinely angry, depressed, or, as environmentalists are pigeonholed, “doom and gloom” (Hall, 2013). Yet we all have the ability to reframe this hard knowledge and desire to do something as empowering, as something we feel competent to take on because we honestly understand it. Avoiding being honest as teachers because we’re scared our students will be scared is neither prudent nor compassionate. It robs them of the opportunity to be as equipped as possible to go forth into this world and do something great.

David Sobel is a luminary in the EE field and famous for his, “no tragedies before fourth grade maxim”. In *Beyond Ecophobia*, he worries that highlighting environmental abuse will prompt young students to dissociate from the natural world, analogous to physically and sexually abused children who develop mental and emotional blocks to separate themselves from pain (1998). Rather than cultivating curiosity and a desire to “save” the planet, too much negative information will trigger the opposite effect, causing students to distance themselves from the environment. His solution is to foster opportunities for children to bond with the outdoors through nature play to replace problem-focused EE curriculum (1998). Little ones need fall in love with wild things before they can learn to protect them.

Sobel’s point is valid, and agreeable. Childhood is ephemeral and precious; there are plenty of years as an adult to be bogged down with the challenges of activism. Yet in his adherence to “no tragedies” he also underestimates the very students he proposes we safeguard. Gene Myers, a professor of environmental education at Western Washington University, counters Sobel, arguing that children are active social agents, capable of taking initiative and being leaders on issues if they are provided a supportive culture in which to do so (2013). Not only are children already aware of some of the scariest environmental problems out there, but being coached on how to cope in a healthy way has a direct positive effect on successful future coping (2013). This is, admittedly, dependent on nurturing communities and involved parenting, things educators cannot count on. We should encourage children to become competent adults, not ones who have been so sheltered they are unable to deal with grown-up realities. It behooves us to devise ways to honestly convey Sobel’s tragedies in a way that frames them as opportunities for growth. The focus should be on resiliency, on developing an ability to recover from adversity and mature into a more capable person because of it. In a study conducted after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, for example, the response by participants with resilient personalities, as opposed to those with less resilient ones, demonstrated fewer signs of clinical depression and became stronger psychologically than they were before 9/11 in terms of increases in tranquility, optimism, and reported life satisfaction (Fredrickson & Kurtz, 2011). Active engagement can lead to resiliency and an associated sense of empowerment, even concerning depressing environmental issues such as climate change (Doherty & Clayton, 2011).

The principle audience for EE efforts is elementary-school aged students. Many children are already cognizant of the environmental crisis and will only become more

so with age. Failing to problematize ecological issues is condescending and demonstrates a lack of trust in the students' ability to think, feel, and act intelligently. In contrast, a culture of honesty and critical thinking can create a space for reciprocity and voluntary, not forced, team building. Knowledge of "the tragedies" and a connection to nature through play are not mutually exclusive. Both should be hallmarks of a good EE program. Additionally, within all this harsh reality is plenty of room to nurture a profound positive spirit. Frederickson and Kurtz list some of these opportunities in their paper entitled *Cultivating Positive Emotions to Enhance Human Flourishing*:

- *Being open and truly accepting of one's current circumstances;*
- *inviting change; releasing expectations; noticing beauty and kindness;*
- *savoring experience;*
- *being curious;*
- *following one's interests and pursuing new things; and*
- *forging quality connections with other people. (2011, p. 6)*

Putting ourselves to task as educators to by enlivening our teaching in these ways provides the essential counterbalance to educating honestly about our species' starring role in ecological degradation.

As such, we are responsible agents. Far from being a source of depression and guilt, this obligation puts us in a privileged position to make good on our side of the contract we inescapably have as self-conscious creatures of the Earth. To gloss over this responsibility is negligent, especially in the name of environmental education. Eyes wide open, our existence is one of "bearing witness," refusing to turn away in ignorance, and ensuring that we use what we learn to do well in the world (Devall & Sessions, 1985; Orr, 2004). Joanna Macy offers wise advice about how we can better act with accountability:

*Each day we lose valuable parts of our biosphere as species become extinct and ecosystems destroyed – yet where is their funeral service? If our world is dying piece by piece without our publicly and collectively expressing our grief, we might easily assume that these losses aren't important. Honoring our pain for the world is a way of valuing our awareness, first, that we have noticed, and second, that we care. Intellectual awareness by itself is not enough. We need to digest the bad news. That is what rouses us to respond. (Macy & Johnstone, 2012, p. 71)*

Our sadness and frustration exists for a reason. It is our internal alarm system. Paying attention to these gut-feelings and trusting them, rather than pointing fingers at "Debbie Downers" and "Negative Nancys" is an essential step in getting to the other side, the one where the solutions dwell. We avoid it at our peril.

So will we be roused, as Macy suggests? It is challenging to teach people, especially young Americans, to honor the world when the United States is leading perpetrator of ecological and human exploitation (Orr, 2004). Like the grief Macy implores us to work through, we must also recognize our internalized hypocrisy. To paraphrase Nietzsche: The measure of a society is how well it transforms pain and suffering into something worthwhile (Weiner, 2008). As we are settling in to the 21st century, this should be the fundamental measure of environmental education.

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### ***The University of Subversity: Destroying the hungry ghosts***

“Most people are mirrors, reflecting the moods and emotions of the times; few are windows, bringing light to bear on the dark corners where troubles fester. The whole purpose of education is to turn mirrors into windows.” Sydney J. Harris, journalist and author (1917-1986) (cited in Howe, 1963, p. 148)

*My hair just won't all stay in a bun....! And is that egg yolk on my blouse? Already? We're not even open yet! Jeez, is it just the mirror or do I really look that tired? Oh well, here comes the adrenaline rush, that fear I still get even though I've been serving food for years. It's just performance anxiety; Friday mornings are hell. Rachel sold \$3,500 worth of food last week! But it'll be worth it at 3:00pm, when I go home with a wad of cash. Hmmm, I wonder how many people I'll talk to today? Who will I end up connecting with? How will I shed light on something random for a customer, or them for me? Our paths could be changed by this day....Accck! Customers already?!?*

Education is an emancipatory discipline; pedagogy should be subversive, and hold fast as the realm of continual questioning. Though there is a vulnerability in labeling anything “subversive,” – as this makes the activity obvious, apparent, and eventually accepted, mainstream, and finally co-opted – the essential idea of undermining systems of control remains. The preeminent goals of education should extend beyond knowledge alone and into the sphere of personal and collective liberation (Bates, 2005), where underlying assumptions are critiqued and power dynamics exposed (Clayton & Myers, forthcoming). In this sense, students are encouraged to be critical thinkers, to learn to use and harness their free will to make decisions toward their own, and the world's, advantage.

This view contrasts with the traditional narrower and more utilitarian view of education as part of the socialization process that has been dominant in Western society since the mid-18th century (Clayton & Myers, forthcoming). With the onset of the Industrial Revolution, students were pedagogically bred for obedience in factory work, shaped to be productive citizens toiling for the State and Progress. In the contemporary version of this paradigm, education is a means toward a successful (i.e., high-paying) career, with all its American Dream accouterments: the big house with the big

mortgage, good-looking spouse, two children, new car, health insurance, credit card debt, and annual two-week vacation. In the proving ground of public school, the qualities to attain this vision are inculcated through standardized tests, a competitive obsession with grades and points, and “pods” of desks to ostensibly learn to cooperate in groups.

Though the ability to survive and meet basic needs as an adult is imperative, a classroom designed to pump out laborers and specialized technocrats only goes so far. Education needs a wider view, along the lines of “training” in early Chinese Daoism, undertaken to help people “do away with arbitrary and delusive conditioning” (Snyder, 1990, p. 92). If educators are going to train students, it should be to think critically – to actively question, devise answers, and question again. It becomes training to untrain. Put another way, the challenge for educators is to combat what author and research psychologist Bill Plotkin calls Primary Socioeconomic Training, or “the indoctrination of the future workers, consumers, and soldiers needed to sustain a global industrial growth society and its extreme disparities of wealth between the elite class and the poor” (2008, p. 155). Without the smart, sharp edge of critical thinking, education perpetuates a grand disservice, a deceit even, in choosing not to look. It becomes, instead, a sterile venue for testable, piecemeal bits of information.

Plotkin’s Primary Socioeconomic Training relates to the environmental crisis. He who dies with the most toys wins, as the saying goes. Fast cars, expensive shoes, tucked tummies: regardless, we die. In the seventy-year-plus interim, consuming products sold with the promise to fill the hole in our souls offers a false solution. The seductive lure of advertising has turned the majority of us into “philosophical and emotional cripples,” what poet Gary Snyder writes are known in Buddhism as hungry ghosts, or “vicious distorters of true human potential” with “giant appetites and throats no bigger than needles” (Devall et al., 1984, as cited in Plotkin, 2008, p. 251). Traditional classrooms are like haunted houses, striving to create hungry ghosts who then graduate to other versions of haunted houses: offices and shopping malls. The goal of EE, and all education, should be to replace these emaciated phantoms with truly satisfied, corporeal humans. We need to help each other decrease our appetites, expand our throats, and open our mouths to express our vision for the world rather than choke down one toy after another.

*You look pretty hungry.....!*

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### ***Serving Soul Food: Education as mastery of oneself***

“David Whyte speaks of soul as ‘the largest conversation a person is capable of having with the world.’ Here ‘conversation’ is the poet’s way of saying relationship.” Bill Plotkin (2008, p. 37)

*Waitress Free Verse*

*Dear Universe:*

*Can we talk?*

*I'm wondering what's on the menu today?*

*And how much it will cost me?*

*Oh, yeah?*

*Does that include tax and tip?*

Our job as educators is to offer students opportunities and support to tap into their relationship with the world beyond their self-contained egoic self. In his book, *Nature and the Human Soul* (2008), Plotkin contrasts two versions of human development, each comprised of eight stages from birth to death. One path he calls “egocentric” development, centered on aggressive consumption and competition; its opposite is “ecocentric” or “soul-centric” development, which is based on cooperation and compassion. Western culture, he determines, is stuck obstinately in Stage 3 of the egocentric model: the “Conforming and Rebellious” phase, otherwise known as adolescence. This is corroborated by late environmentalist Paul Shepard, who argued that the combination of our education system and dominant messages in the mass media condemns us to remain in early adolescence our entire lives (Devall et al., 1985). In Shepard’s view, this connection is key: The only reason our “technocratic-industrial society” can function is because of this epidemic inability to mature beyond this phase of conformity and rebellion (cited in Devall et al., 1985, p.185). Though teaching fifth graders about food webs is important, nudging us out of this highly self-centered stage—one which is natural, to a degree, for actual teenagers—to evolve into more purposeful, true adults is my fundamental intention as part of the EE community. Plotkin writes, “The pervasive failure of individual human development...at its core, is a cultural failure. Solutions, then, are not merely economic or political; they are also psychological, cultural, and spiritual” (2008, p. 103).

“Relevant, robust education exists through the mastery of one’s person on the individual, community, and cosmological levels, not simply mastering a subject” (Orr, 2004, p. 13). The latter is straightforward, fulfilled by the university; in contrast, the former has inspired thousands of years of religious debate and millions of dollars of psychoanalysis. Ideally, education provides the landscape in which Snyder’s “real work” of spiritual growth and maturity can flourish (cited in Devall & Sessions, 1985, p. 68). Taking on this real work is significantly more responsibility for the environmental educator to assume than preparing a hands-on lesson about the water cycle or making sure students don’t trip over logs on trust walks. In my experience, the environmental community touts the buzzword of “sustainability,” yet so easily ignores the trickiest part: the long term. But to mature is a long-term process, the slow development of enduring, deep-seated inner change. It involves countering the narcissism, complacency, and conformity of Stage 3 Egocentric Development and putting our energies toward engendering whole, adult humans. We should not just apply this

approach to our students, but also to ourselves. The question we need to continually ask is, “What qualities or capacities are missing from this person’s [and my own] embodiment of wholeness, and what can be done to cultivate these qualities or capacities?” (Plotkin, 2008, p. 15). Finding an answer becomes more complicated, if not impossible, in the short-term, residential EE model. In contrast, though not notable for its outstanding EE, the typical public school is an optimal setting for Snyder’s real work since teachers are part of students’ lives for an entire year, with the opportunity to be connected with them throughout several grade levels. The soul-centric approach is [w]holistic, considering the entire person rather than only the cognitive piece.

Since learning is a lifelong process, opportunities abound to aid people in maturing into ecological citizens. But adolescence is the crucial life phase in becoming “fully human,” according to Plotkin:

*From an eco-soulcentric perspective, the skills that teenagers really need to acquire...are: the skills of authenticity, emotional access and expression, conflict resolution, status assignment, sexuality, sustenance, human-nature reciprocity...The differences between this set of skills and those favored in contemporary American secondary education are telling. (2008, p. 210)*

While many adults do not hold a high opinion of teenagers, this disdain is ironic, considering the broader American culture embodies the worst characteristics of this stage even though its adult participants are years removed from the teenage excuse of raging hormones. Rather than supporting adolescents as apprentices to adulthood during this transformative and often excruciatingly difficult time, egocentric society “judges, punishes, and shames teens for how it has failed them” (Plotkin, 2008, p. 220).

One of times I felt most successful as an instructor was when I initiated a conversation as a small attempt to reverse this failure. I made the quick decision to follow my intuition and have a talk with “Matt;” it was the end of my first afternoon with ten wily fifth graders fresh off a two-hour bus ride. It was snowing, and I knew something was amiss when Matt unzipped his backpack full of toys rather than warm, layering clothing appropriate for freezing temperatures. In our few hours together, he had already disrupted the group several times, complaining that his family was poor, his dad couldn’t find a job, and they couldn’t afford fancy clothes like the rich kids could. I could relate, having studied, worked, and lived in the heartland of Patagonia jackets and Subaru Outbacks for the previous nine months. It was obvious Matt was intelligent, and that his classmates were accustomed to his behavior. Before leaving for free time, I asked him to talk for a few minutes. “I’m in trouble again?!” he whined. I promised he wasn’t. Instead, we talked about how hard it can feel not to have things when other people around you do and, more importantly, how these next three days were a chance to try to let go of some of the anger about what was happening at home and take advantage of being in a new, outside place without those limitations so immediately present. To my surprise, Matt easily understood this; it was apparent he’d had similar conversations before. “I know, I need to breathe through my anger,” he

said. As he left for free time, he told me, “Thanks! That was awesome! I didn’t get in trouble!” The following two days weren’t perfect, but they were dramatically better.

If we sincerely desire to facilitate adolescents in becoming healthy young adults, we need to offer experiences that help them clarify what is important in their lives. We need to support students, and each other, in exercising the courage it requires to face Macy’s work of honoring our pain for the world. With this in mind, approaching EE as a packaged discipline—one that is typically relegated to the faraway “pristine” wilderness— could be constraining our ability to practice it universally.

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### **Feeling Shifty: Trickster EE as a daily practice**

“The job is to seek mystery, evoke mystery, plant a garden in which strange plants grow and mysteries bloom. The need for mystery is greater than the need for an answer.” Ken Kesey (1935-2001) (cited in Faggen, 1994)

*Not another night at the restaurant! I know I traded my lucrative brunch shift for this one, but gahhh, Wednesday nights are so slow! I’d rather be home reading a book. How can I make sure to only get the good shifts? They sure are hard to come by these days.*

My job as an environmental educator will be shift work.

All education has the potential to be environmental education. What if this is expanded to “All life is environmental education?” This is hardly radical. In softening the delineation between nature and self by realizing that humans are a part of nature, and in recognizing that learning is an infinite process, EE can become not just a profession for 20-something vagabonds or liberals on a mission, but a way of being. In contrast, EE as predominantly practiced today exists within a limited vision, one so myopic that, if not given a new lens, will get stuck cross-eyed, stumbling blindly into oblivion.

Attempting to use one’s life to model the principles of EE thus proposed—honesty, mastery of self, a connection to a larger good—challenges EE as currently constructed. The trickster has arrived, or if preferred, the jester. Intelligent and wily, this character flouts convention, choosing instead to play tricks or make jokes that, at their best, evince ingenuity or transformation.

Though I am hardly clever enough to assume the mythical trickster role, I am becoming increasingly excited about the goal of applying for a business license and owning a bar. From a Masters in Environmental Education to keeping the local luses in business? Indeed. Bartending is a privileged position. From behind the bar, one has access to a wild diversity of people. Pour a drink, and the imbiber’s soul begins to show.

From the worker's end, this can be one of the most annoying and, at its worst, dangerous aspects of the job. However, from the worker-as-environmental-educator perspective, this transforms into an asset. (They ain't called spirits for nothing.' Allowing even the tiniest opening, an alcohol-encouraged softening of one's guard, is enough and, admittedly, a very fine line.) What an ideal venue for encouraging the "real work!"

Borrowing its name from my on-hiatus writing project that celebrated a dual love for plants and music, "Phyte Club, the Bar" would be akin to a natural history museum. Imagine: The inside draped with lianas of leafy plants, separated by interpretive displays and colorful photos explaining the origins of the botanically based drinks; the backyard, a huge garden alive with species revered for intoxicant, medicinal, and/or entheogenic properties accompanied by signage detailing their natural and cultural significance. The institution would walk its talk, powered by renewable energy and complete with composting toilets, a greenhouse or roof of edible plants, and plentiful bike racks. In such ways, the building "itself" becomes a teacher.

In this scenario, the bartender becomes an interpreter, a sort of "city ranger" helping patrons relate to the world around them. In a study examining the potential of interpretive naturalists to foster an interest in natural history among visitors to a natural area, Bixler, James, & Vadala (2010) argue that discrete programs and exhibits can no longer be viewed as a responsive strategy. This is analogous to research suggesting that isolated nature experiences are not incredibly effective at fostering long-term ecoliteracy (Clayton & Myers, forthcoming). Instead, "programming must include establishing and maintaining ongoing relationships with visitors" and interpretive naturalists should be motivated to "take any opportunity they can imagine to extend and enrich a visitor's experiences with natural history" (Bixler, James, & Vadala 2010, p. 61, italics authors' own). Phyte Club would be part of this opportunity. In order to accumulate the numerous and diverse experiences required for a person to develop a social identity around the environment, it is necessary for "nature [to] become part of the ebb and flow of a person's everyday life" (2010, p. 61).

Making these daily connections should not be hard, considering the sun above us, every breath we take, our constant experiencing of weather and seasons, and the ability to trace every item we use back to its origins in an ecosystem. Nature is part of our ebb and flow, regardless of whether we recognize and honor it or not. Yet in reality, elevating nature to be a priority for the general public can be tough. Bixler, James, & Vandala argue that because there is little room in the contemporary, formal classroom for natural history education, this exposure will have to be mainly via non- and informal experiences (2010). Informal learning takes place in spontaneous situations, such as within the family, at the grocery store, etc. (Eshach, 2007, p. 173). Non-formal learning" can occur in formal or informal approaches. It entails planning, but is designed for adaptability, whereas "formal learning" happens in a more orchestrated

way in institutions. Additionally, “the locus of motivation for learning is entirely inherent in the learner, not dictated from outside” (Eshach, 2007, p. 173).

Phyte Club will encompass all three types of learning. The educational factor is somewhat intentional, but the focus will be on the spontaneous interactions and a-ha moments, which bars are exemplary at providing. This is important if EE is to evoke a sense of awe in the version of nature closest to home, not just the kind a hundred miles away, accessed by automobile, languishing presumably unspoiled and untrammelled in some other ecosystem. As environmental historian William Cronon wrote in his controversial essay, “The Trouble with Wilderness:” “Idealizing a distant wilderness too often means not idealizing the environment in which we actually live, the landscape that for better or worse we call home” (1995, p. 21). Similarly, in the 2011 book, *The Nature Principle*, author Richard Louv tells the story of a botanist and middle school teacher, James Dillane, who led groups on trails to teach about the flora and fauna near San Diego. As Dillane said, “Your eyes don’t know what to look at, so you don’t see” (Louv, 2011, p. 109). My shift work will be facilitating people in knowing where to look, in seeing their own immediate environment and, hopefully, being moved to act on its behalf.

Finally, she who pours the drinks, listens; she who gives solicited advice has the opportunity to facilitate healing, not through alcohol per se but via inquiry from one side of the bar to the other. If people aren’t entering the local watering hole to celebrate, there’s a good chance they came to drown their sorrows. Helping people perceive their depression around personal, social, and global problems, and to reframe this pain as an indispensable grieving process necessary to do the “real work” of deeply examining our lives, is true liberation (Macy, 2012).

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### ***Over the Edge: EE, ennui, and eye contact***

“When the heart breaks open, it can hold the whole universe.’ In that phrase is the major thrust of the work: redefining pain for the world as compassion, instead of pathologizing it as a sign of personal neurosis or personal failure.” (Plotkin, 2008, p. 404)

My heart has broken open.

The other day I recalled how I began down this EE path. I ditched a devotion to Phyte Club the writing project and replaced it with the goal of saving tens of thousands of dollars for a Masters in Environmental Education degree by working incessantly as a waitress and gardener. Today, in the final throes of my educational endeavor, I find strength remembering my original intention, and the one before that: using written words, images, and spirited conversation to inspire others to notice plants and, in so doing, notice their own connection to the greater Earth.

As Paul Kingsnorth writes, “None of it is going to save the world—but then there is no saving the world, and the ones who say there is are the ones you need to save it from” (2014). To some, this sounds nihilistic. To me, it rings of reality and freedom, of faith in ecology and the non-teleological renewal of nature. I’ve met countless environmental educators over the past two years with whom I’d love to share his quote.

As an adolescent, I would not have understood Kingsnorth’s words, nor would I have seen the value in a related idea, Macy’s use of the term activist: “Anyone who is active for a purpose bigger than personal gain” (2012, p. 217). It’s too little! Not enough! Let’s go, c’mon! What a major copout! Yet as I mature, the act of making eye contact with a stranger on the sidewalk, or provoking a grouchy customer to crack a smile over an Eggs Benedict, benign offerings though they may seem, has become saving the world.

All life is environmental education. It is hardly radical.

*Wow, you still have some food left on your plate? I know, the serving was huge! Well, would you like a box for that? Before you head out, though, here’s your bill (take your time!), and one more public service announcement from Tom Robbins, the patron saint of well-educated waitresses:*

*....Eventually, she leaves food service for graduate school or marriage; but unless she wins a grant or a fair divorce settlement, chances are she’ll be back, a few years down the line, reciting the daily specials with her own special mixture of warmth and ennui. (Robbins, 2006, p. 68)*

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