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The Red Pill: Environmental Education Wakes Up to the Real World

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Abstract

Growing up, I loved going to camp. My parents who are here today will attest to the fact that going to Camp Wilani was the center of universe around which I revolved. We were always one of the very first cars in line before they opened the gate. I couldn't wait to snag my bunk, and meet my new counselor and cabin mates. Camp Wilani had a particular smell: Oregon Coastal Mountain forest, the riparian foliage next to the lagoon, old wooden cabins and bunks. I loved that place, and my summers there fostered my deep love of nature and being outside; not through any particular programming, but simply because I had fun there, I felt accepted there, I made new friends and had counselors who were kind to me. It was an adventure, and I associated being in nature with good things happening, and (obviously) it stuck.

Keywords: consumerism, environmental education, place-based research; the Matrix

Through that story I wish to elucidate my belief that outdoor education programs are extremely valuable. If had not been exposed to positive outdoor experiences, I would not be where I am today. . .literally.

I believe that environmental educators do really good work. I know, I have been one for nearly twenty years. Giving youth the opportunity to get outside and learn about their own ecosystem is a worthy cause. There is magic in touching an ancient tree, seeing a giant waterfall, and recognizing the call of a pileated woodpecker. These are opportunities that many children never have.

It is important that young people understand the systems of this planet: how decay brings new life, where our water comes from (and how precious it is), and how abiotic and biotic systems work together. It is essential to get kids out of the concrete and fluorescent lighting of the classroom. They have transformative experiences when they get to (as Richard Louv would put it) "poke around" and see animals in their natural habitat.

Multi-day programs (like Camp Wilani) are even more powerful. Young people get to break down social barriers through shared experience, and there is more time to begin going deeper into our essential connection to nature.



As important as these experiences are, there is a crucial component missing from them. There is something wrong. I have always felt that the programs and curricula I facilitated were just plugging in to a larger flawed framework. Perhaps that is why I have been continuously drawn to the film, *The Matrix*. Its message always resonates with me in a timeless way. Especially this quote from Morpheus. . .

You're here because you know something. What you know you can't explain, but you feel it. You've felt it your entire life, that there's something wrong with the world. You don't know what it is, but it's there, like a splinter in your mind, driving you mad.

Stick with me, we're going to go out into the ether a ways, but we'll come back, I promise.

Neo is an internet hacker. By day he works at a regular job, but his real income comes from hacking. He has been searching for Morpheus, a subversive and secretive online guru for a long time because he feels like there is something wrong with the world that he doesn't understand and he thinks Morpheus can help him. In this scene, Neo has been brought to Morpheus by other subversives and he meets him for the first time. . .

Clip One - Begin @ 26:16, End @29:52 (3 minutes, 36 seconds)

Intense, right? At this point, you are likely wondering what I'm talking about and possibly questioning my sanity. What can this possibly have to do with environmental education?

Stick with me.

Do any of you have one of these? That's right, it actually IS an iPhone. Mine is a 3, the third version of this phone. It doesn't have Facetime or Siri. But it works just fine, I even dropped it in a bucket of soapy water and it miraculously came back to life, so why get rid of it? When it comes to clothes, my sister likes to say I "wear them until they die." It's true. I don't see any point of getting rid of them if they still do the job.

Back to the iPhone. . .the challenging part about keeping this little guy is that no one makes accessories like cords and cases for this iPhone anymore - even though you'd think there would be millions of them around. There are a few websites that carry them, but I couldn't find them at Goodwill or other thrift stores. When I asked the thrift and used electronic stores about them, they said that there were so many, that they took up too much space, and there was no demand, so it's their policy to not carry them. Where does it all end up?

Since 2007, there have been six full versions but many sub-versions: iOS1, 2G, 3G, 3Gs, 4, 4S, 5, 5C, 5S, 6 and the larger six. . . that's ten versions in eight years! And people

still stand in line to buy them! I remember when the 5 first came out, it was a “thing” to have it out on the table when you were having lunch with friends or a study session. Not me. I like my little three, and it keeps on ticking. I guess I just don’t care that much.

But iPhones are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to keeping up with the Jones’ (I hope you all enjoy cliches). Why do we feel compelled to do that to do that? What drives to have the latest, the best, the newest, even if that we have still works? Why must our car be new and shiny and our clothes trendy?

That question takes me back to the Matrix. Are you all excited to see what happens to Neo?

I did some serious vacillating about whether to explain what happens with pictures, or show this clip. In the end, I decided that it was much more powerful to show it.

WARNING The following film clip includes intense science fiction themes around machine/human interface that may be difficult for some viewers. It is not gory, just shocking. This intense part is about two minutes. I will not be offended if you choose to step out.

Clip Two: Begin @t 30:25, End @ 35:22 (5 minutes, 37 seconds)

So, now that Neo is in the “Real World” what is The Matrix?

Clip Three: Begin @ 39:00, End @ 43:55 (4 minuets, 55 seconds)

The Day I Woke Up.. .

I think that the idea of “waking up” resonates to strongly with me because there was moment in 2010 when I feel like I did wake up to the power structures and manipulation that I had been a slave to for my entire life.

I had just returned to the University of Oregon to finish my BA. It was summer, and I was in a class called Community, the Environment, and Society. A young Graduate Teaching Fellow taught the class. He was a true believer. He dressed in simple, natural clothes. He had long hair and long beard. He had just gotten married and taken his wife’s last name. The majority of his food came from his own garden. He was an activist for the environment and social justice, and fought against the tyranny of patriarchal power structures.

On the first day of class he showed the 21 minute film, The Story of Stuff, and it changed my life. I have am going to share a clip of the film that best elucidates the influence that I am attempting to translate. It describes The System. The system that keeps us under control, the system that keeps us contributing even if it is not in our best interests.

Clip Four: Begin @10:10, End @ 16:46

Talk about a successful strategy!

Our enormously productive economy demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction and our ego satisfaction in consumption. We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced and discarded at an ever-increasing rate.

Wow, did THAT ever work!

Think about all of the advertisements we see every day that apply enormous pressure to buy things. A great example is that of holidays, especially “Hallmark Holidays”. Since I was a child I have seen celebrated days, usually birthed from religious rites of some kind, increasingly and blatantly marketed as a reason to shop for plastic or unhealthy junk.

Take Easter for example: Easter in Christianity is the celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It coincides with (not unintentionally) ancient Celtic fertility festivals. The celebration of Easter has become synonymous with fertility symbols such as rabbits and eggs. When I was a child, my mom used to get up early and hide little chocolate eggs all over the house for me and my sister to seek out and find. Occasionally we’d find one of the previous year’s eggs, but it was still good. We got a little basket with a chocolate bunny and jelly beans. It was sweet, and a nice treat no matter what your faith.

Today, I see my friends who are parents treating Easter like the shop-a-palooza that Christmas has become with toys, elaborate gifts, and boatloads of candy. It’s not just Easter: St. Patrick’s Day, Memorial Day, Labor Day, even Thanksgiving Day have excuses to shop instead of spend time with family, or find gratitude for things we have, or rest.

We could just stop. . .or could we?

This system is a perfect example of what Steven Lukes calls that Third Dimension of Power: “The third dimension is the set of ways in which the powerful transform the powerless in such a way that the latter behave as the former wish - without coercion or forcible constraint - for example, by creating a pervasive system of ideology or false consciousness.”

More simply: power structures are in place that are so insidious, so ingrained, and so imperceptible (though obvious) that we have been convinced that activities which are contrary to our own well-being and best interests are one we should definitely be engaged in, or else we will be socially shamed and ostracized.

- Here are some of the tools of the system:
- Planned Obsolescence: “They don’t make ‘em like they used to.”
- Perceived Obsolescence: Fashion, “Keeping up with the Joneses”, Social Shaming
- Media: Advertising, “news” bought and owned by the system
- Corporate Personhood: Powerful lobbies that control government, Neoliberalism, Billion dollar subsidies for the most powerful

How does this relate to The Matrix? Remember this [photo of Morpheus holding batter]? I would argue that THIS [picture of Golden Arrow of Consumption] has turned us as human beings into this [dollar sign].

OK, but how does this relate to environmental education? Environmental Educators are supposed to be the “superheros” of the environment, building empathy and understanding of the natural world so our students will be come stewards.

How do you define “Environmental Education” and what it is we are supposed to do?

- Teaching about natural systems like decomposition, the water cycle, trophic cascades, etc.?
- Revealing to students that they are a part of nature and responsible for its protection?
- Encouraging stewardship like tree planting, native plant restoration, storm water protection, etc.?
- All of the above?

What difference does any of that it make if young people don’t understand their daily, direct, participatory role in this cycle: Extraction, Production, Distribution, Consumption, and Disposal. We never talk about the Externalized Cost of our consumption addiction, nor the power structures that perpetuate it. We’ve done plenty of damage here in the United States. But when people got all “uppity” about loss of wild places, corporations just went to third world countries and started pillaging for what they needed to feed our consumptive system.

What if people really saw the faces and working conditions of the people who work for pennies per day to make their inexpensive clothes and electronics?

What if people actually got to see the Great Pacific Garbage Patch and the devastation it causes for plants, animals, and ecosystems on a global lever?

What if people understood how our ever-increasing rate of consumption directly impacted large-scale deforestation, ecological degradation, and habitat loss for many millions of life forms.

What if people took a tour of a factory farm and understood the ineffable suffering of animals for industrialized meat production?

What if learning about the environment included traveling to polluted places, not just pristine ones?

What if we all took a closer look at where the rare earth minerals in our prized technology comes from and how it impacts people and the environment?

"I didn't say it would be easy, I only said it would be the truth." - Morpheus

Uncomfortable? You are not the only one. . . no wonder so many of us choose to stay in the bliss of the system. We are more plugged into the system and tuned out from the world than ever before.

Why are we so unhappy as a society? Perhaps it has something to do with cognitive dissonance: the state of having inconsistent thoughts, beliefs, or attitudes, especially as relating to behavioral decisions and attitude change. This is the feeling of uncomfortable tension which comes from holding two conflicting thoughts in the mind at the same time. Dissonance is most powerful when it is about our self-image. Feelings of foolishness, immorality and so on are dissonance in action. This tension and discomfort can be much worse for people who know better, but feel powerless to change things.

So why don't we do something? Because the system has powerful deterrents in place for people like us: Teaching about the externalized cost of consumerism = anti-capitalist = anti-American. Activist = "radical" or "trouble maker". Living in the system is easy, fighting against it is hard. EE programs are largely funded by donations or public funding and highly scrutinized. Encouraging participation in EE programs requires neutrality and "easy to swallow" contents. Standardized testing requires the stripping down of EE programs to meet state and federal standards. Without meeting the standards, teachers and school administrators will not participate. In the end, we have to accept that it is better to get young people outside than not - even if it means we omit information we consider essential.

But there is hope. Eventually Neo began to be able to see the code, and by recognizing how the system worked he was able to manipulate it.

Now that we understand the system, what if environmental education looked like this? Enabling people to stand up to the system. . .

Understanding that there is power in how we use our dollars, but that the idea that "money = power" is part of the system. How about we put the people back in power? How about remember the fights that were fought, and that we still need to be fighting?

WHO TEACHES ACTIVISM ANYMORE? How about more places like the Youth Empowered Action camp that teacher activism and advocacy?

What if we taught youth how to do more with less, how to refuse to be laves to fashion (tech, clothing, etc.), and choose to seek out locally made, durable goods? What if we made living simply a value, and choose to buy in bulk to eliminate unnecessary packaging.

We can pressure municipalities to offer comprehensive recycling and composting, and be diligent about doing it ourselves. We can be hyper aware of where “stuff” comes from and where it goes.

We can make ourselves immune to advertising. We can put down our devices and have conversations. We can be role models for others in things we do and say.

We can become a society that values social justice, education for all, citizen engagement, activism, and saving the planet.

I’m not suggesting the end of Capitalism, I’m suggesting a shift to Egalitarian Capitalism. Where subsidies are offered to everyone, from tiny home-grown businesses to green energy producers with no one entity receiving more than another. Where business is centered around people instead of profit by recognizing that happy healthy people are the asset.

Where it is admirable to make durable goods at reasonable prices that improve people’s access to food, water, or shelter; or improve the environment.

Finally, let’s not shy away from teaching kids about the system, and how to avoid being trapped in it: Self esteem does not equal stuff! Create change agents by teaching activism and advocacy. Empower young people to make change in their own communities. Reveal the externalized cost of the materials economy and offer alternatives. Work together to create new values as individuals and as a society.

I didn’t say it would be easy, I only said it would be the truth. Which pill will you take? Let’s let Neo take us out. . .

Final Clip: Begin @ 2:07:53, End @2:09:37

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of the letters 'S2SS' in a stylized, cursive font.