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The Making of a Naturalist

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Abstract

The purpose of this work is for you, the reader, to be sufficiently informed, entertained, and inspired that you find yourself reaching your own hands down into your soul, or your soil-filled gut, or the soles of your feet or your over-stuffed brain – wherever it is that you keep the meaning of your life – and press with your thumbs to make room for a new seed. Through story and poetry, I will use my own life as a site of inquiry to illuminate the educational structure and purpose of ideas around ecological identity. I see that dominant Western culture, driving policy and social discourse, lacks in its systemic behavior a sense of its ecological self (Lyons, 1993, Thomashow, 1995). The work expressed in this writing is an attempt to reverse some of this forgetting, for myself and for others. Thus my focus resides in understanding and critiquing the pedagogies that underlie Western culture and in practicing alternative forms of education in order to create positive, life-affirming change.

Keywords: *environmental education, identity, naturalist education, Indigenous ways of knowing*

Natural Law will prevail: The Law of the Seed and Regeneration. We can still alter our course. It is not too late. We still have options. We need the courage to change our values to the regeneration of our families, the life that surrounds us. Given this opportunity, we can raise ourselves. We must join hands with the rest of Creation and speak of Common Sense, Responsibility, Brotherhood, and Peace. We must understand that The Law is the Seed and only as True Partners can we survive. (Lyons, 1980, ¶ 5)

Background

The First Paradox

This essay was written in the traditional territories of the Interior and Coast Salish Peoples. What I can traverse in two hours by car, from Diablo Lake, Washington down to Bellingham, Washington, slices through the territories of the Sauk-Suiattle, Upper Skagit, Stillaguamish, Swinomish, Samish, Lummi, and Nooksack Peoples. Invoking the traditional territories of tribal groups does not in and of itself perform any restorative act. My purpose is to recognize that the responsibility for addressing historical traumas and injustices has not been washed away with time. In recognizing these first peoples, I also recognize my own Euro-American heritage. Having been born and raised in Shoreline,

Washington, just north of Seattle, on what is traditionally the lands of the Duwamish, Suquamish and Tulalip tribes, I do feel a certain birthright to this place. After all, I can only be from here, but as a non-native whose family emigrated from a handful of European nations, I am simultaneously, and always, a visitor to the landscape of my birth (Tuck, 2012). This is the paradox of living in a colonized world. How a colonized/colonizer state of being extends outward from my sense of self and responsibility to dominant culture's collective expressions toward the environment (ranging from unabashed violence and exploitation to sacred acts of love, healing and beyond), connecting histories through and to our present time and conceptions of place, is the focus of my work as an educator. Mitchell Thomashow writes that reflecting on one's ecological identity "is a collective effort – introspection for the purposes of ecological citizenship, personal awareness to promote common responsibility, mindfulness to expand understanding of human/nature interactions" (Thomashow, 1995). Thus our individual thoughts and ways of thinking have ecological implications that extend out beyond even our human communities, into vast networks of biotic and abiotic realities.

An Ecological Frame of Mind

Late in February, on a dry sunny icy day, I go for a bicycle ride along the Nooksack River north of Bellingham. Maybe you've been there. The road curves, your knees go up and down, the river in and out of view, cars passing. My mind tends to wander while cycling, as my brain finds a new chemical balance in the flow of activity. Looking up from the road to a stand of red alders, I find myself in the treetops, weightlessly clinging to bud-covered twig ends. Bright red catkins, still sealed in their winter wax, adorn the branches around me like jewelry. The trees sway in a slight breeze, sending forth a small flock of pine siskins who were feeding on the seed cones. I used to think they were called red alders because on winter days you can look across a river to an alder grove and see a pink-red haze of catkins in the canopy. I love the form of deciduous trees: that dendritic pattern, branching from trunk to main branches, main branches to smaller, then smaller, then smaller branches, each form reflected in the larger and smaller forms around it, until the tiniest twigs finish in potent spring buds. The vasculature that pumps our blood is similarly shaped, as are the canyons made by the folds of our brains. Even our skeletons make dendrites, from torso to limbs to toes and fingertips. My chain skips, I shift. As my perspective returns to my body and bicycle, I wiggle my twigs and roots and pedal away, following the sinuous Nooksack river, itself a dendrite of feeder creeks, tributaries and main channels. Balancing on a bicycle tends to put me in an ecological frame of mind.

This is the house of my ecological identity. Thomashow defines the term Ecological Identity as:

all the different ways people construe themselves in relationship to the earth as manifested in personality, values, actions, and sense of self....The knowledge and experiences that constitute an ecological worldview can be used reflectively to reinterpret the memories, events, and circumstances of personal development. (1995, p. 3)

He goes on to posit that most people follow a combination of three paths in identifying how their senses of nature and self are intertwined: “childhood memories of place, perceptions of disturbed places, and the contemplation of wild places” (Thomashow, 1995). Memory, love, and loss. What images flash into your mind?

Two childhood memories that hold my sense of home(place): I watch my father enter the house after his commute home by bicycle. There is the clack of his shoes on the wood floor, the immense machinery of spokes and gears in a small child’s eyes, the scent of sweat trailing behind him as he wheels his bike past the kitchen.

Decades afterward, I become a group leader of long-distance bicycle tours, spending months at a time pedaling coast-to-coast, border-to-border, guiding folks all over the United States. Doing that work, I gain a sense for what America smells like, what wafts on the breeze from Minnesota soy to Louisiana mud, California cows to Maine boatyards. My perceptions of disturbed and wild places become one impression: that of a vast landscape deeply scarred by human industry (here I am, mounted on a product of that industry, conveyed on its roads) yet still resilient, verdant, throbbing with secrets and alive. I think of a reeking cattle feedlot in the eastern California dust, right at the edge of the smoothest dunes of the Mohave desert. Our Western culture still doesn’t realize the wealth we are squandering. We avert our gaze from the losses we’ve caused, but I have experienced true love in these places. The land has a resilient spirit.

Body
Untitled

*To learn is to repeat –
a place is a repetition of
experience
and that is why an old-growth forest
is a very wise place
and why a river rejuvenates
and why a family of
salmon fry, sheltered in
a root-wad pool reminds us
that we are in bear country.
May the circles we’ve
abandoned
let us back in.*

Where I’m Coming From

I am a twig on a twig on a twig of my spreading family tree. The immediate family of which I am a part, the Taylor-Loviskas, is small. I was born in Seattle, Washington. My

mother was born in Los Angeles, California. Her mother was born in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. My father was born in Jackson, Michigan. His father was born there too. My mother's family, the Schwob-Taylors, comes from England, Switzerland, Holland, and Scotland. My father's family, the Stuart-Loviskas, comes mainly from Ireland and Slovakia. When and how shall roots to place grow amid a pattern of dispersal, migration and movement? I don't live in the place I was born, having drifted away with a casual goodbye in my college years, perpetuating a cycle whose beginning I don't understand.

We are all products of the social migrations brought on by the wars of the 20th century and the opportunities begat by the modern industrial age. I was born into a settler culture that largely does not recognize itself as such. Right now I am addressing the Euro-American readers of these words. It's easy to forget, or act as if it didn't matter, that our people came here and took this place by force. Our ancestors, wittingly or not, participated in the genocide of Indigenous people in North America. Now we live in a time and place of willful forgetting. We've moved so many times, those dendritic forms are storm-scarred, whole branches broken, whole generations forgotten. Did the places we abandoned notice our leaving? What do we remember of those places?

In 2007 I retraced my paternal origins in Slovakia, returning to the small village, called Rybany, where my great-grandfather Anton was born, from which he emigrated to the United States. Rybany, a name that means "a good place to fish," sits in the middle of the Slovak agricultural plain. It holds an old cathedral, a soviet-era town hall, and a neighborhood of brick and plaster homes. I inquired at the town hall and was directed to Štefania Dolanová, maiden name Lovišková. All of the other Loviškas in Rybany had moved away. Surprised but inviting, she answered my call and hosted me for tea and cake, the weak afternoon light filtering through the lace curtains of her living room. Štefania showed me a yellowed photo album of my great-grandfather Anton and his two siblings, sister Anna and brother Jozef. Jozef Loviška. That's my name. Anton came to America after World War I. In Michigan, he made a family of 12 children. But Anna and Jozef remained in Slovakia and Štefania was unclear as to why. In the photo album there was a picture of Jozef as an older man, sitting on a stream bank with a fishing pole in hand. Not a particularly glamorous figure, he wore baggy pants and a straw hat and held a long-stemmed pipe in his free hand. I was stunned to learn that here in this "foreign" place I had ancestors and even a namesake. After tea I wandered through the town cemetery and found him there, born 1871, died 1963. His son was buried next to him, also named Jozef. If you have ever looked upon a gravestone that bears your own name, you might understand the mixture of emotions that I felt: haunted, perhaps, but also rooted, and humbled. It was not a big leap to imagine my own body interred there, another Jozef,



but for the massive upheavals throughout the world that led me to be born thousands of miles and an ocean away. The intimate connection between my life and this other Jozef's life suddenly became very real. It became part of my identity.

So now the context of my life reaches back across time and landscape, along one branch of the family tree to a place where we were once rooted. Both feet on land, a tree well tended. And it reaches forward onto uncertainty, a landscape where we, as part of a larger culture, have imposed. Dr. Robin Wall Kimmerer, a biology professor, author, and member of the Citizen Potawatami Nation, speaks about being Indigenous to place, being of a place, where one can enter into deep reciprocity, a relationship of exchange based on love and necessity between person and land. This is not something that our settler-colonizer culture can achieve. Our terms of engagement preclude becoming Indigenous to place. Kimmerer states:

After all these generations since Columbus, some of the wisest of Native elders still puzzle over the people who came to our shores. They look at the toll on the land and say, 'The problem with these new people is that they don't have both feet on the shore. One is still on the boat. They don't seem to know whether they're staying or not.' This same observation is heard from some contemporary scholars who see in the social pathologies and relentlessly materialist culture the fruit of homelessness, a rootless past. (2013, p. 35)

Kimmerer frames the possible trajectory of Euro-American culture, rather, as becoming naturalized to place. Like a non-native plant with medicinal properties that is neither invasive nor noxious, we might become responsible, naturalized neighbors. Now, I have a foundation for putting both feet on the shore. My sense of self and my sense of place are becoming intertwined. I think we all contain the landscapes of our histories.

On the train to Trenčín

*Villages, like meadows,
have always graced the hillside.*

*Towns sprung up like
oaks, permanent and easily
destroyed.*

*One city was built
by clockmakers' hands
and we are headed there.*

Philosophy, Phenology, and Privilege

Pedagogy is a word that I have learned to use to show that I've been to graduate school. To me it means an educational philosophy that incorporates various theories into a sort of jello mold of practice: formed, yet flexible. During my graduate school

experience (one of my classmates called it 17th grade), my program blended naturalist training, practice in group facilitation, study of educational theory and socio-ecological problems, and meta-experiential learning — a reflexive, in-the-moment practice of experiencing transformative learning. Michele Tanaka and Nicholas Stanger, co-authors of the ebook *Transformative Inquiry*, have a term that I think embodies the person who navigates this sort of holistic educational process: they are a learner-teacher-researcher (Tanaka, 2014). That is, to embody one role is to embody all three. This sort of egalitarian approach means that, as much as possible in the classroom and the field, teachers and students simultaneously take part in teaching one another, learning from each other, and discovering more about their focus of study, together. Parker Palmer, the American educational philosopher, might call this subject-centered study (Palmer, 2000), as opposed to teacher- or student-centered study. In practice, I prefer to consider it as process-centered study, where the collective focus remains, but the content (the subject) balances with an intentional focus on the process of discovery. I'll offer an example below. Given this view, environmental education can move beyond questions of what we are looking at, directly addressing the questions of how and why we (as expressers of our culture) are relating to the world. Process-centered learning squarely acknowledges the moral nature and political responsibility inherent in ecological education. To circle back on Thomashow, this process, like an adaptive management model, flows from individual acts of intention and mindfulness into large-scale expressions of relationship, which in turn informs new individual insights and revises personal values.

Take, for example, the curriculum of seasonal change. Phenology is “the study of plant and animal life cycle events in relation to environmental drivers such as weather and climate” (Schwartz, 2013). In layman’s terms, phenology is concerned with how seasons and other temporal cycles drive our behavior. One might study phenology through a purely scientific lens, tracking long-term trends of seasonal indicators, from bud burst in lilacs to the timing of rut and mating in high mountain ungulates. Lots of people do this, and it is valuable climate science. In fact, phenologists now tell us that spring is arriving earlier by 2.5 days per decade (Ault, 2015), which has innumerable implications for species at any trophic level. But phenology is also citizen science. The sorts of data that climate-affected trends require are too big to be collected by teams of professionals. We are now at a technological stage, however, when scientific protocols can be coded into durable instructions for non-professionals to follow. This is one arena where internet technology has proven to be incredibly democratizing (Newman, 2012). Nature’s Notebook is an example of an international network of phenology databases with instructions for anyone to go out and make observations in their own favorite places. The content of the data one collects may or may not be immediately meaningful: this tree does or does not have leaves on it today, for instance. But the process of gathering the data, of going outside, touching the tree, noticing the nearby sounds, creates the opportunity for ecological experience to build in one’s psyche. It builds relationships. Datasets like those accumulated by Nature’s Notebook represent only one way of coding large amounts of information through time. Another way is through story.

Western modern science, shaped and defined by such philosophers as René Descartes and Francis Bacon as an individualistic reality where humans can exercise domination over nature while simultaneously maintaining objective distance (Pierotti & Wildcat, 2000), was not felt by the North American landscape until European contact. There is a deep history of inquiry on this land that is both scientific in nature and a wholly integrated way of life. Today this is known, in Western terms, as Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK). The literature on this subject produces a variety of definitions. My interpretation of TEK is that it refers to Indigenous life-ways, based in inquiry and observation but interwoven with spiritual belief and behavioral (moral and ethical) systems, passed on through many generations. This refers to Indigenous ways of knowing. Robin Wall Kimmerer makes an analogy between these “incommensurable” (Eijck & Roth, 2007) world views of Western modern science and TEK. Science, she argues, sharpens our ability to see, while Indigenous ways of knowing sharpen our ability to listen. With science we observe (with all of our senses, certainly), from the outside looking in. But, Kimmerer says,

In Indigenous ways of knowing, we say that we know a thing when we know it not only with our physical senses, with our intellect, but also when we engage our intuitive ways of knowing, of emotional knowledge and spiritual knowledge. And that's ... what I mean by listening. By seeing that traditional knowledge engages us in listening. And what is the story that that being might share with us if we know how to listen as well as we know how to see? (2016, p. 137)

In learning about Indigenous ways of knowing, I understand that my focus on Ecological Identity represents a deeper desire to begin building TEK for my own culture. It is easy for white settlers, who have the time and resources to develop an ecological identity, to find enthusiasm for learning and listening about alternatives to our industrialized lives. But is this something that's available to all people, regardless of skin color or socio-economic status? The systems that preferentially put me here are the very same systems that I seek to let light through in the name of social and environmental justice. Patriarchy. Colonization. War. The victors' history books only stand if they continue to extinguish the stories of the oppressed.

I firmly recognize that each of these truths of our reality are interconnected. In many respects, I've lived far from the margins where the pain in the world is felt most fiercely. Frankly, approaching these issues sometimes makes me feel uncomfortable and embarrassed. Robin D'Angelo, a Lecturer at the University of Washington, puts a name on these feelings of discomfort: they stem from white fragility. She defines white fragility as, “[an] insulated environment of racial protection [that] builds white expectations for racial comfort while at the same time lowering the ability to tolerate racial stress” (DiAngelo, 2011). Notice that to comprehend this idea, you must first understand white to be a distinct race, just as we (white people) tend to consider being black or brown. Race is a social construct. There is no universal human.

There's another paradox in all of this talk of white fragility and colonialism in that I am not a willing or active participant in the systems that cause injustice. Nor did I choose to be born a privileged white person. Nor am I sorry for the fact that I was! But none of that absolves me from the responsibility of addressing these issues in appropriate and relevant ways. So here I am, holding paradox, recognizing history, and leaning into education, storytelling, and identity. Thomashow writes, "Ecological identity is above all an educational process, an approach to learning that integrates citizenship, professional practice, and personal growth" (Thomashow, 1995). How can I use my privilege to help my culture remember the goodness of life? My answer is to teach ecology in a way that makes white people like myself uncomfortable; to remember that the natural law that Oren Lyons spoke about is in relationship with our messy human conceptions of race, economy, injustice and identity.

I am/We are

*I am full. I am stuffed
I am brimming with privilege and time
I am sexy when
I want to be, balanced,
ruthless,
I am surviving, impatient
uncomfortable. I am rock-like
in my density, rock-like in my density
sober, quiet, secretive,
grasslike in my voice, my vision
a reed, sharp at the margins
I am my own blind contour*

*We are a whale
we love each other with
breath and measured dives
we are a whale,
barnacled in secrets
we walk, chant, forget,
transpose and project
we are smarter than
we need to be. We lack, we
ride, we move in unthinkable ways
we are a crow roosting at midnight
with other crows,
we are duty-bound to raid the robin's nest*

On Slowness

Some of my earliest memories live in Southern California, in the Los Angeles suburb of Manhattan Beach. We would travel down from Seattle once or twice a year to the house where my mom grew up, where my grandparents still lived. The beach, a broad strip of yellow sand and surfable waves just south of LAX, was a short walk away. It was my mother and grandmother's happy place, a little slice of quietude in the middle of the city, where they could take their shoes off and dig into the earth, grounding themselves in ocean and sand. Seagulls were constant commentators of our picnic lunches. We often saw dolphins and pelicans surfing, each in their own way, on the crests of waves. I think

I learned gratitude from watching Mom watch the ocean, seeing that peaceful smile of thankfulness play across her face. Surely she learned it from Grandma – they share the expression, as they have shared the experience of that beach, that place, for as long as Mom has been alive.

From the beach I walk home to an image of my grandfather, my mother's father, and the house. The house was a 1930's beach cottage that had seen numerous revisions, tucked in the back of a double lot on a hillside. A massive eucalyptus stood guard at the top of the driveway. The approach to the house wound through the garden on an elevated deck - I always had the sense that I was walking through a forest canopy exhibit at the zoo. The house was made of raw wood, glass, and plaster and exuded a scent of dryness, juniper, and lemons. These memories are attached to my body from when I was small enough to crawl through the pet door. Grandpa, whose name was Edward Taylor, was a tall, thin man with wavy hair and a pronounced Adam's apple that bounced up and down when he laughed. I picture him sitting in his mid-century Bughman recliner, popping open a newspaper with the light of a morning streaming through the windows. In that image I am sprawled cat-like on the high-pile carpet behind his chair, next to the wall heater. What I remember most about Grandpa was the deliberate slowness with which he moved. I used to follow him across a room, moving, it seemed, in slow motion. He was so graceful - his pace wasn't forced by age, it was intentional and deliberate. Or so it seemed to a hyperactive six-year-old. Maybe that's part of what grandparents are for: to show the new generation what grace can be found in intentional movement. Whatever the case, I began to practice my admiration for Grandpa by mimicking his slow pace, and I try to continue to do so to this day. It informs my philosophy of how I relate to time.

I am a slow person. Christopher Uhl, in his book *Developing Ecological Consciousness*, defines the ancient Greek terms Kairos and Chronos. Chronos is the linear vision of time within which most of us are preconditioned to think: past, present and future flowing forward on a vector. But imagine time without past or future, without clocks or calendars. Suddenly the places in which you find yourself, and every object within those places, sharpen in detail, since they are the only things that exist. That attention to the present moment is Kairos (Uhl, 2013). Living with kairos – in the infinite moments between seconds – encourages me to tune in to the whole world (to nature) and to take the time to notice it with all of my senses and feelings. This has implications for my work as a naturalist and an educator. Terry Tempest Williams, a writer, naturalist and eco-feminist from Salt Lake City, writes, "I want my life to be a celebration of slowness." Slowness becomes mindfulness, becomes intention, becomes attention. I sit with the plants at my phenology plot and observe the seasons turn, and notice the seasons turning in myself.

I want to stay at the beach for a moment longer. After Grandpa passed away, Grandma sold the house and moved to a home that was easier to maintain. At some point the house where my mom grew up was demolished and the land was leveled to dirt. A

new house was built at the address. The location remains, but I wonder, can a place exist only as a memory?

We went down to Grandma's house for Christmas this year. There had just been heavy rain in LA and when we went to the beach, it seemed like every piece of loose garbage in the city had washed down to the waterline. Flocks of sanderlings sidestepped piles of plastic bags and empty soda bottles. I had never seen the beach so trashed. Certainly, 25 years ago, there was garbage on the beach. But now, I realized, there is 25 more years worth of it. Plastic doesn't go away! At what point does one place transform into another? That was on Christmas eve. On Christmas day, the whole damn family went down to the beach with gloves and garbage bags to pick up trash. You can imagine, we did not solve the problem. I'm not sure we even set a very good example: the passersby gave us blank stares if they looked at us at all. What we did was assert our love for a place to each other. We said, *we are still here, and we still love this place, and therefore we will take care of it.*

On Time

Type in "intergenerational" into Google's search bar and leave the cursor blinking. The drop-down menu suggests these additions: "mobility, trauma, definition, transmission, transmission of violence, equity, relationships, poverty, programs, and solidarity" (www.google.com, 2016). These are queries tied to the human struggle to find peace in a world that increasingly splits our families apart in the name of individual gain (McKibben, 2007). As it connects family to ecology, intergenerationality embodies principles like flow (currents of time, tradition), cycles (repetitions of behavior, connections to place), development (transmission of knowledge, skill-building), hierarchies (systems of parentage), networks (extended families, safety nets), dynamic balance (family size, reciprocity of work and learning), nested systems (mirroring behaviors, concepts of home). Further, intergenerationality informs my ecological identity and pedagogy as the idea that we understand ourselves in the context of the generations that stand in our past and in our future. It is a glowing beacon for the connection we humans hold to what we call Nature.

In 1980, Oren Lyons, an Onondaga Iroquois scholar and activist, wrote about the way his people sat in council:

We are looking ahead...to the welfare and well-being of the seventh generation to come, and that is the basis by which we make decisions in council. We consider: will this be to the benefit of the seventh generation? That is a guideline....We have watched within our own nations and territories the exploitation of not only the people but the resources without regard to the seventh generation to come....There seems to be at this point very little consideration, minimum consideration, for what is to occur, the exploitation of wealth, blood, and the guts of our mother, the earth. (1980, p. 173)

How might your decisions change, if you acted for seven generations to come? Does that seem reasonable? It's certainly catchy. In the 21st Century we've seen this notion churned into the machinery of industrial capitalism, until Seventh Generation becomes a slogan, a brand. Lumbee author David Wilkins cites Vine Deloria Jr. as having a more pragmatic approach to the idea. Seven generations becomes an invocation of the value of family. Wilkins writes, "think about it for a moment. It is possible that many of us have known or will know our great-grandparents, grandparents, parents, our children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren" (Wilkins, 2015). With you in the center, that makes seven generations: the entirety of a family that any of us are likely to know and love.

The International Society of Genetic Genealogy allows the average length of a generation to be about 25.5 years, or the average age of a parent when their child is born ("ISOGG Wiki," n.d.). It must be said that, like the Gregorian calendar or American cheese, this definition of a generation is just one interpretation, and indigenous cultures throughout the world follow different traditions for counting generational time. But following 25.5 years as a simple metric, seven generations amounts to about 175 years. Looking into the future, that's the year 2193. A hard year to envision, perhaps. But seven generations ago, that was 1843, still within the realm of remembered history. If we allow 1843 to be the start of our 25 year count, then a short list of the milestones of seven generations ago could be:

- First North American oil drilled
- American Civil War fought
- World's first transcontinental railroad built in the United States;
- Emancipation Proclamation signed;
- Indian Removal Act of 1830 began the Trail of Tears, wherein the Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, Seminole, and Cherokee people were violently removed from their homes and sent on a forced march farther west, to a land known as "Indian Country";
- Point Elliot Treaty signed by leaders of Duwamish, Suquamish, Snoqualmie, Snohomish, Lummi, Skagit, Swinomish, and other regional tribes. The Point Elliot Treaty established reservations for some, but not all, tribes in the area. One notable tribe that was not granted a reservation was the Duwamish, who's traditional territory is now the site of the city of Seattle;
- Homestead Act of 1862, numerous gold rushes, and manifest destiny.

Did the actions of individual people like you, seven generations ago, have any bearing on our lives today? I would venture to make the claim that yes, had a culture of caring for seven generations into the future been intact in 1843, we would be living in an entirely different present. Watered-down invocations of long-term sustainability aside, may the citizens of year 2192 thank us, or at least not curse us.

Conclusion

Lifestyles That are Dictated by the Weather

There is a simpler way to organize human endeavor. I have declared this for years and seen it to be true in many places. This simpler way feels new, yet it is the most ancient story there is. (Wheatley, 2007, p. 1)

Holding paradox...holding the light of the past and the hope of the future...holding on to the value of family and place in the context of identity...Joshua Rockwood Porter, an educator in the North Cascades of Washington State, offered me this wisdom: “live like you’re going to stay awhile.” Live like you’re going to stay awhile. What better way to finally, as a culture, step off the boat and remember the process of naturalizing to place?

Holding the notion of ecological identity, I often begin classes with students by asking them to do a brief writing activity. I encourage them to take a couple of minutes to write a poem about where they are from. An “I am from” poem is one of the most basic exercises one can do to begin engaging inwardly, toward identity. Even if students have written one before, I encourage them to do it again. Repetition, the moment of starting a cycle over again, can open a window to deep insight. I tell them that the poem will transform every time they write it, just as they have transformed since they last wrote it. I encourage you, the reader, to spend five minutes free writing in this way: begin with the phrase “I am from,” and see what comes next.

10 Seeds

I began with a story about a tree and a bicycle. The tree was red alder, *Alnus rubra*. Like many trees, Alder has a habit of holding multiple generations on one branch. In the spring, you can find the brown seed cones from two or more years ago, still shedding seeds on dry windy days. Next to them will be last year’s cones that opened in September to disperse their seeds. When I gave this essay as a speech, I gifted the audience members each a packet of 10 alder seeds. While extracting the seeds from their cones, I found that the best method was to mimic the action of the wind, rubbing one cone against the other. Without numerous generations of cones on the branch, this rubbing action would not happen nearly as well. Next to the elder cones on the tree will be this year’s male and female catkins, the reproductive organs of the birch family, holding their respective halves of the genetic information required to make a seed. The female catkins will swell, and cure, and become their own cluster of seed cones in the future.

This calls to mind a well known story from the life of David Brower, one of America’s most famous conservationists and Executive Director for the Sierra Club until he was fired by his own board. In 1970, right after he was fired, he founded Friends of the Earth. But on the day before his firing from the Sierra Club, a famous giant sequoia in Yosemite,

the Wawona Tree, fell over in a winter storm. The tree was 2,300 years old and had survived many similar winter storms, but after World War II a tunnel was cut in its trunk for people to drive through, and a road was paved over its downhill roots. Those impositions weakened the ancient tree and it succumbed to the weight of the snow. Brower and a couple of friends drove up to the park and collected seeds from the Wawona tree, and they sent one seed to each of the charter members of Friends of the Earth, along with an essay titled "A Gift from the Tree." In this 1970 essay, Brower writes,

Within the seed...was a wealth of vital, unique, secret information, packed with great efficiency in very little space. It would inform the tree and all its parts, specifying the thickness of bark near the base and the thinness near the top, the number of branches, the density of foliage, the suppleness in wind...with notes about which food to select, the adaptability to sites – a long list of things a tree ought to know, each essential, none superfluous....Last summer people by the thousands parked their cars and walked half a mile to see the tree that fell because the seed it came from did not tell it how to cope with the automobile...A seed shaken from a cone lying among the fragments of the Wawona Tree's crown is affixed here. It can produce a tree that will live beautifully for three thousand years or so. If it fails to do so, please return it. (2001, p. 41)

May you plant more seeds than the trees you fell. I leave my masters experience with a feeling that education is an ecological act. Call me ecocentric, but from my observations, we humans are not unique in our ability to pass on information, to train for skills, or to learn by experience. The process of genetic heredity, the fledging of a robin from their nest and the wandering path of an alder trunk as it grows toward shifting sunlight are all examples of education enacted outside of the human experience. Given that, we can understand our participation in education as a direct link to the ecosystems and contexts within which we learn. If you're looking for a good way to reconnect with nature, learn something.

S2SS

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