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The Queer Agenda: A Fluid Education

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Abstract

Throughout this paper, I weave together various aspects of my identity in order to investigate how fluidity and questioning form an undercurrent of my being and therefore of the way I teach. Through metaphors and narratives of my experiences within environmental education and experiential learning I seek clarity and expansiveness rather than definitive answers, leaning into the certainty that change is inevitable and there are rarely any static answers. Using queerness, Judaism, and my scientific background as the layers of my unique identity lens and positionality, I explore the ways in which the power of questioning, critical thinking, democratic education (hooks, 2013), and Indigenous Epistemology (Aluli-Myer, 2013) profoundly inform education and create learning spaces that embody wholeness, health, reciprocity, and relationality. My hope as an educator and lifelong learner is to inspire in those around me a strong desire to examine the inherent complexity and fluidity found in ourselves and in our world as a tool to unlearn and (re)learn the things we think we know about the environment and our place in it.

Keyword: fluidity, queer, identity, education, environmental education, democratic education, queering curriculum, Judaism, connection, science

I would like to start today by providing some context for the land we are on. What we call Bellingham, is the traditional and ancestral homelands of the Lummi and Nooksack Nations as well as other federally unrecognized Indigenous groups. These sovereign Nations have stewarded and called this land and these waterways home since time immemorial. In 1855, white settlers and the federal government signed the Point Elliott Treaty with several Tribal Nations in this Coast Salish region. Treaties removed these communities from their land and placed them on small reservations and rarely honored the promised fishing, hunting, and gathering rights. Acknowledging the original inhabitants of this land as well as the history of dispossession, genocide, and forced cultural assimilation does not release us from the responsibility we hold as visitors to this place. I will always be responsible for interrogating my own white settler identity wherever I go and how I am implicated in colonialism. For example, I have not been invited to live or speak on this land, nor have I sought permission from the local Indigenous communities to be here. I stand here in contradiction.

Making a Land Acknowledgement like this can be seen as respectful at best, but tokenizing, patronizing, and damaging at worst. However, many of you are visiting from outside of Bellingham and I felt this context essential to knowing whose land you are really on right now. We are on stolen land. Additionally, as a learner and an



educator I am committed to always learning more about the true and complex history of the places I choose to inhabit so I can continue to understand how to be a better guest on these lands and to their people. A Land Acknowledgement does very little to repair or heal any of the trauma or atrocities committed against Indigenous folks, but paired with action it can be more meaningful. I am committed to navigating these murky waters of holding a white settler identity while wanting to support indigenous sovereignty. One of the places where I have started to do this work is within myself, understanding how colonization has affected my own body. We are all simultaneously complicit in and affected by colonization. My intention is to continue exploring the role of settler colonialism within educational systems in which I may find myself working. Part of this could be through advocating for more honest and transparent education for students around the history of the land the United States occupies. I invite and encourage you all to look into the context of the land you live on and visit--who are the original inhabitants and stewards of that land? What is the full and complex history of that place?

I would now like to inform you that today's talk, my capstone, will provide no certainty, though hopefully it will provide some clarity. I assure you that you will only walk away with more questions, possibly in lieu of any answers at all. At the very least, this will give you direct insight, a brief glimpse, into the fluidity of my mind, my heart, my experience over the past 20 months - my truth. My presentation will contain deeply personal, potentially triggering and/or emotional content. I thank you in advance for existing in this space with me right now, present, conscious, breathing together, recognizing and embracing the fluidity of whatever emotions may come up for you throughout. Thank you for holding this space intentionally with me.

I. Am. A. Walking. Contradiction.

Dictionary.com defines *fluid* as an adjective: Pertaining to substance that easily changes shape; capable of flowing; not fixed, stable, or rigid.

Throughout this program I have begun to examine and interrogate my positionality, which is a term that describes how the pieces of my identity interact to determine my social position in relation to other identities. My intention in doing this is to better understand the complexities of the various positions of power that my identity holds. An essential takeaway for me in doing this personal reflection is that often our best intentions can have negative impacts, inflict pain on others, and perpetuate internalized dominant narratives that erase people's lived experiences. For example, the ongoing romanticization of wilderness through the creation of National Parks as pristine, uninhabited places, continues to erase Indigenous past/present/future on this land. Perpetuating the idea that humans are separate from the environment normalizes oppression while it hides in plain sight. Coming from a great many places of privilege, I walked into this program with, at best, a flimsy understanding of the oppressive and exploitative structures of our education and environmental education systems. I walked

into this program never having done much intentional reflection of the intersectionality of my identity and how it influences my worldview and awareness of institutionalized patterns of injustice.

Among the many wise and grounding words of our professor Dr. Nini Hayes, they shared with us that “we are all walking contradictions.” Though I walk through this world experiencing the internal and external impacts of being ‘Othered’ based on my membership to historically oppressed groups, I also walk through this world with privileges that afford me safety and access to a quality of life obstructed for so many, because of my whiteness and my socioeconomic status. Much like my queerness and my Judaism, we probably all have some aspect of our identity that has been or is Othered, oppressed, exploited, some much more than others, as well as aspects that afford us some privilege. However, when we don’t understand the social structures in place and the historical contexts that sustain oppression and exploitation of various groups, we can’t fully understand how our identities influence our worldviews and our unconscious participation in these systems that surround us.

I have a tendency of seeking out physically, mentally, and emotionally challenging situations, usually in remote places of the world, high on mountain peaks, and even one hundred feet below the surface of the ocean. I have often chosen to sleep outside in the freezing cold snow, climb up frozen waterfalls with ice axes in a blizzard, or travel by myself to Indonesia to be a scuba diving research assistant. There are aspects of my identity that privilege me to be able to afford the experiences and feel relatively safe in outdoor spaces, travelling or living remotely. However, there are equally aspects of my identity that make these situations quite unsafe and less than ideal. Based on the intricately layered and unique lens of my identity, how I experience environmental education and experiential learning is undoubtedly different from someone else’s. We are always becoming ourselves, always understanding our dynamic identities. To become is to always be reflecting on our thoughts, actions, and experiences in order to keep growing. Until this graduate program I lacked the language and knowledge to articulate, let alone understand, how the complex layers of my identity have also impacted my experiences and shaped my perception of The Great Outdoors, Nature, Wilderness, The Environment. Or however you choose to describe it.

I am committed to better understanding these complex layers, particularly because I know that my identity directly shapes who I am as an educator and how I teach. I am angry that it has taken until this graduate program to be exposed to a more complete historical context of Western society’s notion of wilderness in relation to indigenous genocide. I have been socialized to perceive the environment in a very specific way based on the dominant white culture. I am angry that my educational trajectory until now has neglected to examine current systems of education and environmental education that continue to erase and mask this country’s insidious history of settler-colonialism, slavery, and forced cultural assimilation. Students, especially white students need to understand the systemic and perpetuated reality of white privilege and oppression in this country.

The lack of complexity and transparency in education is a disservice to all students and does not help make the world a better place.

I need to know my history to know myself. I need to know myself to know how I perpetuate systems of oppression. And finally, I need to know how I perpetuate systems of oppression to know how to work with others towards liberation.

Lilla Watson, an Indigenous Australian activist, artist, and scholar says, “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.” Herein lies so many of the contradictions I feel and witness.

I first set foot in Costa Rica when I was 14 years old, eager to learn about turtle conservation with Rustic Pathways, an organization that prides itself on providing international culturally-immersive adventure and community service projects for students 12-22 years old. Mostly I remember 7 days of patrolling the beach after midnight searching for sea turtles laying their eggs. We learned how to safely transplant these eggs to a hatchery where they would be safer from poachers and predators. I’m pretty sure we also spent one day painting a wall at a school, but those memories seem fuzzy. A lot of educational service work can fall into what is called the Savior Complex where for example a group of predominantly white and/or wealthier students go to another country to build houses or paint schools. Despite good intent, without an awareness of the systemic oppressive structures in place, harm is unintentionally inflicted on these visited communities. Many of these experiences are designed for and benefit the students much more than the community who sees groups of strangers come and go frequently. These are not real reciprocal relationships. What would it look like in education if we recognized Lilla Watson’s words as the wake-up call to interrupt the cycle that socializes us to devalue certain groups and prioritize the success of others? What if instead there were sustainable connections among communities formed to work together towards liberation? A couple weeks ago, I received an email from Rustic Pathways asking if I would consider applying for their Program Lead position for their marine biology-based programs.

The contradictions flow through me. The contradictions flow through all of us. There are no organizations that operate in complete purity. Rustic Pathways is not a terrible or malicious organization. It is equally important to acknowledge problems within an organization that reinforce systems of dominance and Saviorism as it is to acknowledge how the program provides opportunities for students to learn and have experiences abroad. How do I hold that tension between the inevitable problematic nature of programs like these and living according to my value-system? As an educator, I have the ability to encourage students to see the inherent complexities of these experiences and ask critical questions together.

My presentation today is my story and could only come from me. My trajectory as an educator who is also a lifelong learner is far from linear – as if any parts of our identity or lived experience could ever be truly linear. The lines of our reality blur, blend, become

something entirely new, fluid, having no fixed shape. Systems of power and dominance may have us think otherwise. Today I make the case for Questioning. For allowing ourselves to see our complexities and the systems we are part of as much more fluid than we are led to understand.

I. Am. A. Question.

Who are you? What things do you know to be True? How effectively might marine snails adapt to rising ocean temperatures and ocean acidification? Why do I feel like a boy inside? What is the meaning of Shabbat? Why do I feel so inexplicably sad and hopeless sometimes? Are we there yet? Why does mental health feel so stigmatized? How could science support climate deniers AND climate scientists simultaneously? What does success really look like? What does a safe-enough space look like? What do I want to do? Why can't I stop crying? Do I even deserve to be here? Am I the right person for this?

What is a capstone? A capstone is our personal synthesis of our learning, growth, and reflection throughout this graduate program...you have 3 months...Ready.Set.Go! No big deal, right? As time ticked, question after question arose. It seemed like all I could do was ask questions and worry that I was never going to get anywhere with that process. The number of times I've cried in Professor Nick Stanger's office, weeping over how lost I felt, how difficult it was for me to adhere to the rigid structure and pressure of graduate school, how much guilt I experienced when trying to take care of even my most basic needs like eating, sleeping, and exercising instead of studying, how impossible it felt to figure out what I am supposed to do with my life when I don't even really feel like I know who I am.

This is the real work, he told me. This is what you're supposed to be doing and this is where you are supposed to be. You're asking all of the right questions. Listen.

I learned to meditate when I was a freshmen in college because I had yet to learn how immense distress and overwhelm can damage your health. My teacher and dear friend Jeff Kober always told me to keep asking questions but stop expecting answers. We are never guaranteed answers in this life.

Except, traditional environmental education programs all too frequently try and simplify life into categories, rigid boxes, and binaries. Abiotic vs. Biotic; boys vs. girls; nature vs. urban; good vs. bad. I see the richness and diversity in life that comes with questioning this reductionist thinking. All of life is too complex and wondrous for rigid boxes. Complexities are worth examining. Rare is the moment with a static answer.

Maybe that's why more questions don't get asked, because they'll only lead to more questions, they only expand and stretch our current understanding or the way we know things. Asking questions can bring pain, confusion, many emotions. Questioning in all forms has many barriers. The following are just some examples. 1) Fear. If you are

questioning your gender and/or sexuality, there are real and perceived dangers to physical and emotional well-being. “According to statistics from the national coalition of anti-violence programs, 87% of LGBTQ and HIV-infected people murdered in 2011 were people of color” (Mcgowan, 2019). Queer people, and particularly queer people of color face astronomically high rates of violence, harassment, and suicide. From a different angle, homo- and transphobia engenders a visceral fear of ever questioning heterosexuality or the gender binary – such as the fear that gay marriage, gay adoption, or changing one’s gender assigned at birth will cause society’s complete descent into immorality and destruction.

The second barrier to questioning is 2) Power of Simplification. There is power in simplifying historical narratives because it literally and figuratively erases people’s lived experiences that would challenge the social structure of this country. For example, not many schools in the US truly teach their students about settler colonialism. They don’t teach about how Indigenous youth were sent to residential boarding schools like Carlisle where their culture and language were stripped away and they were forced to assimilate to white settler culture. And they definitely don’t talk about how this trauma continues to impact Indigenous communities.

The third barrier to questioning is 3) Time scarcity. We subscribe to a system of capitalism that socializes us to believe that time is scarce. There is no time for questioning when there is a time scarcity. As graduate students, we are rarely encouraged or permitted to take enough space to sit with our thoughts and reflections. We cannot process at our own pace for fear it may be too slow and we will fall behind.

Take a little break right now to let your mind wander. Please stay in your seats, don’t pull out your phone, and I ask that you remain silent during this period. I will check in with you in a bit. In the meantime, what are some of the biggest questions on your mind right now? It doesn’t need to relate to my talk at all, though it could. Write them down if you feel like it. Or don’t. As I like to say, “You do you, boo!”

As a gay, non-binary, genderfluid queer person. As a Jew. As a scientist. As an educator. I am encouraged to question my identity, my purpose, and the way the world works. I am obligated and driven by a forceful undercurrent in my life that I must question the way things are. An undercurrent. Water. Fluidity. Inherent complexity.

A year ago today I would have been introducing myself to a new group of fifth graders arriving at the Environmental Learning Center. The students arrive on a big yellow bus and lug their sleeping bags and duffels up the gravel hill—a journey that seems endless to them in such a new and unfamiliar landscape. We spend 3 days with these students hiking them all over the place mainly teaching and playing games, but secretly trying to tire them out. Part of the curriculum for Mountain School involves structuring the days according to Abiotic (nonliving), Biotic (living), and Community (how they all work together). I remember struggling to teach the difference between abiotic and biotic. It seems simple at first, right? Water. Obviously not living. But Charleeeee water moves and don’t little bugs and stuff live in the water? Eventually I

learned to stop mumbling a halfhearted answer and to celebrate these observations of complexities. Right?! How cool is that?! I would exclaim. I tried to turn these times into teachable moments – perfect to explain that scientists need to provide evidence to back up their claims, but that scientists argue with each other all the time and sometimes there is no answer! I also used the opportunity to teach them new vocabulary. Hey Mountain Goats, who knows what the word binary means? Abiotic and biotic? Not as simple as we thought.

Through all of these reflections, I realized how effective it was to take these opportunities for teachable moments and encourage critical thinking. Students need to know how to investigate these gray areas. They need to know how to ask questions and how to actively listen to each other. These are the ways in which I plan to engage with students. Educators need to support their students to question and think critically, so that they can better engage with reality, who we are as individuals, and how we all fit into this complex world we live in.

In my quest to find writing that supports my thoughts I found this excerpt from an essay in the book, *Balancing on the Mechitza*. Tucker Lieberman says:

“Water, too, has unique properties that blur edges literally and figuratively. Water in the mikveh is used as a tool to separate clean from unclean, workweek from Shabbat, men from women. Yet water itself is amorphous, concealing our bodies in refracted light and shadow and a rush of sound, making it difficult to distinguish male from female. Where we seek clarity and definition, we find boundaries beginning to soften and join us together” (p. 106). -From “Hearing beneath the surface: Crossing gender boundaries at the Ari Mikveh”

I. Am. Queer.

Dictionary.com’s definition of the adjective *fluid* is: Pertaining to substance that easily changes shape; capable of flowing; not fixed, stable, or rigid.

Payless ShoeSource Inc., 1994, I was three years old and desperately wanted those Thomas the Tank Engine Velcro shoes from the boys section. “Mom, you know I’m a boy on the inside right?”

I know how to throw on a dress and a pair of heels. I know that even the most basic and minimal amounts of makeup and mascara can make my eyes pop. I know objectively how to perform gender by dressing a certain way and conforming to socialized expectations around what it means to be a girl.

If you believe in the superstitions around pregnancy, I should have been a boy based on how my mom carried me in her stomach, based on all the prayers sent wishing for me to be a girl, based on my name. I guess that I surprised everyone when I was born with

blue eyes. Charlee, with two e's, a symbolic name on every level. Melanin in the eyes isn't present at birth and neither is gender, though one results from biological processes and the other from socialization—can you guess which one? Anything can become a metaphor if you try hard enough. I still have that blue piece of pie in my right eye where the pigment never completed its fluid transition. And I still feel like a boy on the inside. In fact I feel like a boy and a girl on the inside. I can embody a spectrum of gender.

Queerness is an identity. It is a state of being that differs from the dominant mainstream heterosexuality and gender binary. Queerness by nature manifests in fluid arrangements of attraction and expression. Queerness shows up constantly in all aspects of of nature. And still we see so much hate and fear directed at these identities. Imagine a world without the fear of being different, without bullying and being 'othered'. Imagine kiddos who see themselves reflected in adult role models before they even acquire the language to articulate their identity and their experience.

Have I ever told any of you about the time I ate a Junebug? I spent over a decade at Mountain Meadow Ranch, which is located in Northern California in a small town called Susanville. Some of my best memories are from camp. If you asked me to close my eyes and picture my happy place, a place I feel I can escape to—I would picture the grassy green meadow surrounded by giant Ponderosa pine trees, the swimming pool to my left, our wooden cabins scattered in every direction, and the big campfire ring surrounded by the log benches where we would sing campfire songs every Sunday night. It still feels strange to me that a place that held so much safety, joy, and nostalgia could simultaneously be filled with contradictions, pain, and heartbreak. When I was 18 years old, I came out as gay to Chip, the owner of the camp. Things didn't go so well. The man who had always treated me as one of his own kids and who watched me grow up from a shy and awkward little kid to a responsible and adventure-motivated teen, told me he would lose revenue if he hired a gay counselor. Parents wouldn't want their children supervised by a gay counselor, and plus the Bible says being gay is wrong. My bubble of safety and belonging burst wide open.

Several years before, Chip had dared Matt Dubman to eat that Junebug, but not even the promise of that delicious greasy cheese pizza from Pizza Factory that makes your mouth water after three weeks without junk food could convince him. Obviously, I wasn't about to turn down such an opportunity, so I said "I'll do it!" and I popped that Junebug right in my mouth, chewed and swallowed. All eyes were on me, jaws dropped.

Camp was where I went to be myself and it meant the world to me. Camp has that same meaning for so many kids, many of whom are queer or deviate from the norm in some way. They need that safe space of belonging and acceptance to question their identity and to live authentically without fear or internalized shame. They need to see themselves reflected in healthy and happy adult role models who are unapologetically themselves. Eventually, Chip apologized, and I did end up working that summer. I wasn't doing it for Chip. I was going back for the kids. I went because I wanted to give campers the same opportunities I had as a kid to feel a sense of belonging and the freedom to be silly, to be themselves. It was the first time I realized I could and wanted to be the

queer adult role model I never knew I so desperately needed as a kid. Mountain Meadow Ranch was still my home away from home. I was still the same Charlee Chip had always known. I held that tension of heartbreak and complete disillusionment with the joy and satisfaction that comes with watching kids have fun and learn about their own inner strengths whether by climbing up a tree and flying down a zipline or making new friends.

Not only should young people, questioning their sexuality and gender identity, see themselves reflected in healthy and supportive adult mentors, but they should also see their queerness reflected in nature. Queerness flows through nature as it flows through all of our bodies, showering us with gifts of imperfection and blurring the lines humans often try to impose on the other-than-human-world. Environmental education curriculum and those who facilitate it have the ability to disrupt the assumed heteronormativity of nature by calling on distinct examples of sexual diversity found in various species. Queering curriculum calls for educators to resist rigid categorizations and generalizations that do not capture the reality of biodiversity. Let me briefly take you on a tropical and very queer adventure:

The sun was just about to set on Bocas del Toro, a tiny island off the eastern coast of Panama that is quite popular to backpackers. The air was still and humid, the ocean like a glassy lake. Ten classmates and I sat on both sides of a small motor boat, our BCDs on our backs buddy checked and inflated, regulators in our mouths Oxygen flowing, and masks on our faces. Holding our regulators and masks in place with one hand, flashlights in the other, we rolled backwards off the side of the boat splashing into the water. We all gave each other the OK hand signal and descended immediately into the warm evening water. Breaking off into our assigned buddy pairs we swam along the familiar reef searching for something very specific. *Hypoplectrus* is the scientific genus of a group of Caribbean Reef fish called Hamlets. Within the *Hypoplectrus* group there are at least 9 species whose only difference is color. My favorite, *Hypoplectrus unicolor*, or the Butter Hamlet (shout-out to everyone who loves butter), has a tan body, yellow fins, and two large black dots above its mouth and on the caudal peduncle (or the stem of a fish's tail that allows propulsion to occur!). When hamlets mate, which is something they do daily, they swim along the reef looking for an individual of their same color morph. When the two find each other, they do an elaborate courting dance. If they like each other's moves enough, they suddenly rush together, bodies intertwined and gracefully swim up the water column like a firework shooting up into the air. They repeat this pattern several times. Each time something fascinating is happening – they are alternating sex roles. One hamlet will release sperm and the other will release eggs. The next time they switch who provides the sperm and who provides the eggs. Each individual hamlet is what is called a Simultaneous Hermaphrodite. And as my friend and mentor Elyse Rylander always says "There's nothing straight about nature."

Marine ecosystems are full of beautiful examples like the Hamlets. Male seahorses carry offspring through fetal development instead of females. Clown fish transition from male to female when the matriarch of the group dies. Limpets change their sex as they grow based on the sizes of other limpets nearby. All educators, but especially

environmental educators have this incredible opportunity to queer their curriculums. If we can all recognize the inherent queerness in nature, we might also be able to identify some of the inherent queerness in ourselves. We are all part of nature after all. Queering curriculum provides a more accurate understanding of natural patterns and sends a very strong message to students that normalizes queerness. In a society where heterosexuality and the gender binary dominate and suffocate, queering environmental education curriculum has the power to redefine what we consider “normal”. When I was teaching Mountain School to fifth graders at the North Cascades Institute, I took my opportunity to infuse my queerness into how I taught. The Red Alder, *Alnus rubra*, which is a prominent resident of the North Cascades ecosystem has both male and female reproductive cones. Perfect opportunity for a fun queer fact about nature. And how about wildlife sightings? What do you typically say when you see a bunny or a deer in the wild? Awww, she’s so cute!!! Well, how do you actually know it’s a she? What might be another way to refer to an animal if we don’t know what sex it is? Perfect opportunity to talk about gender neutral pronouns. Awww, *they* are so cute!!!

LGBTQ+ youth need to see themselves represented in their communities and in all aspects of the environment. Non-LGBTQ+ youth and adults need to see these identities as part of our own inherent biodiversity rather than pathological, deviant, or immoral. All students LGBTQ+ or otherwise should be encouraged to question how we are socialized to perform and understand gender. I am calling for the expansion of the gender binary beyond the confined boxes of male, female, boy, and girl. How could we all engage in disrupting and rebuilding this infrastructure around gender socialization? This isn’t about being more inclusive or accepting. It is about rewriting how we understand identities as more fluid. This is what makes questioning so exciting. What could the language of this expansion look like? We need to celebrate the complexity of the world. We need to stop erasing other people’s lived experiences. I use my queerness to demonstrate this because it is a piece of my personal identity that I feel comfortable speaking to. I have questioned my sexuality. I have questioned my gender. And I have remained faithful that these acts of questioning are essential and symbolize an act of resistance. Questioning runs through my whole being.

I. Am. Jewish.

Dictionary.com’s definition of the adjective *fluid* is: Pertaining to substance that easily changes shape; capable of flowing; not fixed, stable, or rigid.

Before I could pronounce my words properly, I used to say, “I am ‘Jewiss.’” But I don’t really think I knew what being Jewish meant until college.

My matrilineage is steeped in Ashkenazi Jewish ancestry. Ashkenazim are a distinct genetic and ethnic group of Jews that were part of the diaspora away from Israel and the Middle East and into Germany and eastern Europe during the Roman period and the Middle Ages (Moneymaker, 2018). My family originated in Poland, Romania, and Russia.

Jews are a historically ‘Othered’ oppressed peoples who have undergone genocide and ostracization, and who are very much still victims of antisemitism. Last quarter, Professor Hayes had us write our Racial Autobiographies. In the process, I did a lot of reflecting on the idea of my Jewish ancestry as an ethnicity. I hadn’t spent much time considering the complexities and implications of my Jewish heritage, but now that I’ve started I feel compelled to continue that journey exploring how my Jewish ancestry influences my identity, and as a result who I am as an educator as well as what, how, and why I teach.

I was not raised particularly religious as a child. I did not have a bat mitzvah. Come to think of it, the fact that I never celebrated becoming a woman feels quite significant and connected to my queerness. Maybe it is part of why I still feel like a kid most of the time. One day I will re-envision what it means to come of age as a non-binary queer kid, as I like to call myself.

I continue to hold conflicted sentiments about religion in general, but my faith and spirituality have noticeably emerged and developed in my adult life in unexpected and profound ways.

Most of my most powerful experiences with Judaism have involved connection with people and with land. Judaism is rooted in a tradition of stewardship and deep connection with the Earth, which deeply resonates with me and the values I want to uphold in my education work. *Tikkun olam*, repairing the world, and *Tzedek*, righteousness, justice, and equity, are two core tenets of Judaism that I hold very closely. These values flow through me despite the fact that I rarely attend Jewish services, forget to celebrate Shabbat, and don’t speak read or write Hebrew. I see a direct connection between embodying these values and infusing them into environmental education and education in general. Despite the tension and discomfort I may feel around religion, I also want to point out that many spiritual practice involve some sort of parallel to values like *Tzedek*.

When I arrived at my new home at the North Cascades Institute and crossed Diablo Dam, I entered a space that paradoxically appeared devoid of Judaism and yet represented a space where I connected to my Judaism more profoundly than I had in many years. Before we even arrived at the Learning Center, we received an email from our instructor Joshua asking us to prepare a gift to the group. I struggled with this. What could I possibly have to offer these strangers I’ve never met? I drew a blank for the longest time. In true experiential education form, it would take a 90 mile canoe paddle down the Skagit River, close to 40 days sleeping in tents, and a 10-day backpacking trip, all with my blossoming friendship family and extraordinary mentors Joshua, Lindsey, and Aly, to suddenly realize what my gift was. I was going to throw a big New Year’s celebration.

Rosh Hashanah, which happens in the fall typically in September or October, is the agricultural new year, just one of several Jewish New Year celebrations. In 2017, Rosh Hashanah and our 10-day backpacking trip happened to perfectly coincide. We had hiked over 30 miles, gained and lost thousands of feet of elevation, spent hours reflecting and journaling about our experience, and saw some of the most beautiful vistas in the

North Cascades—specifically the cinnamon rolls from a remote town called Stehekin. Our expedition ultimately took us up and over Cascade Pass, a traditional trade route that has been used by several local Indigenous groups since time immemorial. Maybe it was in learning about this land through direct interaction and intentionally reflecting on its historical context in all of its complexity, conflict, and heaviness that I felt within me the distinctly Jewish value of connecting to land. I felt the importance of acknowledging the full history and context of place. With the New Year’s arrival, both literally with Rosh Hashanah and figuratively with embarking on this Master’s Program with this special group of people, I listened to the urge to share this piece of myself. I brought my new community together through mindfulness, reflection, and intentionality. I brought my new community together over food—sliced apples and homemade Challah dipped in honey; and we celebrated.

Somehow, despite being the only Jew in my cohort, I still felt the presence of my Judaism running through me like a strong and steady current, influencing my thoughts and feelings. Judaism ebbs and flows through my life unpredictably. Whenever I am learning from the land or connecting with other beings both human and more-than-human, I feel it the strongest. I’ve felt it on a remote farm in Connecticut surrounded by the reverberating sounds of a drum circle and the flowing motions of Jewish priestesses dancing around the room. I’ve felt it in our friend Madylene’s kitchen with delightful dinner aromas filling the room, our families singing prayers banging on pots and pans for percussion, and salivating over her lovingly homemade cinnamon chip Challah. I’ve felt it by myself walking quietly down the trails in the North Cascades listening to Ravens caw and Deer Creek flow into Diablo Lake. As I get older and as I engage with the process of becoming an educator, I see so much more clearly how my spirituality and heritage play such a prominent role in how I connect to others, to my work, and to myself. I see how much sharing and celebrating one’s story and traditions with friends new and old can feel so satisfying. We all need the space to share who we are in all of our complexities and imperfections. Judaism also drives me to continue teaching and learning about repairing our relationships with each and with the Earth, which requires a significant amount of work and intentionality around disrupting the cycles that reinforce hierarchies and oppression. Ultimately, the very Jewish act of questioning and seeking will fuel my forward momentum away from complacency.

I. Am. A. Scientist.

My junior year at Tufts University, I took a marine biology research course where we asked, what factors determine the type of shell a Hermit Crab, *Pagurus longicarpus*, will choose when given an option. Hermit crabs are unusual members of the Crustacean class in that they do not create their own shells, but rather are forced to inhabit empty snail shells that may or may not adequately fit them. Some shells give them room to grow, some are far too small, and some have holes drilled in them by carnivorous moon snails. Vulnerable without any shell at all, hermit crabs are on the eternal hunt for the least

imperfectly fitting shell. In our world where there is so much pressure to fit into rigid boxes and categories, I have often felt like a naked Hermit crab struggling to find a shell that is good enough, steadily moving towards shells that are less and less imperfect.

Science has always been my refuge and my source of inspiration because it gave me an outlet to explore and encourage my curiosity from a very young age. In a world where I felt so different from other kids and struggled to conform to social norms, science showed me a particular view of the world where questioning the way the world works was at the very core of scientific thought. Complex scientific processes and calculations were so much easier for me to wrap my head around than trying to understand why kids who used to be my friends in elementary school were suddenly ignoring me, or why I never got invited to parties, or why I was never as interested in having boyfriends as all of the other girls were. In addition to that, I was so fascinated by life – by plants, insects, rivers, rocks – and I wanted to know how everything worked. I could learn how a single egg fuses with a sperm cell and in mind-blowingly complex pathways and stages eventually develops into a baby chicken or human. I could learn why coral reefs are so stunningly colorful and the factors impacting their rapid deterioration. I could learn how to make water bottles explode with dry ice.

And so I threw myself into studying science, convinced that science was the only way to really understand the world and care for it. I knew I didn't want to be a doctor. I wanted to be outside. I wanted to study *Nature* and focus on protecting *Nature* from human impacts. I wanted to do research that would help conservation and add to climate change knowledge. However, once I entered the science academia world, particularly during my previous marine biology Master's program in 2014, I started to notice myself feeling troubled. Something didn't feel quite right. Disillusionment hit me hard. Cutthroat competitive environments, major egos, inauthenticity, unwillingness to work together towards similar causes, publish-or-die mentality, and inaccessibility to the majority of the world revealed complexities in science I had never expected. Assumptions can break your heart, and I had made many about science being a "Higher Power" that can fix all our problems and bring us together. Science is not always the objective truth-telling machine humans have tried to make it, and I believe that science as a field contains a lot of arrogance that perpetuates several forms of oppression that actively hurt people.

Scientists are humans and as humans we are incredibly complex beings. I want to emphasize here that I am not making an argument that science is unimportant or bad. I especially want to make it clear that scientists are not bad. I identify as a scientist and I have a community of scientists in my life who are doing some of the most incredible and inspiring work I've ever seen. What I am doing, is inviting complexity into the way we think. I am making the case that we, as educators-learners-scientists-humans, would all benefit from seeing science for everything it is, seeing science in all of its complexities. Science saves lives, science helps us understand our world, and science also defines our world in a singular orientation where in the hierarchy of knowledge science sits far above other ways of knowing. I hold science as something incredibly valuable that is also full of contradictions.

Nearly seven years ago, science saved my life. I am a cancer survivor because the powerful toxins from chemotherapy were able to effectively melt and destroy the tumor that was growing on my heart and on my spleen. However, on October 21, 2018, a memo was released revealing that the Trump administration would use science to define gender “as determined on a biological basis that is clear, grounded in science, objective, and administrable...clarified using genetic testing” (Green, Benner, and Pear, 2018). Somehow they had overlooked a significant amount of scientific evidence that reveals the complexities of human sex and gender, not least the fact that there is a vast amount of sex and gender variance within the human species. One of my favorite podcast series “Gonads” featured on *Radiolab* aired two episodes that deeply investigated these topics (Webster, 2018; Webster & Qari, 2018). They tell the stories of Dutee Chand and Dana Zzym. Olympian, Dutee Chand, was winning medals left and right in track and field until she failed a gender test and was banned from further competition (Webster & Qari, 2018). Dana Zzym was born intersex with indeterminate sex characteristics, or anatomy that could be defined as neither male nor female (Webster, 2018). Each of these individuals faced enormous adversity and discrimination because they failed to fit perfectly into these rigid categories of gender that we are told science strictly defines. Science is being used unethically here to constrain and control these individuals’ lives. I could write a whole separate capstone unpacking analyzing how problematic it is for a government to be deciding someone else’s gender.

Last quarter I read an academic paper that has completely changed the way I look at science and policy. The author of this paper, Daniel Sarewitz, was the PhD advisor to Western Washington Environmental Policy professor Dr. Mark Neff who recommended this paper and has greatly helped me organize my thoughts on the topic. The biggest takeaway from this paper is that “if everyone politicizes the science, maybe there is something about the science that lends itself to being politicized” (Sarewitz, 2004, p. 388). Sarewitz (2004) goes on to explain that all environmental controversies, or any scientific controversies for that matter, are inherently values- and interests-based. As a result, “for a given value-based position in an environmental controversy, it is often possible to compile a supporting set of scientifically legitimated facts” (Sarewitz, 2004, pp. 389). What then, becomes of our reliance on objectivity? Sarewitz calls this an “excess of objectivity” wherein those who make the decisions are “extracting from nature innumerable facts from which different pictures of reality can be assembled, depending in part on the social, institutional, or political context within which those doing the assembling are operating” (Sarewitz, 2004, pp. 389-390).

I recently listened to yet another podcast series called “Seeing White” on the show *Scene on Radio* hosted by John Biewen. He takes a deep dive into the history of whiteness, how it was created, and why (Biewen, 2017). In episode eight, John explores the not so distant history of racial scientists who attempted to use skull morphology to provide proof for racist hierarchies (Biewen, 2017). The scientists were conscious of their belief in white superiority over other races, but they were unconscious about the fact that their beliefs were directly impacting their science (Biewen, 2017). They were using science to confirm their own personal reality, which was a very specific and biased reality. If it sounds familiar, this phenomenon is called confirmation bias. Does anyone know the first

step in the Scientific Method? Ask a question. The problem with asking questions is that without an awareness of our personal biases we can become completely unconscious as to how our biases inform our queries. This particular scientific research around white superiority and skull morphology directly assisted in the reinforcement of dominant narratives around race and the fortification of structural racism.

One of my new favorite authors, Dr. Robin Wall Kimmerer, writes eloquently and insightfully about her experience being an Indigenous woman within the scientific field of botany. Her book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, has given powerful words to the thoughts and feelings I have never been able to articulate about science. I would like to share with you all some passages from one of my favorite chapters, "Asters and Goldenrod" in which Kimmerer meets with her college advisor to choose her major and then must navigate the tension between science and other ways of knowing, specifically plants as teachers (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 39-47). Her experience speaks to the restrictive and dominating nature of science in the Western world, which I feel needs to be in conversation with other forms of knowledge.

'So, why do you want to major in botany?' [the advisor's] pencil was poised over the registrar's form. How could I answer, how could I tell him that I was born a botanist, that I had shoeboxes of seeds and piles of pressed leaves under my bed, that I'd stop my bike along the road to identify a new species, that plants colored my dreams, that the plants had chosen me? So I told him the truth...I told him that I chose botany because I wanted to learn about why asters and goldenrod looked so beautiful together...He laid down his pencil as if there was no need to record what I had said... 'I must tell you that that is not science. That is not at all the sort of thing with which botanists concern themselves' but he promised to put me right...

In moving from a childhood in the woods to the university I had unknowingly shifted between worldviews, from a natural history of experience, in which I knew plants as teachers and companions to whom I was linked with mutual responsibility, into the realm of science. The questions scientists raised were not, 'Who are you?' but 'What is it?' No one asked plants, 'What can you tell us?' The primary question was 'How does it work?' The botany I was taught was reductionist, mechanistic, and strictly objective. Plants were reduced to objects; they were not subjects. The way botany was conceived and taught didn't seem to leave much room for a person who thought the way I did. The only way I could make sense of it was to conclude that the things I had always believed about plants must not be true after all...

My natural inclination was to see relationships, to seek the threads that connect the world, to join instead of divide. But science is rigorous in separating the observer from the observed, and the observed from the observer. Why two flowers are beautiful together would violate the division necessary for objectivity...

I circled right back to where I had begun, to the question of beauty. Back to the questions that science does not ask, not because they aren't important, but because science as a way

of knowing is too narrow for the task. Had my adviser been a better scholar, he would have celebrated my questions, not dismissed them. He offered me only the cliché that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and since science separates the observer and the observed, by definition beauty could not be a valid scientific question. I should have been told that my questions were bigger than science could touch. (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 39-45).

When we value science as the top of a hierarchy of knowledge, we dispossess many people and cultures of their ways of knowing. However, in reality, if you remove this constructed hierarchy, there is a multiplicity of knowing where science is just one of many. Every time I read Kimmerer's words I get chills up and down my spine because they contain so much wisdom and reveal the insidious impacts of a reductionist and mechanistic system that negates our relationships with others both human and more-than-human beings. Separating the observer from the observed, and the observed from the observer as Kimmerer mentions, is how we have ended up as a Western society viewing Nature and Wilderness as separate from humans and human civilization. It is the reason why we struggle to perceive highly urban areas as "environment" and "natural". Why are we so obsessed with protecting "pristine" and "untouched" areas of "nature" when the places where we live may be the places that need the most attention and care? To me, Kimmerer's words are a perspective-broadening gift that there is a missing but essential reciprocity and relational component that needs to be developed and prioritized to more effectively engage with the Earth, with our surroundings, with the land, and with the more-than-human world.

What would it look like for science educators to engage their students in critical thinking to explore the complexities and layers of the scientific process? How might environmental educators create curriculum from a more reciprocity- and relational-based approach? How might teachers help their students unpack the hidden biases within the scientific method to understand that the questions we ask are directly informed by our previous knowledge, which is unavoidably incomplete, flawed, and ignorant?

We. Are. Fluid. We. Are. Whole.

We are all walking contradictions, every single one of us. We are all questions. Each individual has a unique combination of intricately layered identities that make us who we are, complicated and whole. Let's take a moment to think about this question. Which pieces of your identity have changed, have become more fluid and complicated over time? Interpret that as you will. Please turn to the person next to you, in front of you, behind you and take one minute to share whatever you feel comfortable with sharing. Which pieces of your identity have changed, have become more fluid and complicated over time?

My goal as an educator is always to create a space where vulnerability and emotions are welcomed and honored, where stories and voices are heard, where instead of Othering and alienating we are understanding and celebrating differences. We do a disservice to ourselves and to our students not to engage with critical thinking and

explore complexities both within ourselves and in the larger contexts of our relationships, communities, and the world.

As an educator who wants to teach and learn through a lens of democratic education, I strive to as bell hooks says “re-envision schooling as always a part of our real world experience, and our real life” with “teaching and learning as taking place constantly” (hooks, 2003, pp. 41). I also am motivated by Dr. Manulani Aluli-Meyer’s insistence on the need for mind-body-spirit connection within educational settings, and the damaging effects of isolating any of these three components (Aluli-Meyer, 2013). Identity is dynamic, multifaceted, and very much connected to the socio-political and economic contexts in which we live and are socialized. Students need to learn and understand the full and complex context and history of a place to form meaningful connections and relationships to our earth and to each other. Thus, as David Orr posits, “all education is environmental education” (Orr, 2004, pp.12).

More than anything, I am driven by hooks’ democratic education and Aluli-Meyers’ Indigenous epistemology that acknowledges the wisdom of mind-body-spirit connection and the wholeness of learning – we bring our whole selves to life, to learning, but first we all need the freedom to know our history and know our whole selves. We have a lot to unlearn and (re)learn about what we think we know. Ultimately, hooks’ words reverberate through my whole being:

Education is about healing and wholeness. It is about empowerment, liberation, transcendence, about renewing the vitality of life. It is about finding and claiming ourselves and our place in the world (hooks, 2003, pp. 43).



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