

**“We Ain’t Got No Wildlife Here”:
Transformative Effects of a Contemplative Assignment in Ecoliteracy**

Tina R. Fields, Ph.D.
Asst. Professor & Program Coordinator,
M.A. in Transpersonal Psychology - Ecopsychology
Naropa University
tfields@naropa.edu

Abstract

This paper describes a college assignment intended to foster ecoliteracy in social science students. The inclusion of a contemplative component, conducted over time outdoors, has repeatedly resulted in not only cognitive knowledge about the denizens and processes of a given place, but has transformed students' relationships with the more-than-human natural world to a much deeper relational gnosis and comfort level. Excerpts from one inner-city student's journal are presented (with permission) as a case study, and elements contributing to the assignment's success are discussed.

Introduction

"The ecological crisis is in every way a crisis of education."
– David Orr

One of the most urgent questions of our times is how to change our patterns of environment-affecting behavior in time to survive – and thrive – as a species. Formal education has begun to play a stronger role in addressing this. But while more and more “green” vocational skills courses are arising, attention must also be paid to effecting change at deeper leverage points, those having to do with mindset.

A question I've asked myself for years is this: How can educators teach respect for the planetary matrix of life that sustains us; the more-than-human world?¹ It is a vital question because of its effects. Emotionally respectful, loving feelings toward nature can help individuals feel more comfortably at home in the planet, and their sense of self-identity to widen from the “ego-self” to an “eco-self” (Naess 1973). The value system that attends these emotions can play a role in fomenting behavior change toward a more ecologically sustainable lifestyle (see Hedland 2011; Kals, et.al 1999; Saunders 2003:142-44).

This paper describes one college assignment that fulfills this aim. Originally intended to foster simple cognitive ecoliteracy, it has the surprising effect of leading students to experience a dramatically altered perspective on the world and their place in it. They repeatedly report some healing of their perceived split from nature.

Versions of this assignment have been done by dozens of students at three U.S. colleges since the 1990s. It's easy to forget that during most of those years, the zeitgeist was quite different. The official word from the White House then was that global warming is a

¹ I prefer the term “more-than-human world” that David Abram coined over the term “nature,” to not lose sight of the fact that human beings are also part of nature.

myth; the governor of California drove a fleet of Hummers, and recycling was seen as an expensive and silly hippie thing. Fast forward to 2012. “Going green” has finally caught on in the mainstream, and discussions about climate change, toxic body burdens, and the like are becoming much more commonplace. But in terms of our thinking, approaches and behavior, things largely remain the same. The focus is mainly on practical solutions – the technofix – largely ignoring the deeper aspect of mindset; of consciousness.

As Joanna Macy (2006) observes, in order to get widespread buy-in for choosing alternative technologies that might be initially more expensive and difficult to create, we need a shift in consciousness that sees the need for these alternatives and recognizes their value. Shifting consciousness offers a deep leverage point for effecting long-term change with the least amount of resistance and suffering. So the question becomes, how can widespread shifts of consciousness that support systemic thriving be fostered?

One way is through transformative education.

The Assignment

The Focus Organism assignment is sort of a bridge between mainstream classroom education, wherein the teacher lays down a sequence of tasks that culminate in a written paper exhibiting the student’s learning, and indigenous education, where the learner is incited to engage in direct relationship with the more-than-human world in order for that intersection to forge her own unique understanding.

Good assignments are not static; they grow over time and can even take on a life of their own. I repeatedly altered this one for courses in natural history, anthropology, humanities, and ecopsychology at three different institutions of higher learning.² The version presented here takes place over an entire semester, to support its contemplative dimension. Giving time for the student’s growing awareness to unfold through continual practice seats the lesson more deeply and is therefore more likely to support a lasting shift in consciousness toward the relational.

I present my assignment here in its entirety, so educators who wish to try it out in their own courses can do so with ease.

² Here I want to acknowledge Ken Kingsley, SILFAF field ecology course instructor for the Audubon Expedition Institute (AEI), for inventing the original science-based version of the assignment.

Bioregional Relationship Exercise: Focus Organism

Choose one nonhuman being to focus on and befriend. This could be a local bird, animal, native plant, stone, or even a weather pattern; but it³ must be an organism that you can actually encounter on a regular basis.

Observe your organism regularly, learn what you can about it, and keep a small journal throughout the semester on your growing relationship with it.

In the end, along with your journal (which you will get back unmarked), you will turn in around 5 pages of synthesized knowledge in the form of a formal paper. This paper should include concrete details of the organism's natural history (physical qualities & ecological relationships), its healing properties as recognized by different peoples (be specific), and your own growing personal relationship with it. You are welcome to include drawings, songs, photos, or original poetry as part of it.

Provocative questions to get you going:

- What are your chosen being's qualities? What is its history?
- What did different peoples use it for? Under which circumstances? Were there particular 'rules' around its collection, processing, or use?
- Think about your chosen organism both in terms of itself as an individual & species-family member, and also as a being embedded in its whole ecological system. Notice it in its environment. Who does it live near? What does it need to survive? What preferences does it have?
- What problems or impacts does it face?
- What items can we make from it that are beneficial to humans, or other animals or plants? What are the steps involved in making these things? (If you try it out, document what worked, what was easy or hard, and the like.)
- Why did you choose this being? Have you had relationship with it before (including both physical encounters and dreams)?
- How might people in general, and you in particular, serve the organism's well-being in return?

A student's focus organism can be chosen through various means, which may include actual encounters – particularly repeated ones, dreams, facilitated visualizations or shamanic journeys, or simple curiosity, where the person feels drawn to that being, whether the reason is understood or not. Previous student choices have been quite varied, including lizards, a cherry tree in the back yard, and even the moon.

Although the range of choices can be quite wide, to ground in bodily senses what could easily become purely mental-imaginal work, students are required to choose a being that they can actually physically encounter in their home place. For example, one African-American woman wanted to choose the lion. To facilitate her desire for ancestral

³ Note about language: Referring to any living being by the pronoun "it" is severely problematic for reasons I'll explain a bit later in this paper. I chose to use this term because I was dealing with first-year B.A. humanities students who largely came from conventional backgrounds, and I wanted buy-in. To contrast, when presented as one of several assignment choices for second-year M.A. students desiring to be environmental leaders at an alternative accredited institution, the language used was much more relational and respectful.

connection and also meet this stipulation, she focused on the wild cats living in her current home area, bobcat and cougar (mountain lion). Her learning, which included a sighting of pawprints, connected her with place in a profound way.

Case Study: One Student's Journey

In this section, I present one inner-city student's semester-long journal as a case study.⁴ It is a story of coming into ecological relationship and a new peace with her surroundings. Although resistant to the assignment at first, Shona⁵ still took it very seriously. She viewed her struggles with it as not only part of the learning on the way to her B.A. degree, but as a gift from God. As I read her detailed journal kept over the weeks, it took my breath away to see her consciousness incrementally shifting.

The series of critical incidents that she experienced make a funny story involving synchronicities. After I gave the assignment, Shona asked to see me after class. She looked worried. Our conversation went something like this:

"Dr. Fields,"⁶ she said, shaking her head ruefully, "I don't think I can do your assignment."

"Why not, Shona?" I asked.

"First of all, because I'm not home enough hours in the day to watch the tree directly in my front window. I think it's pine? But mostly it's because I live in a concrete jungle. We ain't got no wildlife in [my city]."

I was feeling both sadly stunned and amused by this idea. Of course wildlife lived there, animals and plants and fungi – but this young woman, even though very bright, clearly had not noticed it.

I was suddenly reminded of a discussion I'd had years before in Boston, Massachusetts with Gloria Villegas-Cardoza. She had just become education director of the first Audubon center to exist in an urban setting, and was seeking ways to work with her diverse multicultural constituents. When I suggested certain exercises that I'd found successful for deepening people's ecopsychological awareness in a fun way, she shook her head and said something to the effect of, "No, you don't understand. If I tell these kids to go choose a tree in the schoolyard to hang out with, they'll look at me like I'm crazy and ask, "What tree?" They don't even know they have trees; that's how

⁴ The student's journal excerpts and story are presented here with permission.

⁵ Pseudonym

⁶ I offered students the option of addressing me as "Tina," but Shona refused. "You worked hard for your doctoral degree and to become a professor," she said, "and I want to honor that." I then offered to address her as "Ms. [X]" in return, but she preferred me to call her by her first name. I include this note here to show that the disparity inherent in these names does not imply the playing out of an unconscious power dynamic.

disconnected they are. That's the level we're dealing with here" (Personal communication, 2000).

This was apparently a situation like that. So I gently led Shona through a mental list of animals that might be there; successfully opportunistic critters who live pretty much everywhere, such as raccoons...

"Oh yeah," she agreed, nodding. "We do have those."

"...Birds, both local and migratory" –

Here she interrupted, "Oh no. I hate birds. I don't want to do no damned birds."

I paused, a bit speechless, then recovered. "...Okay; well, there's also possums, squirrels, and..."

And then we both said in unison, "Skunks."

"Oh no," she said. "I *really* don't want no skunk. Please Lord, not a skunk."

We looked at each other.

"Well," I said at last, "at least you've got some idea of beings to watch for now." We began to strategize about the various possibilities before her.

Shona's journal: 9/8/08⁷

Dr. Fields inquired what animals I may have direct contact with or what animals frequent around my home. I told her often I'm awakened at night by the smell of a skunk's spray. So Dr. Fields suggested I may give skunks a try. 'Reluctance' was the first emotion that came to mind. I'm thinking this woman is not serious about me observing a skunk. The way she described how I could go about doing so was nothing short of mind staggering for me. She suggested I might think about coming out in the middle of the night, and if I see one, just silently watch what it may do. Eventually I could get even closer, and perhaps one would walk past without being alarmed, which may lead to me being sprayed. I've never felt I could do such a thing because it's a natural reaction to be afraid of the expected results – sprayed. Nevertheless, I accepted Dr. Fields' suggestion and when I arrived home, the first thing I did was look for a skunk – after all, it was close to 11 pm. Before I went to bed, I asked the Lord for His intervention.

Shona's synthesis paper:

My life is guided by my belief in the infallible word of the Holy Bible. This is why I prayed to God, the Father of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob for divine intervention on my focus organism.

⁷ All direct quotes from Shona's journal and/or synthesis paper are in *italics*.

Shona is a woman of strong Christian faith. She called upon this faith to help her with the assignment. But the response was not really what she had hoped for.

At the next class, Shona pulled me aside. “You won’t believe what happened,” she said. “I tried, I really did, but you know I really didn’t want no skunk. Then I came home, and guess what was sitting right in front of my house?!”

We both burst into laughter.

Shaking her head, she went on, “I said, ‘No, not a skunk! Please Lord, not a skunk! Send me something – anything – else.’”

Shona’s journal, 9/9/08

This morning I asked the Lord to give me a species for this project. My prayer was not just of intercession, it was also one of thanksgiving because I knew that the focus organism was already in my life and that the scales that covered my eyes would fall off. I made a decision that whatever He revealed I would take on. When I came home for lunch, there was a brown bird in my carport. I winced! Lord, you know I don’t like birds; please don’t make me observe this creature! When I was a child, a black bird became aggressive towards me and to this day, I just don’t trust them. Or any birds for that matter. When I returned to work from lunch, still going over my request and the timely answer as I approached the office, three crows appeared in the parking lot adjacent to my office. I asked, “Father, is this a sign?” Please no! Careful of what you ask for; you just may get it. Then about an hour later, as I was talking with a service repairman, a hummingbird came into my focus in the garden. I laughed. Lord, I cried, what are you doing? You know I don’t care for birds!

Reading this in her journal, I laughed too, but from a bit of awe. Through these seemingly synchronous encounters brought into focus by watchful observation, Shona is being offered the opportunity to heal this old fear.

Then on my way home from work, I spoke to the Lord, saying, “If you show me a hawk then I’ll know these are signs from you and I’ll consider this creature – the one I don’t like.” Right after I made that comment, I saw a turkey vulture with a massive wingspan in the sky. For me, God spoke loudly and the/a bird may be my focus organism.

On September 10, on the way home from Bible study, she realized she smelled the spray from a skunk. “What’s really going on?” she wondered in her journal. “Will it be a bird or skunk? Because both species are in my path.”

The next few days were to bring an enormous change to Shona’s perception of birds.

Shona’s journal, 9/14/08

I awoke at 5:30 am this morning. My first thought was to get out of bed and walk outside to see if I discover any skunks. That thought quickly evaporated from my mind because my bed was feeling too good. At 9:30 am, I was talking with Pastor out in front of the

church when a hummingbird flew close enough for me to examine its beauty. At first I was startled and my facial expression changed. When Pastor asked what was wrong, because his back was to the hummingbird, I told him the bird was so close. Its wings were iridescent green colors. It was an amazing moment. The Lord allowed this tiny creature to come close enough for me to see its Beauty. I'm thinking God may be saying in all of this, not all birds are ugly like I think them to be.

She is still on the fence about which organism to choose, though, the skunk or a type of bird. *What a choice to make, since I don't care for either one.* However, her journal reveals how she is beginning to notice a lot more than before. She now sees a bird as beautiful.

On September 15, Shona notices the three crows perched on top of an awning that covers the front door of her workplace. Then on her way home from our class, she noticed that she came close to running over a jackrabbit. *Lovely. Is this another possible focus organism? I hope not! Before pulling into my driveway, I decided to drive around the community to see if I could spot any skunks. No luck so I just came home.*

An interesting shift has occurred: spotting a skunk has begun to seem lucky.

Right around then, serendipitously, a former student, Cindy,⁸ emailed me to talk about her own repeated encounters with skunks! When I told her that she was not alone in this, she responded, "At first my reaction was much like your student's. 'Oh no, not skunk!' Then I decided to try to set aside preconceived ideas and learn a bit about skunk. I grew to really like skunk and be glad for its medicine" (Personal communication, 9/26/08).

She included a re-typed excerpt from a book about working with animal imagery in a psychospiritual way:

Skunk medicine! Go ahead and laugh. This furry little animal has a reputation that contains a great deal of power. Due to its distinctive behavior, humans give this tiny, smelly creature a wide berth. The key word here is respect. ...Skunk is teaching you that by walking your talk and by respecting yourself, you will create a position of strength and honored reputation. The carriage of your body relates to others what you believe about yourself. There is no need to bully, aggravate, torment, or overpower other beings when your sense of 'self' is intact. ...Learn to assert, without ego, what you are (Sams and Carson 1988:65).

Cindy ended by saying, "Feel free to share my story with your student. I struggled with Skunk but am now pleased to have her on board. It was good for me to write this here, brought me back to skunk and all that she has done for me" (Personal communication, 9/26/08).

Shona was touched by Cindy's gesture. This new interpretation of skunk as holder of "good medicine" helped her find a way to say 'yes' to skunks by opening her heart to

⁸ Pseud.

them. Suddenly the world was larger, fraught with overtones of mystical possibility. In her worldview, one might say that God's hand is nigh.

The skunk was just the beginning. Two days later, Shona has a close-up personal encounter with a wild black bird, precisely the sort she has most feared. This is a critical incident that will change everything.

Shona's journal, 9/17/08

Well. The three crows are back at the church. One perched itself on the swing so I went to the window to check it out. This bird saw me at the window and lowered its head and looked me straight in the eye. We stared at each other for what seemed like minutes, although it could have been seconds. Its eyes were like black onyx. After a moment it flew away, only to come back into the lot joining the two others. As I checked out this bird, I could see it's the biggest of the three and it has white feathers on its left wing. I decided to call it Congo.

A partially white crow: in terms of symbolic psychology, this unusual sighting shades Castaneda's (1974) initiation into widened perception of reality. Indeed, a huge consciousness shift has taken place in Shona's psyche. She now sees this particular bird apart from the scary category of 'birdness'; this bird is now an individual. Not an "it," but a "he." She has even given him a name.

Shona's journal, 9/18/08

I arrive at the office around 8 am. By 9:07 am, I'm a little concerned I haven't seen the crows ("3 Amigos"). By now they should be here... And then I hear the gwaking sound. I look for Congo.

A significant shift occurs: the relationship begins to seem reciprocal. Once we know somebody and see their beauty, we can't help but worry about them. Shona's journal begins to exhibit entries like "No sign of the 3 Amigos this morning." She looks for her new friends everywhere, and through this search, finds connections to others like them.

Shona's journal, 9/20/08

*I saw a few crows by my home in [my city] and could only wonder if they may be related to the ones by my job in [a nearby town].
That evening, when I go pick up my girlfriend in [another town], I spot a large skunk.*

Shona notices the sounds of hummingbirds in the garden now. *It's a distinctive sound.* She spots crows as she walks or drives to different places, noticing not only their presence but also specifics about their appearance and behavior. *One of the crows had something white in its beak, perhaps some food.* And they begin to haunt/occupy her thoughts even when not physically present.

Shona's journal, 9/28/08

I woke this morning thinking about Congo and the other birds.

On Sept 30, when she came to work late due to attending a friend's funeral, she found the crows on the front door stoop waiting for *her*. Amazed, she wrote, "*God purposed this to happen.*"

Over the next two weeks, Shona seeks to understand the causes behind some of their behavior, thereby gaining knowledge about these species' lives.

Shona's journal, 10/6/08

When I arrived to work today, I looked around for the crows. I spotted the smallest one on the asphalt and then I saw Congo on the roof drinking from the side paneling where water was trapped.

Her observations grow more and more detailed. She begins to notice the focus organism's interactions with its environment, which leads to noticing more details of the environment as well. Interaction between beings is, of course, the basis of ecological science. Seen through the lens of cultural story about the web of life, e.g., Indra's Web, such interaction also encompasses the mystical.

Shona's journal, 10/7/08

This morning the 3 Amigos are scavenging for bugs because they are pecking in the dirt. I watch the hummingbirds in blissfulness as they suck the nectar from the plants.

...[Later] I see one of the hummingbirds resting quietly on a small branch. From my window, it looks like a little twig. It's a part of the ivy that has wrapped itself around one of the columns.

Only one month has passed, yet Shona's consciousness has shifted dramatically. Instead of avoiding birds like before, she now tries to get close for a better view of what they're doing. She frequently mentions sightings of skunks and hummingbirds in addition to crows.

Shona's journal, 10/9/08

It's so amazing how [a little hummingbird] sits still on what appears to be a twig!

Her endogenous attention is becoming honed, as is her appreciation. Shona is far more at ease in the world than she was two months prior. Instead of fear, nature is now a source of infinite curiosity.

Discussion

From "It" to "Thou"

Through the trajectory of Shona's journey through this assignment, we can see her ecological consciousness dramatically shift; in particular, her relationship with birds. She began by 1) not noticing them at all, thinking there were no nonhumans around, then 2)

remembered that she had seen them – and feared them, then 3) gradually grew curious about them, then 4) recognized them as individuals with personalities and predictable behavior patterns, even naming some of them; and toward the end, 5) she worries about them when they aren't up to their usual habits.

To paraphrase Buber (1923) the crow shifted in her mind from an “it” to a “thou.” To “it” someone is to do violence to them, obliterating any sense of individuality, agency or value. “Itting” is a form of subconscious mental conditioning that allows such actions as the performance of hate crimes and the conducting of gruesome laboratory experiments on animals. Others come to be seen not as beings like us, but somehow less than: “specimens,” “the evildoers,” “collateral damage.” When the other is instead seen as an individual “you” worthy of notice, thoughtlessly dispensing harm becomes much more difficult. Going further to perceive the other as an appreciated and even cherished “thou” offers a chance at true relationship. Over the weeks of this assignment, Shona’s feared and avoided “it,” a black bird, was magically transformed into a friend, Congo. She moved through her fear to arrive at a kind of love.

In doing so, she gained a new sense of herself as safe in the world of nature. She no longer cowers away from birds, even black birds; she seeks them out from curiosity and caring. She forged a deep relationship of the sort that humans have commonly had with their totem animals since time immemorial – that is, until fairly recently. But as H. David Peat observes (2005), this knowing, this connection, is still available to anyone who opens herself to it. The animals have not forgotten.

Models of Ecological Relationship

Shona’s case is particularly interesting because of her strong Christian beliefs. Her faith offered a source of clarity and strength in doing this assignment. She is of course not alone in turning to God to help build relationship with nonhuman beings – St. Francis of Assisi immediately comes to mind.

The Church generally offers a model of relationship with the natural world based on the concept of Stewardship. In this model, nonhuman beings are seen as in need of our caretaking and/or existing for our use, rather than seeing humans as just another type of flower amongst those in God’s vast fields. Humans are placed above the rest of creation. Because of this hierarchical, benevolently controlling aspect, the stewardship model is considered “shallow ecology” (as compared with the ecophilosophy Deep Ecology).

Contrast the **Stewardship model** with two other models of ecological relationship:

Community model

The basic concept of ecology, according to Aldo Leopold (sometimes jokingly referred to as ‘father of the First Church of Environmentalism’), is that any given piece of land is a community, of which humans ought to be regarded as plain members. “We abuse land because we see it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love & respect” (Leopold 1949: xviii-xix).

The Community model has parallels in the worldviews of many Indigenous peoples. Both the Lakota in North America and Polynesian islanders perceive the world as a large multi-species family, mutually dependent upon, and supportive of, one another (Callicott 1994).

Expanded self model

Arne Naess, Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at Oslo University, coined the term "Deep Ecology." He concludes an essay in the book of the same title by saying, "It is not enough to have ecological ideas, we have to have ecological identity, or ecological self" (Naess, in Seed, et. al. 1986:86). Similarly, James Hillman said there is only one real question for the field of psychology: "Where is the 'me'? Where does the 'me' begin? Where does the 'me' end? Where does the 'other' begin?" (Hillman, in Roszak et.al. 1995:xvii). In the Expanded Self model, there's no actual separation between nature 'out there' and the person 'in here'. We can understand this by contemplating a common physical experience, the act of breathing. We take in air, thus oxygenating our blood and powering our brains; then we breathe out air containing carbon dioxide, which trees in turn "breathe" in. They then "breathe" out oxygen, which we breathe in... Since we cannot live without this exchange, where does the tree end and the person begin? Such musing can be mind-blowing, as it throws into question the edges – and even the reality – of the individual self, so prized by current American culture.

So the three models basically say this:

- Stewardship – Humans are separate from, and above, nature, and have a responsibility to care for it.
- Community model – Humans are one among many equal species belonging to the biotic community.
- Expanded Self model – Humans *are* nature, part of the body of earth.

This assignment allowed Shona to feel more comfortable within the Stewardship model as she deepened her relationship with the bird part of Creation. It also expanded her worldview into the Community model as she became aware of the crows' lives, seeing them as another nation living alongside the human-centered world. Some students, like Cindy, also find themselves touching the Expanded Self model, as they identify with the characteristics of their chosen organism and try to emulate these to enhance their lives.

Elements Contributing to the Assignment's Success

Why does the Bioregional Awareness: Focus Organism Assignment so often lead far beyond cognitive ecoliteracy to actual transformation of students' lives?

Three elements can be observed: The combination of observation practice, actual encounters with wild nonhumans, and stories that help interpret these experiences through an indigenous epistemological lens. Together, these offer an effective counterpoint to the storied reality unconsciously inherited from the waning industrial growth society.

1) Observation Practice

This assignment takes place over a period of at least two months. So often in these days dominated by the Internet, emphasis on the new and the swift precludes a long immersion in anything. At the core, this assignment is a contemplative practice. It trains the attention span to be longer, observational skills to be keener, and the senses to open and be aware in a way that our ancestors, who lived closer to nature, depended upon for survival. The practice of observing nature in a focused way can make us feel more connected and alive.

2) Actual Encounters (Specificity of Relationship)

This assignment is experiential. It asks students to not only read about what they're studying, but to get to know their subject by seeking actual encounters with wild other-than-human beings. Thus, the learning goes far deeper than cognitive theory; it centers on visceral lived experience. If skillfully offered, this combination can form true gnosis.

One important factor in this assignment's success is the specificity of the relationship. Students watch for a particular sort of being over time, and inevitably, this leads to their knowing quite a bit about the one or two individual members they see most frequently.

Parallels can be made with diversity training. A change in worldview often begins at the level of the specific. Getting to know an individual who belongs to a feared category such as black person, gay person, Jew, feminist, large dog, etc., can lead a biased person, who has been told dark stories and thereby taught to fear, the way back out of that hateful labyrinth. Even when a category of person is dismissed or disapproved of, it's far more difficult to "it" a single known person. "Oh, *he's* not like that."

Long-term observation combined with repeated encounters with individuals of other species can foster a deeper level of comfort in relationship, along with securer feelings about students' own selves and their place in the world.

3) Stories that help interpret these experiences through an indigenous epistemological lens

The mental map, the "reality," that emerges from an experience or repeated practice is the outcome of the epistemological process in which the mind conceptually structures a given content.

The paradigmatic map that most American students are accustomed to, centering on a story of the physical world as "dead matter" instead of a multifaceted alive universe full of beings with whom to commune, cannot encompass the sort of experiences that this assignment often sets in motion. It has been interesting to notice how often students are led by the doing of this assignment to hold a worldview more common to Indigenous or First Nations peoples.

The way in which the learning takes place is not "banker-style education" where the educator, thought to know all, opens the head of the student to make one-way deposits. Rather, what occurs here is a form of "midwife teaching" (Warren 1996) that leads to

what F. David Peat (2005:56) calls “coming-to-knowing.” As the learner engages with the subject, knowing arises from deep within and from the intersection between the two. The Focus Organism assignment attempts to lead a student to what philosopher Michael Polyani calls “tacit knowledge.” This is a form of knowing not passed on by books or verbal instruction but by “direct experience through the whole of one’s being” (as cited in Peat, 66). A familiar example of this is learning to ride a bicycle. Although people can offer bits of advice and can help through actions like holding your seat as you take off, nobody can really tell you how to ride. But after a time of trying, you find that you suddenly can ride. Further, from then on, you never forget how.

Coming-to-knowing differs from tacit knowledge in one aspect, however: in its animacy. Knowledge, to most people raised in the industrial growth society, is seen as an abstraction. To continue its existence, it must be kept alive in paper, silicon chips, electrochemical brain signals, or muscular responses. But for native peoples, as Peat explains, knowledge is “a living thing that has existence independent of human beings. A person comes to knowing by entering into a relationship with the living spirit of that knowledge” (2005:67). Knowledge actually has conscious existence of its own. Even if knowledge seems lost due to the death of its holders or the destruction of libraries, “the Elders are confident that when the time is right this knowledge will come back. Like the grass that grows again each spring, it will reappear in dreams or during ceremonies” (Peat 2005:68). An implication of this is that if a student prepares properly, the knowledge might come to her.

Coming-to-know is a process that must continue throughout a person’s entire life. This kind of knowledge is holistic; it’s more like gnosis than fact-based repetition of the sort that can be tested for in the short term. And it starts with paying attention; by ongoing active observation (Peat 2005:72) such as listening and watching; alert yet patient, a wolf watching a mouse hole for an hour, poised with one foot up, ready, doing nothing; missing nothing; in a stance of open willingness for the unknown to emerge. Prepare the soil by a stance of open curiosity; plant the seeds by reading, listening and doing; pray for rain – the grace of understanding, and the crops of knowledge may arise. Accessing the ecological unconscious takes place through this sort of education.

Conclusion

The Bioregional Awareness: Focus Organism Assignment is very simple, yet it has had profound effects on students. These have included surprising long-term deeper relationships with wild other-than-human neighbors, a mental paradigm shift from ownership to belonging, and an attendant inner mandate for behavioral responsibility toward the planet.

It opened Shona to a new story of relational embeddedness, and an outdoor world based no longer in fear but wonder.⁹ Shona began the semester deeply disconnected from the other-than-human side of her home place – not even noticing that animals and birds lived there, then upon learning they were, fearing and avoiding them. Yet over the period of two months, she developed a felt sense of engaged belonging, safety, curiosity, peacefulness, and even responsibility. Her case illustrates that the distancing from everyday interaction with planetary cycles and processes that is experienced by people in the industrial growth society can be overcome, and conscious awareness of our embedded relationship can be taught or regained.

I hope that educators reading this paper will play with the assignment, finding ways to apply its three combined elements to their own coursework. This sort of exercise may be of particular value to students coming from thickly built environments such as lower income or inner-city neighborhoods, where economic disenfranchisement often brings with it a lack of large, safe natural areas for people to roam in and therefore, fewer positive everyday interactions with wild neighbors of other species.¹⁰ It also holds potential for use by leaders of various faith traditions, with discussion slanted toward positive interspecies relationship and action in accord with the group's particular belief system. This contemplative assignment has served students from many different backgrounds and home places. I offer it with the suggestion that it be employed more widely as a pedagogical technology for shifting our collective consciousness toward sustainability.

email, 11/26/08

Hi Dr. Fields,

My eyes are open. I'm still observing my focus organism and I can swear those two crows just kissed. I just spotted them in a tree outside my office window. I'm not sure where the youngest one is; perhaps taking care of the nest. This morning on the ride in, I was wondering what a roost with hundreds of crows would like - not that I'll be on my way to find one - just curious. Have a Happy Thanksgiving and I will see you next week (God willing).

*Blessings,
Shona*

⁹ If space would allow, I would discuss this profound mental shift in terms of another very useful model, Ashok Gangadean's "double-bracket" self connected to Logos vs. "single-bracket" egomental thinking. Interested readers are encouraged to look further: www.awakeningmind.org/downloads/work_ref.pdf

¹⁰ I encourage interested readers to inquire further into this important topic of Environmental Justice, the connection between environmental and social justice issues, including environmental racism. A basic introduction with reading list can be found in *What About MY Environment? – Incorporating Environmental Justice Issues into Environmental Education*, a description of a workshop I co-led in the 2002 NAAEE conference proceedings (available at <http://wp.me/PFkYv-9E>).

References

- Buber, M. (1923/1937 transl). *Ich und Du* (I and Thou). NY: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Callicott, J. B. (1994). *Earth's insights: A multicultural survey of ecological ethics from the Mediterranean basin to the Australian outback*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Castañeda, C. (1968). *The teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui way of knowledge*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Hedlund, T. (2011). The impact of values, environmental concern, and willingness to accept economic sacrifices to protect the environment on tourists' intentions to buy ecologically sustainable tourism alternatives. *Tourism and Hospitality Research, 11* (4), 278-288.
- Hillman, J. (1995). A psyche the size of the earth. In Roszak, T., Gomes, M., & Kanner, A. (Eds.), *Ecopsychology: Restoring the earth, healing the mind* (xvii-xxii). San Francisco: Sierra Club Books.
- Kals, E., Schumacher, D., & Montada, L. 1999. Emotional affinity toward nature as a motivational basis to protect nature. *Environment and Behavior, 31* (2), 178-202.
- Leopold, A. (1949). *A sand county almanac*. UK: Oxford University Press.
- Macy, J. (2006). The Great Turning as compass and lens: What it means to be alive at a moment of global crisis and possibility. *Yes!* (May 10). Retrieved from <http://www.yesmagazine.org/issues/5000-years-of-empire/the-great-turning-as-compass-and-lens>
- Peat, F.D. (2005). *Blackfoot physics: A journey into the Native American universe*. Boston: Weiser Books.
- Sams, J. & Carson, D. (1988). *Medicine cards*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Saunders, C.D. (2003). The emerging field of conservation psychology. *Human Ecology Review, 10* (2), 137-149.
- Seed, J., Macy, J., Fleming, P., & Naess, A. (1986). *Thinking like a mountain: Towards a council of all beings*. Gabriola Island, BC, Canada: New Society.
- Warren, K. (1996). The midwife teacher: Engaging students in the experiential education process. In Warren, K. (Ed.), *Women's voices in experiential education* (182-192). Boulder, CO: Association for Experiential Education.