

# Transformation is in our hands: The educational imperative of creative Nature connection

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*Earth Hands*

*Only experiences that profoundly alter our view of nature and reconnect us with the divinity in ourselves and in the environment can empower people to commit themselves to the prodigious task before them. The therapeutic methods must be powerful enough to shift the ground of our being so that we experience the Earth in its living reality.*

(Mack, 1995: 284)

When I first encountered it, I was so moved by the dedication to Joanna Field's book *On not being able to paint*. In it she says, "To my son and his generation, may they not take as long as I have in finding out about these matters". It was as though she had made a marvelous discovery, one that no one had told her about before. That's how I felt when I first began to paint. No one told me what I could come to know through moving my painted hands around a canvas. I felt like I was the first person on Earth to discover the power of creating to bring us back to life. The euphoria burst through every aspect of my being. This feeling is available every time we create.

To prepare ourselves and our students for a world we can only barely imagine, we need practices that strengthen our Nature relationships, support new visions and open us to connected ways to know.

In this paper I focus on the creative fit between humans and Nature. I explore how hands-on creating promotes intimacy with Nature, transforms our relationship to Nature and self, and is a powerful way to know. I share how creating naturally develops a resonant connection, is spontaneous, deepens our seeing and listening capacities, and is like a reciprocal dialogue. Creativity and Nature connection go hand in hand.

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In the mid 90's while pursuing graduate work in transformative learning and creativity I was shocked into a deep sadness when I realized that our minds are so systematically molded by the rational and the mechanistic that we are effectively unfit to live sustainably with other life forms. I pondered how we could come into right relationship with Nature again.

I reasoned: if all living beings are naturally creative, maybe we have the potential to awaken to Nature simply by creating. Creating seems to come so naturally to young children and adults living traditionally in indigenous cultures. It is our birthright. Also young children and people following traditional ways seem to have a strong connection to Nature. Creativity and Nature connection seem to go hand in hand. I wondered if creating following natural principles might have the potential to teach us how to connect with Nature and help us to learn her ways.

As an experiment, I simply did a painting each time I journaled. I had journaled for years and already had this as an established writing practice. Each session I wrote a few words about how I was feeling then I chose the paint colours with my eyes closed. I felt for the colours and in a way, let them choose me. I painted with both hands and with my eyes closed as well. This helped me to navigate around my planning mind and stay with my feeling body. I simply gave

colour and form to feelings and body sensations. I did this a number of days a week, sometimes daily until after about a year I had hundreds of images. When I looked back on the images I saw natural patterns and images develop, grow and change over time. I also saw the metamorphic cycle of a moth. What on the surface seemed like an arbitrary even chaotic creative process quite naturally revealed remarkable cohesiveness, beauty and pattern.



*A selection of photocopied images*

Painting cleared out old understandings and gave a meaningful feeling connection to my own creative nature. It also awakened me to a deeper feeling connection to life. I recovered childhood memories of a pivotal encounter with a giant Cecropia silk moth and later I created with just such a moth in a chance encounter in my own backyard where I experienced an in-the-moment communion with Nature.

As well, a few months into my painting journal practice, I painted the way a vase of tulips felt instead of the way it looked. I closed my eyes, set the intention to paint our feeling connection, and then painted. I immediately loved the complex vibrancy of the resulting image. I felt like I was seeing beyond the surface. I felt awakened to a whole new depth of Nature connection that was contemplative, intimate and magical.



*Seeing tulips*



*Feeling tulips*

After more than a decade of creative Nature connection exploration I've concluded that when we spontaneously create following natural principles, or create *with* a tree or a snake for example, we feel and see Nature in ourselves, and embed ourselves with Nature. We practice over and over again how to relax into being with Nature in-the-moment. We open to full engagement with life, better understand how to create and care more deeply for life and self. We access a powerful way to know.

While not discounting the power of well thought out arguments to inspire radical activism and to shape lives and change behaviours, animating and interweaving ourselves with Nature may be more of a subtle, daily response to the crisis at hand; a seeping, slow melting type of work that seems to open one up to full connection with the beauty and splendour of life. We become inspired and come to know and act in a new way. Creating with Nature takes us one step further than the typical art-making in Nature done with activities like Nature Journalling (Hinchman, 1997; Leslie, 2000), since we develop ways to engage with animate Earth (Barrett, 2009) that put us on speaking terms again. We create *with* Nature by giving colour and form to our felt connection in-the-moment. We go beyond what our eyes see, to what our hands spontaneously create while being in relationship. We also create with self as natural. We can therefore be in Nature connection at anytime, in anyplace.

Being in Nature gives us a renewed sense of well-being. It is therapeutic (Buzzell, 2009). Creating with Nature deepens our experience of this connection to Nature. It dissolves us into Nature and gives us an intimate humbling personal connection. We also learn about Nature and ourselves. It is imperative that children are taught ways to maintain their connection to creativity and Nature for the sake of their relationship to the planet. It is equally imperative that adults are helped to regain this connection if it has been lost.

## **Thinking about Nature is not the same as intimate connection**

*It is one thing to be careful with our environment so it will last and remain benign; it is quite another to know deeply that our environment, like ourselves, is part of a living planet.*  
(Sahtouris, 1999: 12)

Western education teaches ways of knowing that do not honour the transformative potential of lived experience with Nature. As parents and teachers we often favour “rational, scientific” ways of understanding and teaching about Nature over “subjective, embodied” ways, especially when presenting scholarly “serious” knowledge (Robinson, 2009). As a result, we drastically limit our ability to live and learn in harmony with Nature because rational analysis of Nature separates us (Rogers, 2000). There is a dangerous mismatch between the way humans think and the way Nature works (Cohen, 1997). The global ecological crisis facing us today is a mirror of this precarious state. According to physicist David Bohm, we don’t even realize how much our thinking gets in the way.

*Thought thinks pollution is a problem “out there” and it must solve it. Now that doesn’t make sense because simultaneously thought is creating all of the activities which make the problem in the first place and then tries to create another set of activities to try to overcome it.*  
(Bohm, 1998:115)

Ken Wilber (1979) tells us that symbolic knowledge is different from intimate knowledge. Intimate knowledge is the knowledge gained from first hand embodied experience of the transforming “I-Thou” relationship (Buber, 1937). It will not submit to analysis and labeling. When we attempt to analyze, the intimacy is lost and is replaced by the distanced symbolic representation or the name (Wilber, 1979). Not only is intimacy lost, the life force has somehow slipped away. We lose our connection to life, and our thoughts, if acted upon create realities that potentially imperil Nature and of course ourselves.

*Behind naming, beneath words, is something else. An existence named, unnamed and unnameable. We give the grass a name, and earth a name. We say grass and earth are separate. We know this because we can pull the grass free of the earth and see its separate roots- but when grass is free it dies.*  
(Griffin, 1978: 190)

According to educator David Hunt (1992) we create maps. However, we have forgotten that the map is not the territory (Sheldrake, 1990a). The territory is Nature in its actuality. We can never fully capture the intimate experience of the territory since the map flattens this experience. For most people, knowing through names and maps has not been sufficiently balanced with first-hand experience of spending time in Nature or creating with Nature. So just as regular, long-term TV viewing begins to shape the viewer’s perceptions of the world (Mander, 1977), the boundary-laden naming systems of the human mind first formally taught in school have become the lens through which we perceive Nature. We see landscapes and pictures devoid of feeling and life. Wilderness becomes something we see through a square window or a camera lens (Shepard, 1992).

Research has revealed that we are currently raising an entire generation of children who are more in love with and knowledgeable about cartoon characters and video games than they are with trees and animals (Louv, 2005). They are suffering from what is now widely referred to as Nature Deficit Disorder with

correlate issues of unprecedented levels of obesity, anxiety and depression. Mistakenly we have created a language of Nature alienation and equally alienated mindsets and daily habits. It seems that centuries of scientific cataloguing, labeling, organizing, and mapping of life on earth have led us astray.

*...scientific language, however useful in scientific investigation, can be harmful to the total human process once it is accepted as the only way to speak about the true reality of things.*  
(Swimme & Berry, 1992: 258)

Since the guiding stories of our time are rooted in alienation, mistrust, fear, exploitation, consumption, competition and domination (O'Sullivan, 1999), we need to access and tell new stories that bring meaning back to our lives as earth beings (Swimme & Berry, 1992). It's not that we have successfully controlled the wild earthy aspect of life; rather we have become astonishingly successful at anaesthetizing ourselves to it. We have also silenced Nature, and ourselves as advocates for Nature by denying that Nature is alive and can speak for itself (Jensen, 2004). Western culture has championed a sophisticated, all encompassing campaign against living beings, including ourselves (Glendinning, 1994), thus denying the other story that lies just below the surface. Yet we know it's there lying in wait as we fence, pave, and wall off.

Also, ecological destruction did not happen as a series of a few profound tragic miscalculations (although there are examples of devastating ecological events like the current Gulf oil spill and Chernobyl). The destruction of the planet has happened over an extended period of decades. With a habitual mindset, we have daily inched ourselves to where we are today.

Many believe that a purely intellectual understanding of Nature, even a technologically mediated one is not sufficient for sustainable human-Nature reconnection and ultimately does not motivate people to act in Nature nurturing ways (Barrett, 2009; Berry, 1999; Lipsett, 2009; London, 2003; Purpel, 1989; Thomashow, 1996; O'Sullivan, 1999; Selby, 2000, Von Boeckel, 2009). The transformation of the

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human-Nature relationship is impossible to accomplish until we begin to transform our deepest understandings about our capacity for relationship to life (Berry, 1988; O'Sullivan, 1999). When we overpower Nature for our own purposes it becomes very difficult to form a trusting relationship with Nature.

The intimacy, openness and creativity required for truly transformative solutions need to be seen as important as eco-skills and "serious" earth saving tasks. An array of ways to know and hands-on skills are imperative so we can make connected decisions on behalf of earth and self. We will continue to rape, pillage and plunder until we experience a balanced relationship of mind and body, inner and outer, human and planet (Berman, 1989; Shlain, 1998).

*If it is accurate to trace many of our present dilemmas to what has been called the "disenchantment of the world", then the solution, presumably, must somehow involve a process that breaks the spell and circle of routines built up by modern culture and begins the transition into a different stream of experience.*  
(Gablik, 1991: 11)

In order for beings to want to talk to each other there must be a balanced exchange between human and Nature that is enlivening and sustainable.

## Intimate Connection

First hand direct intimate experience of Nature rebalances the inequality between thought and life. It softens the naming gatekeeper that is the rational mind. When we regularly go to the place that is deeper, richer and beyond the map, beyond the words we use to label, separate out, and bound the elements of Nature, we develop strength, tenderness and resilience. We move to a renewed relationship with Nature characterized by multiple ways of knowing that help us vision and carry out sustainable action (Griffin, 1988).

*Metaphysical and theological maps, profound psychologies and spiritual teachings may indicate the*

*pattern of the whole quite convincingly, but what one really knows is what one has experienced.*  
(Lipse, 1988: 9)

Lived experience with Nature is different from planning, studying or theorizing about Nature. Lived experience has the capacity to meld *knowing how* (perception) something works or how to do something with *knowing that* (conception) something is true (Rogers, 2000). Lived experience places us in the dance (Selby, 2000), in dialogue (Bohm, 1996), and in the river (Pinkola-Estes, 1992).

*New visions do not come from blueprints in our heads that are shaped by past experience and old habits of thinking. They are born as we interact with our world, and receive fresh sensations and perceptions. And for that we need earth and body, the stuff out of which we are made. They remind us that we are not brains at the end of a stick, but an organic integral part of the web of life. Matter itself if we attend to it mindfully, can help liberate us from delusion; for it is mind not matter that is in bondage.* (Macy, 1991: 84)

When we mess around with materials, we materialize our understandings. We let our hands show us what they know. We know we are alive, we feel alive and we feel engaged with life. This connected relationship is crucial for the transformation of the human-Nature relationship because it ballasts us over and over again in tangible experience. If we regularly embrace “in the moment” experiences of Nature we can begin to “*know from*” (Shotter, 1993). It is this experience of “*knowing from*” Nature that occupies our work here. Through creative engagement with Nature we open a channel for knowing and deep connection. Lived experience in the moment, is the place where human and Nature meet.

## A Natural Fit

Nature in its living wholeness is comprised of the dynamic relationship or fit between such complements as body-mind, masculine-feminine, and wild-tame.

The word ‘*fit*’ is related to the Germanic or Old Icelandic ‘*fitja*’ meaning junction, connection or to knit. It is also related to the Old High German ‘*fizzon*’ to surround, ‘*fizza*’ yarn, and is related to an early sense of ‘*fit*’ in English which means a meeting or a coming together with an adversary of equal power (Chambers Etymological Dictionary, 1988).

When we talk about the fit between humans and Nature, the work of Charles Darwin comes immediately to mind. According to Dissanayake (1995: 20) Darwinism has been misrepresented by social Darwinists and rabid capitalists alike in their desire to support unchecked competition and survival of the fittest. Even educators can find themselves in favour of developing programs that make students more competitive in the global marketplace at the expense of arts and ecology programming that would better prepare us for sustainable living and strengthen a fit between humans and Nature.

*“For a true Darwinist it is the inclusive survival of the fit that matters, not the exclusive survival of the fittest, and the former results from the selection of the successfully competing and co-operating individuals, not the promotion of the most ruthless and self-centered individual (or group) as (socio)biological singularities”.*

Therefore the ‘*fit*’, the match of strong individual or species with the environment, is what survives in a sustainable relationship. Maintaining a balance between strong individuals and a good environmental fit are key.

Loving Nature is also key. In her studies of how contemporary Australians understand their relationship to Nature, Bragg (1997) found that having strong caring and loving feelings towards Nature had a stronger relationship to environmental action taken than anything else. We preserve what we love, we protect what awe-inspires us, we value the feelings those experiences bring to our lives. We will fight to preserve what we care about. A good fit with Nature is at its root a caring relationship.



*While the human cannot make a blade of grass, there is liable not to be a blade of grass unless it is accepted, protected and fostered by the human.*  
(Swimme & Berry, 1992: 247)

To strengthen our connection with Nature implies learning new ways of communicating that bridge the gap between humans and the more-than-human world. It also implies that somehow we have not been on speaking terms for a long while.

*There is a language older by far and deeper than words. It is the language of bodies, of body on body, wind on snow, rain on trees, wave on stone. It is the language of dream, gesture, symbol, memory. We have forgotten this language. We do not even remember that it exists.*  
(Jensen 2004: 2)

There is also an implied warning that if we do not recover this rich language again soon, one that fits us with life, we may never be able to find it under the layers of debris and acrimony that comprise our currently autistic state. These languages are embodied and help us to be in dialogue with Nature. We move from simply recording Nature on paper to communicating with her, body to Earth body.

*...our interchanges with nature can be conceptualized as a dialogical drama in which the embodied human and the world of nature play off each other. The essential feature of this dialogue is the bustle and richness of joint engagement between the human and the natural worlds. In this "conversational" space, the two parties involved in the interchange dissolve into a singularity of embodied, reciprocal dialogue.*  
(Rogers, 2000:5)

Wherever there is a marriage or a relationship connection of any kind, in order to maintain it there must also be an exchange, a dialogue, an open channel for communication. For the mother and fetus it is the umbilical cord, for the young child it is the senses, the mouth and the hands, as we grow it often becomes destructive and/or lost through sole dependence on the schooled thinking mind. Ideally it

is an ongoing dialogue, a partnership and a dissolving down of self to meld with the other. It is a co-creation generated by authentic expression and heartfelt receptivity. One must not only be open, maintaining a clear channel, one must also be able to generate and share decipherable messages, to be in a reciprocal exchange of sorts.

Creating with Nature is about simultaneously uncovering just such a language, a native tongue if you will and as a consequence, developing a new way of being. This language lies in the depths of our bodies, in the forms on cave walls, on pots, in the germination of a seed, in the spontaneous play of a child, in the wildness of a tiger's eyes and in the nurturing of an infant suckling at a mother's breast. Opening out to this language, unveiling the roots of our connection, experiencing its newness, both its pleasure and its pain yet staying with the life force, the unconditional acceptance of all that is, enlivens, fitting us with Nature once again.

One meaning of the word "dialogue" is "flowing through" (Bohm, 1996:117). David Bohm has designed a process where people come together to begin moving towards cultural coherence and understanding. There is a shedding of agendas that happens in this type of dialogue that allows for a co-creative free flowing interaction in which it is possible for something new to emerge. This type of open resonant interaction is also possible between humans and Nature. We shed our preconceived notions and commune. Reciprocity is key to maintaining this open channel of communication (Bohm, 1996).

*... human beings, deeply mingled with the world, are addressed by all things and can in turn learn to address all things, provided that we grasp the language.*  
(Lipsey, 1988: 8-9)

There may have been a time when we were able to engage in dialogical "earth speak". There is much to be learned from many of the planet's indigenous people who still seem able to maintain a dialogue with Nature (Narby, 1998, Barrett, 2009; Castellano, 2002). If there is a barrier between the western mind

and Nature that may be stopping a natural flow of communication, what can we do and teach to make us sensitive to Nature again?

We may find a clue in the following description of Gary Snyder's Nature connected poetic expression. Maybe we must begin to open to the power of creative expression while in resonant relationship with Nature and use our powers of creativity to commune with creatures.

*...the wilderness poet calls forth Being. ...His poetry speaks, indeed resonates with the primal myths of the Paleolithic mind and archaic people, and through its saying reveals a world in which humankind might again be an integral part....*  
(Oeschlaeger, 1992: 299)

We can release ourselves from our enclosed world of human verbiage (Abram 1988) and embrace the creative language of the wilderness.

## **But I'm afraid to create!**

Despite the potential benefits of art making in terms of making deep and lasting even transformative Nature connections, and the fact that art making is a universally human behaviour, Dissanayake (2000: 201) believes as a society we have degenerated into a very fragmentary relationship with our creativity.

*...like zoo animals we have been removed from our natural environment and show the exaggerated consequences of this displacement in the fitfulness of our artistic ventures as well as in more unsavoury pathologies of unmet needs for belonging, meaning and competence.*

Generally, adult experience of the creative is limited, full of fear and shadowy (Berman, 1981) mirroring the fearful, shadowy feelings many have towards wild Nature. Fear of both the unknown and the uncontrollable that surface for many when they are in the wilderness (Tuan, 1979) also emerge with art making of any kind (Cassou & Cubley, 1995). Yet just because we have not been open to the wild

creative doesn't mean it has disappeared. More likely it has invaded our lives in its destructive aspect in the form of burning rainforests, dying fish, cancer ravaged bodies, depression, anger and alienation (Allen, 2005). Another way to look at the sad state of artistic expression in our society is to see ourselves as asleep.

*... to awaken to the creative state of mind is not at all easy. On the contrary, it is one of the most difficult things that could possibly be attempted. Nevertheless, ..., I feel that it is for each of us individually and society as a whole the most important thing to be done in the circumstances in which humanity now finds itself. And the key is , ..., to be continually aware of and alert to the mechanical reactions that are causing us to "go to sleep" again and again.*  
(Bohm, 1998: 24)

It takes courage and tenacity to maintain an awake relationship with the creative. For many it is easier to just push down the impulse to create (Allen, 2005).

We find this untamed or wild aspect of self to be frightening and threatening, and therefore often avoid, control and distrust it. When we distance from our creative wildness we enter into a form of eco-alienation (Clinebell, 1996: 32). Not surprisingly the human attempt to tame the wild has simultaneously tamed our deepest potentials.

*When Thoreau said in his essay on walking, "in wildness is the preservation of the world," he made a statement of unsurpassed significance in human affairs. I know of no more comprehensive critique of civilization itself, this immense effort that has been made over these past ten thousand years to bring the natural world under human control. Such an effort that would even tame the inner wildness of the human itself. It would end by reducing these vast creative possibilities of the human to trivial modes of expression.*  
(Berry, 1999: 69-70)

The alienation from Nature that results from our fervent attempts to tame and control out of fear, also leaves us with a lack of energy and desire to act on its behalf. We become impaired in our ability to access a

guiding vision that will help us act in ways that adequately address the complex environmental problems of our time.

*...often we find that our attempts to fix things only end up by making them worse. Part of the impasse is that in dealing with an intricately interconnected network of patterns on the scale of the global ecology, neither our reasoning faculties nor our feeling faculties are equal to the job. The only capacity that our species has that is powerful enough to pull us out of this predicament is our self-realizing imagination. The only antidote to destruction is creation.*

(Nachmanovitch, 1990: 181)

Letting go of fear and trusting the art making process gets easier over time, just as letting go of fear of the wilderness and gaining a measure of confidence and security also develops over many experiences in the wild. Part of the process of letting go of fear involves accepting it and realising that having control is an illusion. Paradoxically, once we let go to the spontaneous unrestrained wild aspects of self and Nature, we gain a sense of connection and security that is lacking when we try to plan and manipulate. We also become versed in the patterns that govern our ongoing relationship to Nature and therefore become better able to predict when we really are in danger. We develop a healthy respect for that which we cannot control. We move from a position of fear-based alienation to one of secure eco-bonding. Only then can we begin to remove the barriers that insulate us from the wild creative power of Nature.

Creating opens us to creation and steepens us bodily in the nature of creation, so that connection with life comes in a flowing resonant way. When we create we not only learn about and heal the self, we also come alive and are en-livened, woven back into the web of relations in a deeply felt way. We come to be versed in the language of creation, we move with it, we feel it bodily when the acquaintance of authentic expression is met, in whatever form it takes. We come to know that engagement of this kind is not possible from a distance, that to truly know the

creative we must move with it, dive into it in all its forms.

Knowing Nature cannot come exclusively from furrowed brow distanced analysis, rather it involves feeling the rhythms of life in the body and moving with them. Therefore creative journeying is an attempt to harmoniously co-create with Nature while attempting to let go the need to control its creative power out of fear. While co-creating in this manner we simultaneously feel and express the universal life force, the pattern that connects all beings (Bateson, 1979). We commune with the wild creative aspect of Nature and ourselves. By creating over time we transform and become sustainable earth beings again. Experiences of this kind are crucial for the sustainable bonding of the human with Nature.



24"x 30"

acrylic on  
paper

*Earth-Mind*

Bohm (1980: 81) describes art making as a "fitting together" or to "fit", and "beauty" as "to fit in every sense". Art making can nourish a good fit between humans and Nature.

In contrast to teaching-learning partnerships where information about Nature is transmitted to and accumulated by the learner, or where there is a learning transaction characterized by a focus on cognitive processes and labeling, artful Nature



connection is hands-on and engages the whole person. It involves forming relationships and making connections between self and Nature, thinking and intuition, mind and body, self and community, self and Self (Barrett, 2009; Boeckel, 2009; Kellen-Taylor, 1998; Lipsett, 2009; London, 2003). We learn that we are of Nature, Nature is of us, we are also not separate from our fellow humans. This area of learning acknowledges that there needs to be some "doing" or "being" that bridges the personal and the planetary. We cannot think, or discuss our way to that connection. It takes a whole different skill set and mindset.

Creating with Nature can be described as, "art for *all* life's sake" (Nachmanovitch, 1990: 181). I have added the emphasis of "all" because the art-making described here is done in relation to both humans and the more-than-human world. Therefore I am also making the assumption that creativity and hence art making is a natural ability shared by all living beings. Creating and especially self-creating is what all living beings do (Capra, 1996).

Some artists like Freidenreich Hundertwasser (Rand, 1991) have made it their life work to help people understand the intimate connection between Nature's creativity and their own. The connection to the sacred life force of the universe comes through time spent in that timeless state of creative contemplation. Without that connection we are rootless and disconnected from ourselves and Nature.

*Art and nature are siblings, branches of the one tree...*

(Fowles & Horvat, 1975: 60)

If you are alive, you can create.....

## Principles of creating with Nature

*...the arts process provides me with a meeting-place, a dancing-ground of change, where the worlds within interact with those beyond my skin.*

(Kellen-Taylor 1998: 303)

The creative life force speaks in images, music, dance, dreams, sculptures, poetry, trance and mystical experiences to name a few. When fully engaged we have a sense of timelessness, of total absorption and pre-occupation. We are lost to its power, its motion and flow. We access the essence of self and Nature, the creative living force that binds all beings together.

There is potential for incredible expansiveness in interactions with Nature due to the great diversity of her forms and the human capacity for both varied receptivity and creative expression. So in part Nature connection is about becoming more flexible and adept at speaking many different languages. Many of these languages are non-verbal and are the language of images, body movements, and altered states. These new languages are simultaneously wild, spontaneous, child-like, primal, organic, embodied and sacred. They are also visionary.

The following are some basic principles for creating with Nature:

- setting an intention
- empathic resonance
- spontaneity
- seeing with heart and hands
- deep listening
- dialoguing with creations
- celebrating the experience
- showing gratitude for the process

(Lipsett, 2009)

## Intention

Whether we are inside a classroom or outside in a beautiful forest, both the intention we set for creating and the mindfulness with which we approach a session are very important (Lipsett, 2009). We tune into our desire and state it clearly. We can write it down. The power of intention to shape our lives and experiences is just now being understood (McTaggart, 2007).

We also ask for permission to create with Nature. Cohen (1997) writes about the importance of seeking permission to enter a natural area. We ask in our

minds or out loud directly. Like a tourist asking a local if it is okay to take their picture, when we begin a session we place ourselves in the mindset of respectfully entering into someone else's domain.

## Empathic Attunement

*It is this merging, or dissolution, into a larger, more encompassing identity that the rationalized ego-self that is now felt to be necessary by many people, in order for social transformation to take place in our time.*

(Gablik, 1991: 52-3)

Once an intention is articulated, we "tune in".

*Art moved by empathic attunement, not tied to an art-historical logic but orienting us to the cycles of life, helps us to recognize that we are part of an interconnected web that ultimately we cannot dominate.*

(Gablik, 1991: 88)

Ancient knowing for the sake of all life, develops an empathic heart, heals individuals and collectively awakens us into responsible ecological action (Grey, 1998: 30).

When Kellen-Taylor creates with a tree or a rock she experiences this kind of empathic dissolving down.

*Through my art process I take in with all my senses the rock, tree, body that I am drawing. An exchange occurs in which my subject is imprinted in me and, by the same token, I have become part of "it". I must be careful not to disengage by reducing the relationship to an "it", an object to be packed away, labeled "rock". If I remember the exchange and contemplate it fully, the numinous event continues and transforms my relationship to all "rocks". This process can be perceived as en-souling the world- to which we humans belong. Here we approach respectfully and with reverence, not in an effort to match our painting techniques with what we perceive, nor owning the*

*view through our gaze, but by being present through all of our senses.*

(Kellen-Taylor, 1998: 308)

Uniquely in humans, artmaking is a response to the experience of our animal nature (Dissanayake, 1995). We enter into an "I-Thou" relationship (Buber, 1937) where new habits can be chosen and new actions can be undertaken which are infused with a broad sustainable life-centered vision. Empathy, compassion for all life, including self is about dissolving down self and feeling another's feelings, seeing through another's eyes, truly experiencing another without fear of losing self. Empathy is not about observing and labeling someone's emotions, it is about compassionately feeling someone else's pain without fearing a loss of self.

*We have such potentially grand powers for empathy and communication, since there is something in us of every animal, and something of plants, and of stones and of seas, for we are woven of the same fabric as everything on earth, and our textures and rhythms are those of the planet itself.*

(Abram, 1988: 313).

## Contemplation

Creating with Nature is a contemplative practice much like meditation. To create in this way is similar to painter and drawer Joanna Field's (1957: 140) description of "contemplative action".

*...now it was clear where the mistake had been, it lay in thinking of contemplation as essentially involving sitting and action as being essentially purposive. What the method of the free drawings has embodied was something that could be called 'contemplative action'; and it was this, whenever achieved, which brought back the full sense of the significance of the facts as more than instruments of one's private purposes.*

The contemplative aspect to creating couples the stillness of meditation with the movement or action of the creating body in Nature. It also moves one beyond

the self to incorporate all living beings. To contemplate is to muse and engage in quiet still mindfulness. To create contemplatively is to remain still while in the moving dance of the paints. Letting go to the flow of the art-making is the desire, in order to animate the inherently spontaneous aspect of being. We simultaneously access the source of our being and connect into the life source of all beings when we create in this manner. This work is about stilling ourselves enough to give colour and form Nature's energy.

*Art is contemplation. It is the pleasure of the mind which searches into Nature and which there divines the spirit by which Nature herself is animated.*  
(Rodin in Paul Gsell, 1983: 1)

The meditative state associated with creating with Nature is akin to the flow experience described by Csikszentmihalyi (1996). The flow experience is characterized by a loss of self or ego, and a deep concentration or pre-occupation with what we are doing in the moment.

Over time, I was led to paint in Nature where I can easily open myself to other beings and create from this felt connection. Creating can shift our self-image to include all life forms as we see ourselves reflected in painted clouds, oceans, birds, sunbursts, stars, grass, trees, animals, mud...

Sometimes we are not outside in Nature. Instead we are apparently alone creating with the door closed, ostensibly separate from the rest of the world. Yet in actual fact we are in a co-creative dance with the universe, in contact with our child self, with our adult self today, with all beings who have come before whose wisdom is stored in our DNA, and with all earth beings alive in the wilderness. All come together in our little creative space, all coalesce and present themselves as we create. (Lipsett, 2009).

## Spontaneity

Creating is a wild spontaneous dance. It engages us in the moving resonance of self dissolving into a co-

creative relationship with forces not completely in our control.

*To understand the human role in the functioning of the Earth we need to appreciate the spontaneities found in every form of existence in the natural world, spontaneities that we associate with the wild- that which is uncontrolled by human dominance. ... We are not here to control. We are here to become integral with the larger Earth community. The community itself and each of its members has ultimately a wild component, a creative spontaneity that is its deepest reality, its most profound mystery.*  
(Berry, 1999: 48)

What is unique about spontaneous creating is its power to simultaneously animate and dissolve down "self" in order to connect with all living beings. Part and parcel of re-balancing our Nature relationships involves experiencing our own inherent wild spontaneity. This spontaneous creative aspect seems to be easily accessible in childhood, bids a hasty retreat underground in the face of the development of schooled critical reason but can be uncovered and accessed again with an openness, and a letting go of the fear that drives us to attempt to control its power.

Over time, learning to create spontaneously teaches us how to live in balance and harmony with all earth beings. Wild spontaneity is a powerful easily accessible channel for connection. The spontaneous nature of creating with Nature allows us to embrace our own spontaneity. No special talent is required to create in this manner.

*Talent is universal. You can dip into the source to your heart's content. Everyone is good at what comes to them spontaneously.*  
(Cassou & Cubley, 1995: 17).

The more we are able to nurture our own spontaneity, the more sustainable and ecologically sound our thoughts, actions and feelings will become. Once this is accomplished we become able to embrace transpersonal identifications where all beings are experienced as aspects of a single unfolding reality (Fox, 1990: 252). Fox likens

cosmological identification to the branching pattern of a tree. What is unique about spontaneous creating is its power to simultaneously animate and dissolve down “self” in order to connect with all living beings.

“Spontaneous” means “occurring or caused by natural impulse” (Chambers Dictionary of Etymology, 1988). The word “spontaneous” is synonymous with “instinctive”, “automatic”, “involuntary”, “uninhibited”, “unforced” and “natural” (Rogets College Thesaurus, 1978). Spontaneous art creation can also be called intuitive, visionary, self-taught, and raw. It belongs to the larger category of “outsider art” (Maizels, 2000: 11).

*Outsider Art holds in question our established beliefs of art education and art history. It is a glorification of the individual, creating only for themselves, without need of training or a critical explanation or awareness of art history. It is the purest and most natural form of visual expression. Its influence can only grow stronger as more people discover its power and its purity.*

Joanna Field (1957) was an early creative pioneer from the field of psychoanalysis who chronicled her coming to know about self in the world through spontaneous drawing and painting. She was deeply interested in the relationship of both the inner and the outer, and the mind and the body, as experienced in her creations. She was also very interested in the relationship between spontaneous art and Nature.

*So what the artist, ..., is doing, fundamentally, is not recreating in the sense of making again what has been lost (although he is doing this), but creating what is, because he is creating the power to perceive it. By continually breaking up the established familiar patterns (familiar in his particular culture and time in history) of logical common sense divisions of me-not-me, he really is creating “nature”, including human nature.*

(Field, 1957: 161)

Spontaneous art creation can take many forms including but not limited to: sculpture, poetry, drawing, improvisational music, dance, movement,

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writing, and drama. However, the medium used is secondary to the nature of the process of letting go of the analytical mind and returning to the place where the playful embodied child can run free. Its playful and free nature is art’s preferred mode of being (Gadamer, 1994). It is also the mode of being that allows us to create the deepest and most lasting relationship between self and Nature. We can experience a new way of dissolving into Nature.

*When painting, ..., there occurred, ..., a fusion into a never-before-known wholeness; not only were the object and oneself no longer felt to be separate, but neither were thought and sensation and feeling and action. All one’s visual perceptions of colour, shape, texture, weight, as well as thought and memory, ideas about the object and action towards it, the movement of one’s hand together with the feeling of delight in the “thusness” of the thing, they all seemed fused into a wholeness of being which was different from anything else that had ever happened to me. It was different because thought was not drowned in feeling, they were somehow all there together. Moreover when this state of concentration was really achieved one was no longer aware of oneself doing it, one no longer acted from a center to an object as remote; in fact, something quite special happened to one’s sense of self. And when the bit of painting was finished, there was before one’s eyes a permanent record of the experience, giving a constant sense of immense surprise at how it ever happened; it did not seem something that oneself had done at all. Certainly not the ordinary everyday self and way of being.*

(Field, 1957: 161)

Sometimes different creative modalities spontaneously dance together all in one experience. Poetry may grow out a painting. Painting may lead to an attraction only satisfied by a Nature experience both of which may deepened and recorded through drawing, movement and photography.

By spontaneously and mindfully engaging in the creation of images and forms, we can begin to story both self and the Nature. Creating with Nature is a process that captures the mind, heart and soul. We

soon learn a new reciprocal way of seeing and listening.

## Seeing

*We regard the world anew, having regard for it as it shows its regard for us and to us in its face. We pay respect to it simply by looking again, respecting, that second look with the eye of the heart.*  
-James Hillman

Through creating there is indeed a transformation in the ability to see that develops. Creating does not require the physical interaction between self and a being in Nature for these experiences to occur. Rather, following wherever the hand spontaneously leads allows materials to bridge between the creator and their natural self. We begin to “see” self as a natural being. Nature no longer resides “outside”, rather we are Nature.

A new way of seeing is also part of connecting deeply with Nature. New or renewed seeing may involve seeing with different eyes, each with different seeing capacities. One way of seeing is not privileged over the others. Each has their role. For example Sufism distinguishes between three different eyes.

*Eyes of flesh focus on the thing itself, eyes of fire on facts but still more intently on their participation in a larger meaning by which they are raised. Eyes for art strike a balance between these two.*  
(Lipsey, 1988: 17)

Ken Wilber (2000) describes three modes of knowing that correspond to the eye of flesh (sensibilia), the eye of mind (intelligibilia) and the eye of contemplation (transcendelia). Each describes a different way of knowing Nature. The eye of flesh perceives the “outer” material realm, the eye of mind or reason is engaged in the conceptual realm of symbolic language, the contemplative or mystical eye experiences the transcendent realm. If we become adept at knowing through all three eyes then seeing can be a multidimensional reciprocal act imbued with love.

*And so with true reciprocity- our attention given over to the patterning to be found in relationships between the things of the world- our perception, more seamless now, more ready to perceive the relationships, reflects itself back into our eyes penetrating us. We see ourselves mirrored and potentiated in the myriad patterns of leaf and limb, of animal totems, of spirals, the ripples and meanders that carry us downstream. Our own true natural organic selves are revealed. We see our own patterns rise to the surface as we find ourselves meandering along the relations, as we begin to get it; to see and understand that we too are natural, that we too are truly of the earth.*

(Sewell, 1999: 150)

We can become what we deeply see. We can lose ourselves in the engagement, yet be more ourselves as we re-emerge. We see ourselves mirrored, and both ourselves and Nature are revealed.

*In the visionary mode, myths from all times and cultures are available to us; we touch into a seemingly magical dimension from which emanates a sense of the mysterious and the sacred; we have experiential access to the past or the future, and the limits of our cultural conditioning are transcended. Visionary seeing is a force against the literal mind, which believes that things are only as they appear. It is a movement into a larger timeless dimension that honours, from the deepest levels of consciousness, our connection with archetypal forces and powers beyond the local self.*

(Gablik, 1991: 52-3)

According to Nachmanovitch (1990: 51) “for art to appear we must disappear”. We must let go of the mind, the personality, the judging eye and be lost to the flow. By closing my eyes I am helped into this state of disappearance because I can better feel what is happening on the page with my fingertips. I encourage students to do the same when they are drawing or painting in Nature. I suggest that they set the intention to connect then close their eyes and let their hands create. I tell them that it is not necessary for their eyes to tell their hands what to do. Rather if



they stay with the feeling connection their hands will record that connection, and their usual way of seeing need not be involved at all. Kellen-Taylor (1998) and others (Dancer, 2006; London, 2003) engage in art making in similar ways to connect self with Nature.

## Listening

*Life's solutions lie in the minute particulars, involving more and more individual people daring to create their own life and art, daring to listen to the voice within their deepest, original nature, and deeper still, the voice within the Earth.*  
(Nachmanovitch, 1990: 183)

Creating with Nature develops a new way of listening, characterized by an unclouding of preconceived notions about what Nature might be trying to say and how it might be trying to say it. In some ways it's about opening out to receive messages and to fully listen again.

*...listening quiets the mind, calms the senses, and opens us to intercourse with the earth.*  
(Oeschlaeger, 1992: 302)

We learn how to attend, stilling ourselves with open mindful attention to Nature.

*Attention to the qualities of things resurrects the old idea of "notitia" as a primary activity of the soul. "Notitia" refers to the capacity to form true notions of things from attentive noticing. It is the noticing on which knowledge depends.*  
(Hillman, 1989: 101)

Sustainable notions about Nature and ourselves come from co-creative flowing within balanced interactions, rather than exchanges characterized by a tendency towards anthropomorphic projection of ourselves onto Nature. Instead opening to and attentively noticing Nature's own enlivening voice is the desire.

## Reciprocal Dialogue

By giving colour and form to feelings and then marveling at the natural patterns and forms that emerged, we begin to feel natural. We can also begin to dialogue directly with our images.

When we create with Nature we have heeded the call for the development and sharing of, "ecologically grounded forms of animism that put us on speaking terms with Nature" (Roszak, 1992: 213).

It is detrimental to the life-enhancing message of an image to attempt to pin down a meaning or somehow "explain" what it is saying. James Hillman (1997: 46) cautions against this tendency to define the meanings of animal symbols in his writings about dreams, "*we must animate our images thereby giving a life soul back to them. In our eagerness for conceptual beings, we ignore the actual beast. Analysis and interpretation, even Jung's active imagination is done for the sake of the dreamer's soul not the soul of the animal image*".

We can literally ask an image if there is anything it would like to share with us, then record the answer.

## Gratitude and Celebration

Thanking ourselves for doing the work, thanking Nature for sharing and thanking the creations for appearing are all wonderful ways to end a session. We end as we have begun with a reverential attitude towards the process (Lipsett, 2009).

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## The transformative power of creating with Nature

A new kind of "earthwise" listening and seeing is at the core of sustainable human-Nature reconnection through creating. By opening up to these new ways, we open to new understandings of self and Nature. These understandings are ageless and wise. We also connect to the source. The source is embodied,

connects all of us, is revealed in creative play and is the energy that first set the universe in motion.

*“...the source is that deepest part of you, that part that remembers everything with absolute clarity. It is the body intelligence that exists without words..... As the collective memory of the creation of the universe and the history of evolution, the source is also home to the primordial imagery of myth, dreams and remembrances” (Gold, 1998: 9).*

We feel connected to all living beings in an interdependent whole and are subjectively woven into that whole when we make their acquaintance. We are invited to experience a sacred place, characterized by rooted expansiveness and grounded imaginings. It is the experience of this sacred place that gives us glimpses of what is required to have a truly sustainable relationship with Nature. From an Eastern perspective this place of unity is not the result of bridging separations rather it is the development of a consciousness that experiences the undifferentiated primordial state prior to divisions, where everything is one (Nakagawa, 2000). We access our natural fit, the connection that has been there all along.

Connection to Nature through creating is about many things. It is about experiencing profound shifts in sensory perception in relationship to self and Nature. New openings develop that transform awareness. There is psychological reworking and integrating of internal relationships between different aspects of self. Human body-mind re-balancing resulting from reconnecting with the wisdom inherent in the hands is a large component. Community re-balancing becomes crucial as sustainable networks of individuals are developed, allowing people to co-create together, nourishing themselves and Nature. Spiritual re-awakening to the awe and mystery of Nature is a large dimension of this work. Being able to regularly check in with that mystery and feel a connection is central. This work is about education in its broadest sense, about drawing out the light within each of us. Once uncovered, we learn to respect and nourish our own light thereby opening to experience the light in all life. We become moved to act on

behalf of beauty, joy, lightness and creation. Work of this nature is also a form of therapy, the treatment of a tenacious and pervasive dis-ease of disconnection, which fuels life destructiveness. We become better able to remain firmly standing in the face of cold, darkness, fear and loneliness thereby building strength and tenderness in equal measure.

To create with Nature is about opening up and receiving, letting go, finding Nature in the stillness of breath or dialoguing with spontaneous splashing of colourful painted waves.

A sense of sacred connection comes from actively experiencing the wild creative in dialogue. It is the experience of a unifying dialogue. This connection takes place in the liminal space that is the creative act. We can come to better know ourselves and the wild earth in a joyful renewing manner when we enter this relationship. Transformation of the self and the planet need not be agonizing and analytical. It can be a celebratory creation that affirms the inner wisdom and interconnection of all beings. What once seemed so separate becomes melded and unified.

Creating is about giving colour and form to that which is not said, not able to be spoken. Before the practice of creating came into my life I'd all but forgotten how to speak that language. When this practice is not part of my life due to neglect or other pressing obligations I lose my sense of the flow. Just like a good hot shower can wash off the dirt and grime, a single creating session can put me back into connection again. This was not always the case though. It has taken a great deal of clearing out to get to the place where creativity flows easily when called. There were lots of layers to be unwrapped and a dedication to not re-wrapping myself again by letting doubt in the form of my highly schooled rational mind take over (Lipsett, 2009).

Creating with Nature is a powerful response to the earth crisis at hand. It is a call for a return to a heartfelt experience of being wildly creative. There is a healing or eco-therapeutic aspect to this work that nourishes and weaves the human back into the fabric of earth community. Daily caring engagement helps

to build both the strength and sensitivity needed to act counter to popularized consumerist dogmas and at times stand against the crowd to preserve creation even at the cost of our own individual safety and security.

This work is about giving birth to new life, new vision, a new understanding of self in the present, new knowing. Creating with Nature is a practice that leads to a way of being that is embodied and fluid, emotional yet grounded. It is a marriage of sense and soul, heart and mind, self and Nature.

Animating, unblocking, and releasing our wild creative capacities allows us to open to a sense of Nature connection, animate new visions and remain fuelled and energized for the difficult tasks ahead. Once experienced, this transformed sense of connection is reflected in our relationship to the planet in the form of creative right feeling, thought and action. Self-interested action that is rooted in this intimate relationship is also in the Nature's best interest. Without a creative, sustainable, flexible vision our actions will always be left wanting. We need artful creation for all life's sake.

Transformation of the human-Nature relationship is no small task in a culture that values reason over imagination, action over contemplation, and domestication over wildness. Yet despite the perceived obstacles it seems important to develop creative ways of being and knowing that fit humans with the earth community once again. The time to begin is now. The transformation of the human Nature relationship is in our hands.

For more in depth descriptions of the creative Nature practices I've only touched on here, see [Beauty Muse: Painting in Communion with Nature](#). Numerous artful Nature encounters are also documented on my blog [The Drive to Create](#). The video [This Little Bird](#) is a good companion piece to this paper because it shows a complete creative session. Videos, photos and a chance to share your own work can be found at the community site: [www.creativebynature.ning.com](http://www.creativebynature.ning.com). In addition, the Art-based Environmental Education group at

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[www.artnatureeducation.org](http://www.artnatureeducation.org) has a very rich collection of resources.

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