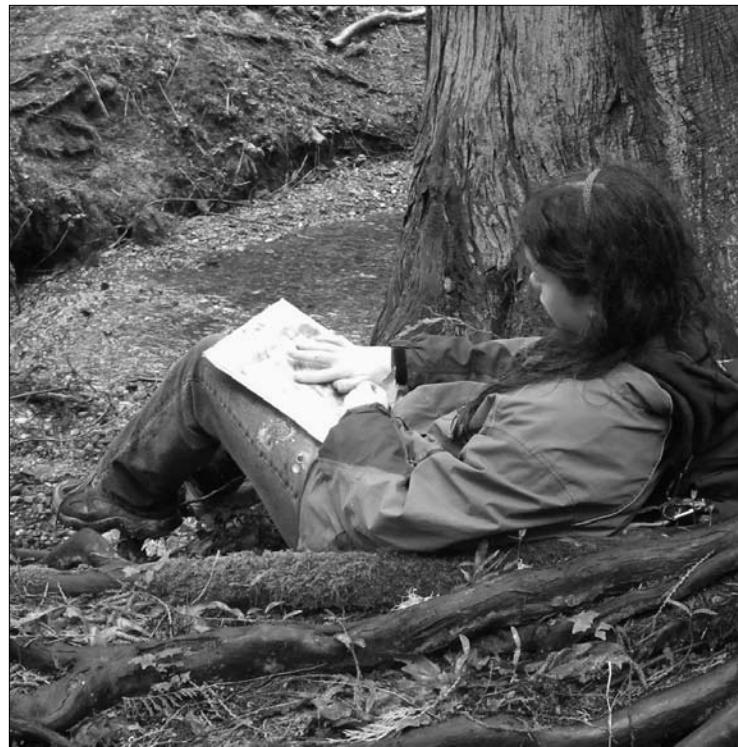


# Transformation is in Our Hands

*A creative process for deepening our connection to nature*



Photographs: Lisa Lipsett

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by **Lisa Lipsett**

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*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

WHEN I TAUGHT ELEMENTARY school environmental education in the mid 1990's I didn't realize what could be learned and how much we could care about nature through creative engagement. Back then I had a limited understanding of creativity that was more art-product focused than process centered, and I didn't appreciate the power of a creative practice to transform our relationship to ourselves, each other and the world.

I took a leave from teaching to develop fresh ways to work that utilized expressive art-making to create connection. Each day I wrote in my journal and then painted with no plan. Over time I developed ways to help soften my thinking, planning mind while painting so I could trust my hands instead. This allowed me to let go of what I was taught to think and do in order to make a pretty picture, and instead I followed what felt natural. Paint gave colour and form to felt experience, allowing me to see an inner state while feeling it more fully. As I painted from the inside out, I slowly came back to life.

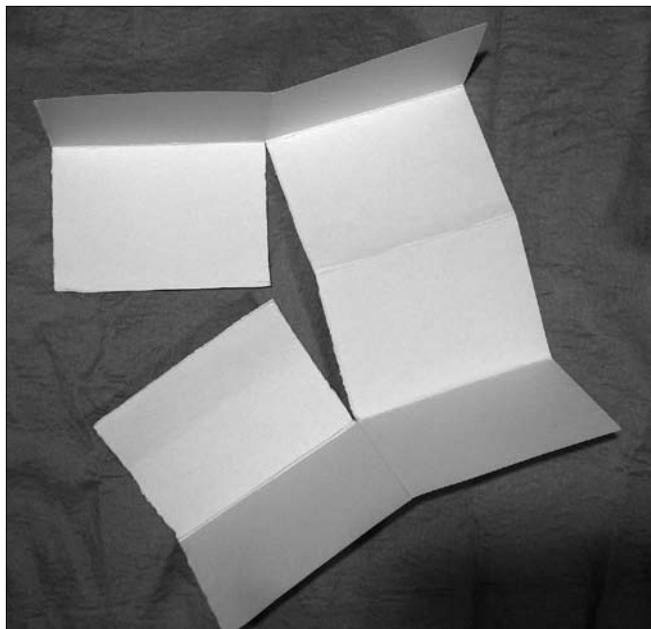
One day I followed the impulse to paint the way tulips feel instead of the way they look. I simply set that intention, sat quietly, closed my eyes and using my hands, painted whatever came. As I painted, I felt a resonant connection to the flowers. When I looked at the painting I was enchanted by the magic that something normally unseen was revealed. With both inside-out and outside-in aspects, the practice of what I call Creative Nature Connection (CNC) is a nature-centered approach to artful connection to ourselves, each other and the world. It is a great way to enrich nature journaling in five main ways.

## Hands

We invite both right and left brains into the creative process by using both hands to create. We also paint without brushes and feel our fingers directly on the page.

## Eyes

We close our eyes part of the time. When we create with our eyes open we can be seduced by the idea of something in particular. With eyes closed we flow with the process, feel the sensations associated with nature-connected creating and open to a fresh way of relating. If we can't see what we're doing then judgments soften and expectations fall away. Other senses kick in and we pay more attention. Over time, whether our eyes are open or closed becomes less important as we trust that our hands know how to create.



For the two sessions in this activity, cut a 15" x 22" sheet of watercolour paper widthwise. Use the instructions to the right to create two folding books.

## Dialogue

When we have finished creating an image from the inside out or in connection with another being, we ask if there is anything it would like to share with us, and then record the answer. We open to receive messages and to fully listen.

## Reflection

When practiced over time, images transform. Each session we step back and look at any patterns we see in the images and reflect on our experience of the creative process. Periodically we also look back at images from earlier sessions to reflect on where there is change, cycles and constancy.

## Gratitude

We end a session with a reverential mindfulness towards the process. We say thank you or express our gratitude in some way, whether that means thanking ourselves for taking the time to create or thanking another for the connection shared.

## A Creative Nature Connection session

There are two main phases to Creative Nature Connection: letting the inside out (creating connection with self) and letting the outside in (creating connection with nature). Each phase has three steps: connect, create and dialogue.

Anyone can practice CNC although it is best suited to youth aged 10 through to adults. Shorter playful portions of a session are enjoyed by children as young as five. I recommend that anyone planning to facilitate a session first explore on their own over a few encounters before they share. Be an archaeologist of your own experience. Notice what helps you stay in the flow and what jars you out again. This deepens trust in the practice and increases familiarity with its steps.

To facilitate a group of students, follow the steps with everyone in a large circle. Do the inside-out portion one day and the outside-in portion during a second session. Work for an hour each time, emphasizing that staying connected is more important than the final product. Once you feel confident that the steps are clear, students can find a spot for their first creative solo. A full CNC session can be completed in 90 minutes including 15 minutes at the end for sharing with a partner and/or with the whole group.

## Materials (for one person)

Paper: There are many options here. What I find easiest is one sheet of 15" x 22" watercolour paper made into two folded books. (See instructions below)

Paint: one set of watercolour paints. Check a dollar store. Only non-toxic paint should go on your bare hands. Portability is the main consideration.

Drawing Pens: two Sharpie ultrafine black permanent markers or similar non-toxic permanent drawing pens

A small water container

Moistened hand wipes

## How to fold a book

Begin with a sheet of 15" x 22" watercolour paper. Cut the sheet in half width-wise. Fold one of the two pages in half length-wise. Score the edge really well. You can use the side of a pen for this. While maintaining the fold, make two

additional folds to create a page with 8 sections. Thoroughly score the folds. Cut into the middle half way then cut along one section to the left and one to the right. The cut should look like the letter "T". This can also be done after you draw and paint.

Fold in the flaps and you have a folded book with a total of 16 sections, eight per side. Unfold the book for drawing and painting. Two books will supply enough surfaces for a full inside-out and outside-in session. (For an instructional video showing the above process step-by-step, visit [www.creativenatureconnection.com](http://www.creativenatureconnection.com).)

## Letting the Inside Out

### Step 1: Connect

When we create from the inside out, we create with ourselves.

We open to what is present in the moment and give it colour and form. This prepares and opens us for connection to other beings.

Gather and lay out your materials. Find a place where you can be undisturbed. To begin, settle into a comfortable position. Rest the busy-ness of your mind on the smooth inhale and exhale of your breath. Lengthen your inhales and slowly exhale. Do this at least 10 times. Melt any tension you may feel in your shoulders. Scan your body for sensation. Listen deeply to the sounds that surround you. What do you hear? What do you feel on your skin?

After 5-10 minutes of quieting down and becoming present to your surroundings, open to an intention for this session. Maybe a feeling has bubbled to the surface or possibly a body sensation or idea has come to mind. Take a few minutes to record how you feel in this moment and record your intention for this session in one section of your folded book.

### Step 2: Create

Once you have gathered materials, made a connection to yourself and recorded an intention, you are ready to create. First we draw. Then we paint.

#### Draw

By the time we are finished, we will have created seven drawings using a fine tip permanent marker. For the first four drawings, go slowly and take your time. Start with your right hand. Then try the left, first with your eyes open and then with them closed. Simply draw whatever your hand desires. Record somewhere on the page what hand you used and when your eyes were open or closed.

For the next two images, try drawing with both hands simultaneously. First draw with your eyes open, and then draw with your eyes closed. As you draw, check in with your body regularly. Are you breathing? Are your shoulders relaxed? If you feel stuck or you find yourself planning out what to do next, mix things up a bit. Maybe turn your page



around 90 degrees then continue by asking what the image needs.

To finish, do one last drawing. Allow yourself a few minutes to play with all these different ways to draw (left and right hands, both hands, eyes open and closed). Maybe you can come up with a few combinations of your own.

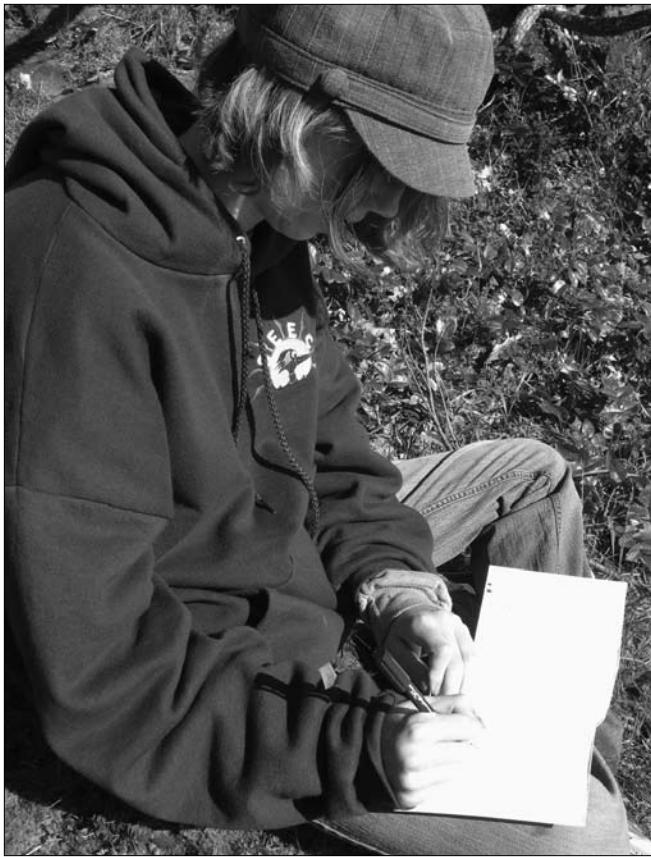
Beside the images themselves, write down any words or associations that came to mind while you were drawing or that come to mind now.

#### Paint

Flip your page over to paint seven more images using the same sequence of using both hands, first with your eyes open and then with your eyes closed. We are not planning an image: we are practicing staying in connection. Take a few moments to reconnect with yourself before you begin. For the first four images, start with your right hand followed by your left, painting with your eyes open and then closed. Simply paint whatever your hand desires. When your eyes are closed, work slowly and let your hand run across the paint palette to choose a colour. Savour this time to feel the texture of the paints, the water and the paper. Be sure to record which hand you have used and whether your eyes are open or closed.

For the next two images, paint using both hands together, first with your eyes open, then with your eyes closed. For the final image, do one freeplay painting that allows you to use all these different ways to paint. Write down any words, ideas or associations you had while painting right beside the images themselves.

**Other activities:** Turn your page 90 degrees after a minute of painting. Limit your colour palette to just the colours you have not yet used, or ones you know you dislike. Paint with the side, top or heel of your hand. Make a mess, create a rainstorm on your painting, paint like your three year old



self or your 80 year old self... The possibilities are endless. The key is to stay with what attracts you in the moment, use both hands equally and experiment with closing your eyes so you can better feel your way through.

### Step 3: Dialogue – Let your images speak

Take some time to look at your images. What colours and forms do you see? What do you notice? Do you have any strong likes or dislikes? Provide an opportunity to let a painted colour or form speak. Ask questions like the following: What nourishes you? What do you nourish? Is there anything you want me to know?

Record these answers in some way. Try using both hands to write. Also take the time to record how the creative process was for you. What worked to keep you connected, what made it harder? You can write your responses in the remaining section of the folded book. End the session by showing your gratitude for this time spent creating.

## Letting the Outside in

### Step 1: Connect

Settle into a comfortable position somewhere outside. We learn a great deal about ourselves and the quality of connection we can attain by practicing in a wide range of settings—wild, naturalized and human-made. Rest the busy-ness of your mind on the smooth inhale and exhale of your breath. Lengthen your inhales and slowly exhale. Do this 10 times or so. Soften any tension you may feel in your shoulders. Then feel your body melt into the Earth and listen

deeply to the sounds that envelop you. What do you hear? What do you feel on your skin?

After 5-10 minutes of quieting down, open your heart to what attracts you. Maybe go for a short walk and open to what chooses you. What or who draws your attention? It could be a rock, an ant, a bird, or maybe a blade of grass. The point is to connect with something other than ourselves. Rest your gaze on this being as though for the first time. What do you notice? What do you smell? How does he/she feel? Maybe a few words or associations come to mind, write these down in one section of a second folded book. Also take a moment to record where you are and what being you will be working with.

### Step 2: Create

Once you have accessed a connection, you are ready to create. You will draw and then paint your feeling connection with this being. The key here is to trust that your hands already know how to create. Simply rest your attention on the connection you feel while your hands record this experience on the page.

#### Draw

You will do seven drawings in total. For the first two drawings, slowly move your eyes along the contours, light and dark areas of this being. Let your eyes softly and slowly caress the surfaces while your right hand, like a secretary, simply draws. The more slowly you move your eyes and hand, the more contemplative the experience. Keep your right hand moving on the page in one continuous line. Repeat this exercise with your left hand.

For the next two drawings, close your eyes and feel the presence of this being. Let your right hand record what you feel followed by your left hand. Keep your eyes closed throughout the time you draw. Afterwards, take a moment to record next to the images any surprises, insights or words that come to mind.

Now make two drawings with both hands together, first with your eyes open and then with your eyes closed. To finish, do one “free play” drawing combining all the possibilities of eyes open and closed, left hand, right hand and both hands. Once again, record any words that come to mind right beside the images themselves.

#### Paint

You will do seven paintings all together. For all of them, go slowly and let your fingers choose the colours from the paint palette. Simply dip a finger into your water container and run your hand over the paints. Can you feel a colour draw you in?

For the first two paintings, softly and slowly move your eyes along the contours, light and dark areas of this being while letting each hand record the connection in turn. We are trying to give colour to our feeling connection rather than accurately recording what we see.

Do two more paintings with your eyes closed, one with each hand. Tune into the connection you are experiencing. Let the paint colour choose you and trust your hands. Paint two more images with both hands together, first with your eyes open and then with your eyes closed.

Finish with one free play painting using all the combinations of eyes and hands experienced thus far. When you feel done write down a few words about this experience beside the images themselves.

### Step 3: Dialogue

Now that you have developed a measure of intimacy with this being you can provide an opportunity to let him/her speak. Here we are opening to alternative ways to know while acknowledging that it is presumptuous to think we can ever speak for another. We are practicing intuitive deep listening. Here are some questions we might ask this being. What nourishes you? What do you nourish? Describe any challenges or threats you may be experiencing at this time on the planet. What do you want me to know about how you are affected by the human world? Since so many threats are caused by humans what wisdom can you offer to help us make necessary changes? Is there anything else you want me to know? Record these answers in the remaining section on your page.

Now look at all the images you have created throughout both the inside-out and outside-in processes. What colours and forms to do see? Do you have any strong likes or dislikes?

Are there any overall themes or patterns that draw your attention? What is the relationship between the being you created with and your personal state? What would strengthen or dampen their presence in your life? What in you needs care and nurturing? Does this being have anything to share about the best way to go about this? What help does this being need

from you? Have fun with this. Maybe poetry will emerge or you will feel compelled to create something in clay or with dirt. Follow where you are led. End the session by showing your gratitude for the time spent creating together.

After more than a decade of exploring the practice of Creative Nature Connection, I've concluded that everyone can be touched deeply by this process. When we create directly with animate Earth we feel more alive and appreciate the expressive arts as a powerful bridge between nature and ourselves that opens our hearts and awakens us to the creative language of life. The practice of Creative Nature Connection is one simple rich way to start. The transformation of the human-nature relationship is in our creative hands.

**Lisa Lipsett** is an artist, author and teacher whose work focuses on the transformation of human-nature relationships through the arts. Her book *Beauty Muse: Painting in Communion with Nature* and her blog *The Drive to Create* include numerous activities. She lives with her family on Salt Spring Island, British Columbia. Learn more at [www.creativebynature.org](http://www.creativebynature.org).

### Resources

Lipsett, L. *Beauty Muse: Painting in Communion with Nature*. Salt Spring Island, BC: Creative by Nature Books, 2009.

Lipsett, L. *This Little Bird: An Artful Nature Encounter*. Video, 28 minutes, 2010 <[www.creativenatureconnection.com](http://www.creativenatureconnection.com)>

Lipsett, L. *Making a Creative by Nature folded book*. Video, 2010 <[www.creativenatureconnection.com](http://www.creativenatureconnection.com)>

Nachmanovich, S. *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art*. Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, 1990.

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