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Learning from the Fields: Reflection on Experience in the Outdoors as Professional Development

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Abstract

This paper is composed of a series of linked narratives that examine and reflect on the experiences and findings obtained during the initial period of my research, which was a self-study. I began this project to learn whether attending to the natural world would deepen my ecological awareness and how this shifted understanding might inform who I was as an educator and researcher. Beginning with experiences that occurred during the research period (the latter half of 2008 to the first few months of 2009) these stories move backward and forward in time to illustrate the recollections and connections these explorations instigated and how they influenced my perceptions of the world around me.

The findings of this study are relevant to the field of social work because they imply that human growth and well-being are related to understanding ourselves as connected with and significant to our bioregional homes. This study also demonstrates that critical experiential learning is key to professional development.

Background and Theoretical Framework

If thinking and writing about experiences in the out-of-doors/nature enhance ecological awareness, will this movement of understanding inform professional identity? This was a key question that arose for me after completing a qualitative, arts-based study on facilitating awareness about the social construction of knowledge (Lichtblau, 2007). From this research I found that more and more we, in the Western world, and specifically in North America, are part of fragmented and rushed societies shaped by utilitarian, hierarchical, and materialist worldviews. As Coates (2003) cautions, "Allegiance to the market and consumerism is so complete that institutions through which we can subordinate market to social goals do not exist" (p.5). Yukka Takahasi (2004) lists the following qualities as symptomatic of post-industrialized cultures acting from an "instrumental consciousness" (P. 172):

1. Belief in limitless material growth;
2. Success and happiness seen as the acquisition of material wealth and achievement of “higher” social status;
3. Human beings primarily seen as economic beings whose purpose is to produce and consume;
4. Society viewed as a competitive market place;
5. Mechanistic, atomistic view of the universe that gives rise to fragmented thinking;
6. Divisions between people, family, professions, nations, races, genders, and religions seen as overriding [in importance] our common humanity;
7. Nature seen as having only instrumental value; a resource to be exploited;
8. Patriarchal views and principles;
9. Dualistic view of mind/body, mind/spirit, reason/emotion, reason/intuition, in which mind and reason are valued over [body, emotion, intuition].

These nihilistic and exploitive principles appear to infuse most aspects of North American existence. To instigate wholeness and health we need to reclaim the spaces, attributes, and capacities that have been denigrated, cut from, or repressed in our lives. To achieve this we need to seek contexts and practices that ask us to examine holistically what we identify with, what we know, how we have come to this knowledge, and how we can expand our awareness. The Catch 22 is that the fast-pace and responsibilities of daily life allow little room for critical thinking on our way of life let alone the structuring principles that drive it.

These findings and reflections spurred me to inquire into ways to integrate reflective practices into programs or activities related to human development so that critical analysis could contribute to these processes and at the same time be acknowledged as a means of enhancing growth. Building on my previous inquiry, I decided to consider how place informs the construction of knowledge and identity. My current study, *Learning from the Fields*, examines how reflection on experiences in the outdoors may shift our relationships with the landscapes in which we dwell and how this altered sense of place may inform professional identity. Since to become more sensitized to other forms of existence we need to learn to be profoundly attentive to non human life around us and to pay attention to moment to moment experience (Abram, 1996), I situated my study in the outdoors to connect with processes, beings, and events that have not been completely subsumed by human culture and to be removed from quotidian distractions and habits, to some degree.

In this study the outdoors/nature is defined as a local place such as a back garden, park, neighbourhood street, lakeshore, river way, or skating rink where one can be exposed to the open air, flora, fauna, and the elements. It does not imply an iconic, idyllic, or mythic wilderness or paradise. And I chose to look at the professional development of educators (this investigation also speaks to the development of those in fields related to health, counseling, and the social services) because I believe that educators and counselors can become agents of change by coming to perceive themselves as reflexive inquirers.

This paper is composed of a series of brief linked stories that examine and reflect on the experiences and findings obtained during the initial phase of research described above. This was a self-study that inquired into my engagement with the outdoors in western Canada during the

latter half of 2008 and the first few months of 2009. Starting with experiences that occurred during the research period, the stories move backwards and forwards in time to illustrate resonances, my shifting understanding of the world around me, and the questions that arose from this process.

My research is based on the theoretical stance that human existence is complex, layered, multi-dimensional, dynamic, and informed by contexts and relationships. I view knowledge as an ongoing dialectical endeavor that is subjective. We learn from contextualized experiences and our ways of knowing are multi-modal (Dewey, 1938; Gadamer, 2003). Seminal to this knowledge framework is the view that narratives are the means by which we humans process, recollect, communicate, and give meaning to lived experience (Bruner, 1990; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, 1999; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

I chose Narrative Inquiry as my methodology and form of representation because it is highly compatible with my theoretical framework. This means of studying human existence captures the interweaving relationships, times, places, and perspectives that shape life. Narrative inquiry is rooted in the understanding that we learn from experience. This learning is multimodal and situational. We create meaning by interpreting what we encounter. This meaning-making takes the form of narrative maps that are temporal and located in a specific time and place. Interpretations are a fusion of all that a person brings to a situation, the perspective from which she looks at it, and what the experience contained. Critical inquiry into the stories we tell about experiences may allow us to see further details, hear others' voices, and to perceive situations from various points of view. Shifts in interpretation move understanding and enhance awareness.

Purpose and Design

The question that guides this study is: If reflection on experiences in the out-of-doors/nature enhances a person's ecological awareness does this changed understanding inform her professional identity?

I began this study by creating narrative and illustrative maps of my personal and professional history in relationship to nature. Guiding questions for this activity included:

- Why did I enter my profession?
- How would I describe myself in terms of my profession?
- Who or what influenced my career?
- What have been high points of my career? What have been low points?

Afterward, I kept a journal about my photographic explorations of the outdoors. As I wrote my accounts I purposely included physical, emotional, instinctive, intuitive, and sensory aspects of experiences to obtain information about what occurred for me on these existential levels and what I learned through these modalities.

The questions that guided my journal writing were:

- Describe what you did during this session of your outdoor activity.

- What responses or resonances occur for you as you review your recollection of the activity?
- Can you make any associations between your experience in the outdoors today and your professional field?

My journal entries were informed by readings in educational theory, curriculum, teaching practices, ecology, and sustainability.

The data I used for this research included my life history maps, my journal entries and responses to these, notes from my review of literature, and the photographs I took during this study. The life history maps provided information about my relationship with the out-of-doors, my sense of place, and my perspectives on ecology and holism, at the beginning of the study. These brief life histories also sketched a portrait of who I am as an educator. I used these maps to document the understanding with which I began this inquiry. During my analysis of data I looked for examples of writing that demonstrated a heightened or shifted understanding of existential systems and/or processes. I also looked for evidence of links between these kinds of changes in awareness and stories I told about who I was as a teacher and learner. I wrote a reflective narrative account of my research journey. I shared sections of my initial drafts with colleagues and considered their questions and responses when I revised my accounts. Subsequently, I wrote an expanded narrative account.

Stories from the Fields

Let us bless the source of life,
source of the fullness of our knowing,

May we learn with humility and pleasure,
may we teach what we know with love,

And may we honour wisdom
in all its embodiments.

(Marcia Falk, 1996, p. 168.).

Sanctifying Place

I had never imagined that I would stay at Catholic monastery, situated in the middle of prairie farmland. This rural community had not been on my list of places to visit. I had come here because a friend talked it up: “A lovely old monastery with secret passages and courtyards”, she claimed. An evocative depiction, but not what I encountered. Built around the middle of the last century, the main buildings of the community were sturdy, plain, and functional, though also pleasantly comfortable. This aesthetic orientation reminded me of my great aunt Rose’s kitchen, a welcoming and soothing place from its spotless linoleum floor to its smooth plaster ceiling.

I recall visiting Aunt Rose when my sister and I were still in elementary school. Invited to lunch, unaccompanied by our parents, Gabi and I sat at the square Formica table tantalized by

the delicious smells that emanated from the pots and pans on the outmoded gas stove. While filling our plates with fat, juicy beef burgers and seeking out more delicacies from her squat Frigidaire, Aunt Rose told us stories about life in her downtown neighbourhood. Besides the satisfying food and tales, Aunt Rose had a collection of souvenirs and knick-knacks that she let us hold as she described their origins.

Rose's place wasn't beautiful; but it was. The abbey wasn't like my great aunt's kitchen; but it was, with the exception of the icons. And, with the exception of the sanctuary, situated a few meters further down the foyer from the heavy front doors of the principle building. Neither quaint nor homespun, it expressed another quality of the community. Made mostly from light and air, the large peaceful hall was infused with the warmth that showered down from the modern stained glass windows. Yet despite the splendid chapel, my initial impression of the abbey was that it was just another nice Canadian place. However, I had come for inspiration and was disappointed.

Resigned to the situation, I decided to make the best of it. I was glad to be in the countryside and to experience a landscape new to me. Besides, the weather was just right. A soft breeze mitigated the August heat and earlier had swept away flocks of wispy clouds, leaving a bare sky. After settling in my room, I went for a walk with my camera.

Beyond the lawns adjacent to the abbey's brick buildings, I found a dirt road that led to a marshy area teeming with reeds, bull rushes, and animal life that I could hear but not see. Along the way, I had passed a wood of scrawny conifers. I continued my walk until the path bumped up against a paved crossroad. Just on the other side, the vista spread open to acres and acres of faded green and bleached gold grasses. Here and there, the feathery pattern of the crops yielded to large rectangles of furrowed brown earth. By the sides of the road, multitudes of wildflowers painted a colour-spattered contrast to the rows of grain. Above, the sky sprawled over the textured landscape, only touching the land below somewhere in the far distance.

The magnificent sight so astonished me that something within me shifted. Breathing in the smell of the sun and listening to the wheat wave in the breeze, I felt simultaneously grateful and a great fool. Once again I had made assumptions and had passed judgment before I had acclimatized to a place and was ready to see it. I turned onto the road and walked slowly toward the sun. I wanted to see, hear, and feel the world around me, to be a part of it, not only to theorize about it. When I was a girl that way of being seemed to occur spontaneously. At the time, there were fewer veils between the elements of life and me. The world was fascinating and contained many places to explore and much to discover. Setting out on local adventures was integral to the pleasure of existence. As I walked along the rural Saskatchewan highway, far from my home, recollections from my childhood flickered before my mind's eye.

As I review this story about my first day at the abbey, I wonder to what extent I am removed from the mundane aspects of daily life. By this I mean what do I gloss over, do perfunctorily, or not attune to fully. I ask myself how much have I succumbed to a fractured way of being that seems what our current culture values. Sometimes called "multi-tasking" and seen as efficient and as a sign of being able to manage several activities simultaneously, this life style seems to cultivate disinterest in focusing on any one thing for more than a few minutes and on

praising quick results, no matter how shoddy or uncaring the process to achieve them was. This way of being does not stem from the same school of thought as Catharine Bateson's (1994) discussion of peripheral vision. What she describes is perception that is receptive and alert to the various entities and relationships on a landscape. She contrasts this way of seeing with the laser beam view that only looks down the narrow path to results and getting the prize. Multi-tasking belongs to the getting results family of thought, except here the attempt is to get several rewards at once.

I see examples of this when I buy lunch during the workweek. To begin with, it is rare to find a place to purchase a simple meal that is not a "fast food" franchise. This means that the food is either pre-prepared or assembled from pre-packaged ingredients. Meals, therefore, are not fresh or composed of locally grown produce. Usually ingredients are laced with preservatives and chemically concocted flavours. Often lunch or dinner is made in assembly line fashion. As I follow a long queue of people along a counter, a server fires a few questions at me, then scoops a prescribed amount of egg salad, tuna salad, cheese, or other menu item on a waiting bun, throws a few pieces of vegetables, which having been lying in their containers for some hours, on top of the ration of protein, spritzes a condiment onto everything, and then slaps the other side of the bun onto the whole deal. The sandwich is wrapped in less than thirty seconds flat, so that in almost no time I can pay and go. Rush-gobble-rush. This aesthetic says a great deal about our relationships with food, bodies, communication, and culture. This kind of eating is rarely fully satisfying since it lacks substance in almost every way. We are always left wanting more.

I encounter evidence of this kind of reification of efficiency when I shop for clothing, household goods, and other necessities. Customer service, too, seems to have become pre-packaged. Sales people offer hollow greetings or responses that they have been trained to repeat, but they often have little knowledge about the items they are retailing or even where articles are located in their premises.

Many times in schools, I see parents hurriedly dropping off their children while juggling a cup of coffee and a cell phone conversation. I see children more interested in getting answers than in exploring the topics related to the questions since schools, too, are places where we are expected to consume and produce according to institutional recipes. Rather than following their curiosity or inquiring into a topic of interest, students mostly are asked to ingest received knowledge and then produce the 'correct' information.

In North American societies the pattern is to dwell not within our actions or relationships but on their surfaces. At the same time, we live in an age of the superlative. Being ordinary is not good enough. Everything has to be awesome or stellar. We chase perfection in myriad ways – we must have the flattest stomach, be headache free, odour free, have the cleanest bathrooms and kitchens, be the most popular, have the latest digital devices, wear the most fashionable clothes, possess state of the art televisions, achieve the youngest looking skin, the whitest teeth... Yet, the definition of 'perfect' is slippery as is knowing who decides what it means and how it looks. When inflated and shaped by marketers' language loses meaning. But in an era of inattention and pervasive background noise it may not matter. We chat, twitter, peep, send text messages, heavily composed of exclamation points and emoticons, but have lost the art of conversation.

I think about my initial reaction to the retreat centre in the prairies and wonder about my disappointment. Was it created by my expectations of how the place would and should be? Did I, therefore, not see what was before me? What kinds of assumptions about quality, beauty, and worthwhile knowledge had I brought to the situation? This approach to an unknown location is similar to beginning a study from hypothetical knowledge and then asking how the actual world fits into this framework. It is generalizing from abstract ideas as opposed to examining and discovering the particulars. Coates (2003) writes that we need strong antidotes to these reductive ways of knowing and challenges us to attend to the workings of nature “to discover how we can achieve fulfillment in the context of a healthy and thriving earth” (p.76).

This course of thought forces me to inquire into the expectations and assumptions I bring to teaching. I understand myself as a professional practitioner who is interested in her students, wants to learn who they are, what appeals to them, and about what they are curious. Yet, I recall the numerous occasions when I have employed one-size-fits-all lessons or methods of assessment. I think about situations when I have relinquished learning from students’ responses or actions because I felt I had to adhere to a timetable or a standardized curriculum.

John Dewey (1938) stated that an experience is educative if it is noted, informed, and critically reflected upon. This view implies that the first step to learning is to make an experience conscious, by being awake to one’s environment and interacting with each person or phenomenon in a particular rather than a general manner. Andrea Nightingale (2009) writes that ecological knowledge develops from reflection on how we dwell in the world, our home. She, like Dewey, underscores the importance of enhancing awareness through close and informed examination of experience. Understanding that we cannot know or encounter the entire natural world, she invites reflection on the value of becoming well acquainted with the spaces we usually inhabit, including places such as gardens, parks, ditches, local beaches, city sidewalks, or creeks. One of the issues she explores is whether and how we separate ourselves from the out of doors. For instance, she asks that we consider simple behaviors such as how we respond to rain, overcast skies, or icy cold temperatures and what these actions show about our relationship with natural systems. She suggests that we think about how often we avoid being outside by driving, going to climate-controlled venues, such as shopping malls, or by doing sports and other leisure time activities indoors? What do these patterns tell about how we handle circumstances that are not convenient, nice, or easy?

Nightingale’s work provokes fundamental questions about the consequences of our way of life choices. How does what I buy, where I shop, how I travel, or how much fuel and water I consume contribute to climate change? Or, taking another tack, what do I know about the plants that grow in my neighborhood or the quality of air in my city? How connected with and informed about my community am I? This line of thinking returns me to Dewey’s second criterion for educative experience, since I begin to perceive the value of considering what I bring to my outdoor experiences and how well-informed I am about how the natural world functions. For instance, I enjoy working in my small urban garden, but I probably could not recognize most plants by their leaves nor name all the varieties of trees that grow in my region. If I do not know the names of the living things around me or how they function, am I taking them seriously? Can I say that I care about them? Nightingale argues that whole-bodied relationship with and investigation of the places around us stimulates understanding that we are part of these realms.

As we discover what local varieties of insects, or animals, or plants have to offer as well as how they may harm, we learn how systems in nature work together to sustain life on our planet. We begin to see the impact we have on the land, air, water, and wildlife in our vicinity, and perhaps act on that knowledge. Nightingale suggests that by becoming more intimate with the places we inhabit we may be spurred to care for them. Thomas Berry (1999) articulates the need for intimacy with place even more emphatically:

The human venture depends absolutely on this quality of awe and reverence and joy in the Earth and all that lives and grows upon the Earth. As soon as we isolate ourselves from these currents of life and from the profound mood that they engender within us, then our basic life satisfactions are diminished (p.166).

But perhaps change requires more than knowledge and intimacy. Nel Noddings (1984) writes that the act of caring is rooted in receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness. This implies that how we act toward who and what is in our worlds not only influences them but also shapes who we become. If we conduct ourselves in an open, responsive, and connective manner then we are these things. Enacting these qualities informs how we interpret our experiences and ourselves within those experiences. It may influence our humanity. Additionally, attending, communing with, striving to bring into focus the details of our lives means developing a relationship with our bodies and senses and possibly feeling more at home in our skins. The more alive and responsive are our bodies, the more refined is our ability to perceive what is part of our existence. An action reverberates out and affects more than we may realize. Our choices shape our internal and external worlds. We cannot forget that a web of relationships fosters justice, self-actualization, and compassion. Personal sovereignty and respect for individuals are formed within groups and communities. Respect and justice for individuals and communities and respect and justice for nature are inseparable (Zapf, 2009).

Like Dewey and Nightingale, Noddings addresses the quality of experience. She says that when we are responsive to those with whom we are in relationship, we begin to see them as individuals not as objects or examples of a type or category. Furthermore, she says that when we can empathize with other lives, we become more caring and want others to flourish. By the same token, when we come to value the natural world, even the annoying aspects of it, our priorities and aims may shift.

Abram (1996) exhorts us to return to sensory/sensuous knowing so that we may be more alert and connected to the lives around us. Drawing on his explorations in Bali, he illustrates the expanded states of consciousness that can be achieved through multi-modal attentiveness. In contrast, writes Abram, we Westerners tend toward an intellectualized approach to relating to the world. This way of being separates us from other facets of our humanity and from identification with natural processes.

Reflection on life encounters and their significance is Dewey's third criterion for educative experience. This practice suggests that education is a life-long dialectical process that not only instigates development but also insists on being in relationship to life in the process of living it. Inherent to this approach is the understanding that learning and life are dynamic.

Considering these few points, I wonder about the many possible implications that attending to and cherishing of the mundane may have for me personally, as well as for my communities. I am beginning to perceive the depth and breadth of the term “attending”.

The Power of Being Here Now

To celebrate life is to acknowledge the ongoing dying, and ultimately to embrace death. For although all life travels toward its death, death is not a destination: it too is a journey to beginnings: all death leads to life again. From peelings to mulch to new potatoes, the world is ever renewing, ever renewed (Marcia Falk, 1996, p. 193).

Some of my most joyful memories relate to the years my family lived in a small bungalow on a quiet, dead-end street in a newly developed suburb of Toronto. We moved into the neighbourhood when I was six years old and moved from it when I was about eleven. The seasons we dwelled there formed me in numerous ways.

I was part of the generation now famously known as the Baby Boomers. The eldest daughter of Eastern European immigrants, I lived in and was learned about two cultures. My parents spoke an imperfect and accented English. I was a dark haired and dark eyed girl, who took “extra” time off from school to celebrate religious holidays unfamiliar to my classmates. My friends’ white bread, roast beef in gravy, meat pies, chocolate Easter eggs, and plum pudding were new treats for me. I found their accounts of large family gatherings and generations of ancestors rooted in one region novel and eye opening. At the time, I perceived the diverse aspects of home, school, and social life merely as the ingredients that constructed my world. Any tensions or confusion that were part of the landscape could not curb the joy of exposure to a cornucopia of books and materials to explore at school or of spending long hours at play with friends on the school grounds, or at our homes, or on the street.

Those were the days before children were bussed to schools outside their communities and when there was much less concern about youngsters walking alone to a friend’s house, or going to a local park with a few chums but with no adult supervision. We did inform our parents of our whereabouts and when we would return. Our parents equipped us with information about how to safely cross streets and how to respond to strangers. But, it was an era of greater trust, less fear, and more neighbourliness. My parents knew where my friends lived and had met their parents. The inhabitants of our tiny street regularly encountered one another, exchanged greetings and bits of news.

The road we lived on bordered a green space, which separated the homes in the district from the highway that ran through this part of the city. In today’s terms, the suburb was not far from the city centre, yet it was only a generation from being farmland. Roads were wide and lots were spacious, even though the houses on them were tiny. We children played outdoors as often and as long as we could. In the spring and summer we played baseball on the street and went swimming in a pool at the local park. I remember hunting for fossils in our gravel driveway and catching a preying mantis, which I kept in a jar with a lid punched full of holes. Michael, who lived across the street from me, was my fellow adventurer and co-conspirator.

Within the few blocks that composed our world, Michael and I found inexhaustible sources of fascination and discovery. We observed the worms that suddenly appeared in puddles after a rainfall and the small furry green caterpillars that, in early summer, inched their way across leaves. One season we grew a watermelon from seeds. We loved to climb and swing from the apple tree in Michael's front yard. Another time we found a baby robin that had fallen from its nest. We tried to keep it alive by providing a safe place to rest and worms to eat, but the weak creature did not last long.

Many of the families in our neighbourhood kept pets. These companions ranged from dogs and cats to guinea pigs and rabbits. At my home, we, at various times, lived with a budgie, dogs, and gold fish.

One exciting feature of living on Orchard Street was that just on the other side of an easy-to-get-through fence was grassy land abundant with wildlife. The field led to a creek, hills, and marshes. When we entered this space we became great explorers. We never tired of watching the minnows dart in the shallow rivulet. We were in awe whenever a Monarch butterfly waved by. During our travels we gathered sticks, stones, and grasses to examine or play with. One year we discovered a badger hole. Routinely, we returned to the spot where the animal lived to attempt to view its comings and goings, but it was too clever for us.

These forays into unknown, slightly dangerous territory made us feel brave and accomplished. They also provided a rich vein from which to draw stories that often were larded with tall tales and fantasy. More than that, these spaces whether just outside our front doors or a little further away, were part of our home. They were places that we were intimate with and felt connected to and loved even though they might cause us trouble, pain, or discomfort. In the outdoors we were free to play, to imagine, and to investigate.

During that first walk on the land near the abbey, I thought further about the phrase, "attending to nature". I still wanted and needed to refine my perception of what those words represented for me. I realized that to come to a clearer understanding I first would have to practice what I perceived attentiveness was to create something I could learn from. Perceiving that time was seminal to attentiveness, I decided that the first change I would attempt would be to stop rushing. I would try to slow down so that my muscles and senses could take in the environment more fully. Afterward, I would write about what I found when relating to the world this way.

The next morning, after breakfast, I chose to roam in a direction opposite from the previous day's exploration. I heard birds chirping nearby and decided to find their location. Minutes later, I came to a cluster of evergreen trees in which chickadees were chattering as they hopped along branches or flew to adjacent pines. The bark of these trees was knobby and much of the white grey wood was peeling and looked patchy. Mosquitoes also populated this stand. Despite my intention to give time and care to my surroundings, I quickly moved from the annoying buzz of these little menaces to look at the gardens further ahead. Yet, this short-lived try at attentiveness did have an effect. I realized that taking time to perceive didn't necessarily

mean great gains in knowledge but that it did have a calming influence. Why was that, I wondered? Was this significant in any way? A few days later I had the opportunity to consider this question further.

In a relatively short time, I had come to deeply appreciate the abbey and the community of monks, staff, and guests who resided there. The Fathers' actions exhibited a commitment to service and respect for all around them. Each monk I met offered cheerful friendliness and pleasant banter. However, if I had a question or concern it was received seriously. I also noted how well maintained, clean, and orderly all things on the immense property were even if quite old. I recall seeing a beautiful, fully functioning, red truck that looked as though it belonged in a film from the fifties. Behind the wheel, was one of the monks, outfitted in faded denim overalls. The portly, white-haired gentleman was driving around the property to look for and remove fallen branches and other debris from the farm's pathways. Meals in the communal dining hall consisted of simple vegetarian dishes often made from produce grown in the Abbey's organic gardens. Though there was no lack of lively chatter, these mealtimes were renewing and engendered a sense of peace.

Besides being dedicated to prayer and learning, the monks were engaged in running a farm. On it were gardens, wood lots, chickens, goats, cows, and horses. There also was an apiary. One afternoon I learned about the beehives from Father Dominic, the administrator of the Abbey, when I found him rushing to close his office in order to spend time with the bees. I'd never seen bee hives and was curious about how it would feel to be in close proximity to colonies of *apidae*. Graciously, Father Dominic consented to my accompanying him on his rounds.

I met him near the flower gardens. He was driving a miniature tractor to which was attached a small wagon. I hopped onto the wagon and we bounced our way along the creviced road. On the way, the Father mentioned that he had packed an "Epipen" just in case I turned out to be allergic to bee stings. This comment didn't ease my anxiety, but I did find it ironic and amusing. The Father's precaution reminded me that nature is not always idyllic or safe. We do not live in Walt Disney worlds. Rather, life offers a vast and rich trove of experiences to learn from. In short time we came to a place sheltered by a hedge. Just inside this leafy wall were about half a dozen hives around which there was a great deal of activity. I was instructed to stand several feet from the hives since my "foreign" scent might frighten the insects and spur an attack. I did as I was told. Wearing little protective gear, Father Dominic checked the honeycombs at each hive. I watched and tried to curb my fear by taking long breaths and staying focused on the actions in front of me.

Earlier the Father had told me that he found this work relaxing and a pleasant contrast to his other duties. He was comfortable among these creatures and it seemed that they trusted him. He gathered a few combs and placed them on the wagon. We climbed back onto the vehicle and bumped our way to the shack where the honey was extracted from the combs.

Inside the bee house it was hot and in many spots the floor was sticky. Several bees had become trapped in the tiny room and were buzzing at the window and in the corners of the structure. On the windowsill and on the floor there were a few withered bodies of dead bees. Remembering what the Father had said about bees sensing fear, I decided to pay attention to the

details of my surroundings and to what was involved in getting honey from the combs and into containers. I let myself enjoy the heat, the smell of the place, and the drone of the bees. I noted the old pails and the wood furnishings. Now and then I asked Father Dominic questions about beekeeping and how he had come to this avocation, but mostly I was still. Soon I found I felt calm and surprisingly joyful. I also felt very young. Everything around me seemed special and fascinating. I felt connected to the room, to the insects, to the Father, and to the golden liquid honey. None of this made sense but it felt harmonious.

Father Dominic filled several containers with honey and gave me one to take home. I felt honoured and slightly embarrassed, but he insisted. We rode back to the residence mostly in silence. Before we parted, I tried to express my thanks.

That evening, I journaled about the day's experiences. I reflected further on the phrase "attending to nature". Could these words relate to the peace of mind that comes with being present to the here and now, being content to live within a current context? These questions excited me. I looked forward to the adventures of the following day.

Before sunset on the second day of my stay at the monastery, I went on a stroll toward what looked like a barn and stables. The smell of dung told me that there were animals close by. Soon I discovered a farm nestled on rolling land. On it was a large hen house and several other structures. Beyond the fences was a small herd of cows and there were goats in a nearby pen. At one point in the road, I saw a man wiping down the walls of the white washed farmhouse. We exchanged greetings and he invited me to have a closer look at the goats and to meet his dogs. During our chat he informed me that a group dedicated to sustainable living managed the farm.

At the front of the house, two dogs lay on the grass. Initially, they barked warnings at me; or at least one of the dogs did. The other tried but could not form much sound. As well, this dog's left hind leg was amputated. The poor fellow had cancer, his owner told me.

I learned that the snowy dairy goats were from Switzerland. As the sun set, the mother and her three kids playfully chased one another up and down a wood bridge made especially for them. The cows were a prized Heritage breed from Scotland. Unlike the goats, they were quietly resting in the meadow.

The man I spoke with that evening clearly was proud of the animals in his charge and of the work carried out on the farm. From his tone and his descriptions I could tell that organic farming and sustainable living were important to him and that he felt that he and the others who laboured on the farm were making a contribution to agriculture. What for others might seem like menial tasks, were for him interesting, satisfying, and meaningful. This man was living with the natural world around him and seemed to cherish his environment. He communicated a strong sense of place and of being part of it. I found his range of knowledge and skills enviable.

That night, as I wrote about my tour of the farm, recollections of my elementary school and especially of my fifth grade teacher came to mind. Mrs. Henley my class teacher and the school librarian loved books and reading. I remember once she suggested that it was worth reading everything in our environment from soap containers to cereal boxes to newspapers

because in this way we could learn about the things around us while practicing our reading skills. Reading was one of my favorite activities, but Mrs. Henley's warmth, encouragement, and example inspired me to explore genres of literature I usually ignored. Her passion for fostering literacy was not confined to teaching and learning to read. She introduced us to folk songs and Canadian legends, and throughout the school year linked us to the changing seasons through story writing and art making. Often she brought flowers, or other gifts from her garden to celebrate the time of year and to brighten our classroom.

One autumn day Mrs. Henley took us for a walk in the neighbourhood to look at trees and gather leaves so that we could become acquainted with some of the vegetation native to our part of the province. She knew the community well because she lived in it. I remember ambling with my classmates elated about being out of doors while also fascinated by the observations Mrs. Henley guided us to make. She had brought us to wooded parkland and urged us to touch the barks of trees, collect specimens from among the fallen leaves, and to notice the shape and colour of different types of trees and of their leaves as she told us their names and provided a brief description of their life cycles. During our walk we also stopped to examine the mushrooms, insects, acorns, and maple keys on the floor of the forest.

Besides Mrs. Henley no other adult accompanied our class on this field trip, since this was not required at the time. Yet, I have no recollection of any serious misbehavior. This school memory stands out for me because it was a thoroughly enjoyable and enduring learning experience. I still remember the trees that we noted on that day – maple, oak, elm, poplar, birch, and willow – with gladness and poignancy, since some of these species have disappeared from the region.

After our return to school, we pressed the leaves we had gathered in wax. On a later occasion we created booklets that included leaf samples, the names of the trees they had come from, and a brief description of the tree.

I liked and admired Mrs. Henley and wanted to be like her. She formed a nurturing yet stimulating environment in which I eagerly participated. In retrospect, I understand that she deeply cared about her students. She was interested in cultivating our development on many levels and sought ways to engage our entire beings.

Sustainability is a Matrix

Maxine Greene (1995) wrote that teachers must guide students to perceive their worlds in a concrete and nuanced fashion so that they may establish a sense of full membership in their localities. Using students' familiarity with the systems, people, and landscapes of their communities, teachers may motivate them to raise questions about the forms, processes, and contents of their lives. This critical participation in the world may allow them to see that they possess the agency and ability to effect a difference in their society. They may realize that their actions have consequences in the world and that the realities they help to shape will in some way influence their lives. When young people can feel empowered, confident, safe, and secure, they may experience their environment with respect and appreciation.

Coates (2003) writes that those in the helping professions must strive to be at the forefront of developing ecological consciousness. Since social change begins with the self, social workers, counselors, and educators must cultivate the habit of attending to and learning from local ecosystems before they can guide others to new perceptions. They need to regularly ask: how do I fit into this biosocial community? How can I contribute to and enhance life where I live? How can I facilitate others joining me in these endeavors?

When educators and counselors respect the range of human capacity and allow learners/clients to be imaginative inquirers rather than achievers of prescribed milestones, we may discover shifts in community cultures. Wandering about the Abbey grounds and being able to follow my curiosity, examine places, ask questions, observe people at work was exhilarating and emancipatory. Paradoxically, I felt at peace and energized... perhaps this is not a paradox.

The day before we left the retreat, a friend and I visited the organic gardens to learn what was grown there. We found two varieties of sunflowers, huge bouquets of leafy spinach, large globes of squash and cabbage, a patch of wheat, radishes, and root vegetables. As we admired the bounty, a tall, lean, gray-bearded man sauntered toward us and asked if we wanted to know what the grasses on the plot beside us were. His faded jeans were held up by an old belt that was caught in only a few of the loops on his waistband. His work shirt was thin from many washings and rolled up at the sleeves, and he wore a straw hat. Bony and tanned, his face was attractive.

“Hi, I’m Jim. I’m a seed grower,” he smiled. “These are my gardens. That plant is quinoa and the purple stalks are amaranth, an ancient grain.

I was thrilled to discover what quinoa and amaranth looked like in the field. Seed grower! This man is a known preserver of plant varieties that are dying out due to hybridization and other changes in agricultural practices, or so I learned subsequent to doing some research on seed preservation.

In response to our interest, Jim showed us other examples of his work. In the opposite field there were several types of wheat; one of these was a variety that came from ancient Egypt. As Jim told us about the plants he explained that he and the organizations he works with are striving to maintain biodiversity on our planet to attempt to keep ecosystems in balance. Engaged by his stories and excited by the potential of his endeavors, we asked question after question about farming and seed preservation. Jim was rescued from our enthusiasm when a colleague came around to ask him advice about a chore.

I felt fortunate to have met this man and was inspired by what he had described. Our conversation reminded me that making significant contributions to sustainability was possible. More than that, it moved me to plan ways I might assist with the revitalization of the environment.

Upon reviewing this story, I understood that hope, growth, and change are not easily achieved but must be cultivated. As Dewey’s writing (1938) implies, learners require guides who are informed and thoughtful to provide them with means and opportunities toward greater

consciousness. Hunt (1992) tells us that organizational support is crucial to development. Zapf (2009) states that social work professionals must be informed about local socio-environmental-economic conditions if they want to improve people's lives.

Since there is so much in our culture that deadens energy and inhibits growth, mentors and collaborators are essential to development. An entry in my field notes reminds me that life affirmation is a daily struggle, yet essential to being alive. One winter day I wrote:

It is not this or that or one damned thing after another; rather, existence is dense, chaotic, marbled, scaffold, interconnected, multi-dimensional and much more. My thoughts, words, and actions count. What I imbibe through my mouth, eyes, ears, nose, and skin makes a difference. All these things shape my minutes, hours, and days and form and reform who I am.

In the still dark morning I awake to the news broadcast on the radio by our national communications service. I don't want to get up. I am tired. I crave sunlight. The news is not good. Stock markets continue to tumble. Thousands of people are losing their incomes. Many points on the globe are war inflamed. In our land, too, people are in conflict over territory and power. Amidst comfortable houses and well-stocked supermarkets, hundreds of citizens survive on little food and without shelter. It is going to be another cold day.

I rise to prepare myself for the tasks ahead. After a shower my brain feels in gear again. I pull on layers of clothing, get the coffee machine going, then sort the books and papers I want to take to work with me. As I pack, I think about passages I read last night that resonated with notions I have about learning. I feel exhilarated and affirmed by the possibilities. I feel deflated by thoughts that jeer at there being an opportunity to realize these visions. Up, down, around, and around, I journey through thoughts, images, layers of stories, responses to stories, and perspectives on stories.

I take a few swallows of coffee. I used to like it strong, but things have changed. I still enjoy it piping hot. I put all my paraphernalia into my bags and make sure to bring a bottle of water. The dryness of this landscape affects my ability to breathe. Dressed in full winter gear, I make sure no stove burners are still on – an old habit.

Outside the sharp air pinches me awake. I notice that the sun has climbed well above the horizon. Moving, despite the heavy bags, feels good. I begin to view myself as strong and active. It is still early in the day, one that will include conversations, further reading, and various kinds of news. I am cheered by the knowledge that gradually the hours of sunlight are lengthening and remember that recently we had a warm spell. Nearby chickadees and magpies flutter about their business. All this and more constructs and reconstructs my experience throughout the ever-changing day. A passage from *Original Blessings* (Fox, 2000) affirms my reflections. Love of life comes from receptivity to the profound joys and pleasures integral to daily life on our planet, asserts Matthew Fox. "Yes," my body responds.

Reading these thoughts, I recall circumstances in which a supportive community made the burden of existential challenges lighter. Many years ago I visited a place that had a strong

influence on my life. This place was Findhorn, a spiritual educational centre near the shore of Scotland's North Sea.

I arrived at Findhorn at a transitional, yet exciting point in my life. I was on the first leg of a journey toward learning and work that only a short while before I never thought I could realize. Far from what was familiar to me, I found myself at a location in which the whole being – body, mind, and spirit – was recognized and fostered. From its inception the community had been dedicated to transformative learning through contemplation and intentional action. Since the members of Findhorn based their relationships with people, places, and things on an ethic of care and sanctity, they chose to treat all phenomena as though animated by spirit. All things were appreciated even household appliances, tools, furnishings, and fixtures. Work was viewed not as punishment but as the enactment of interest and love.

Living in this community adjacent to the fishing village that was its namesake, meant that I was immersed in community service and creative learning. My stay at Findhorn provided time for reflection and the opportunity to meet people from various parts of the globe. I especially valued the chance to roam the hills that surrounded the property to enjoy the abundant gardens by the main building, or to walk along country roads, or on the beach as the waves sprayed onto the shore.

The clean air and peaceful ambience produced a powerful sense of well being within me. Living in an intentional community that supported processes leading to growth of awareness and the development of human potential gave me space to consider what I identified with and the directions I wanted to move toward. The caring attitude that prevailed in this place permitted me to feel safe to pursue this personal inquiry and to be receptive to others' ways of being and understanding. I began to perceive that not knowing is emancipatory.

One afternoon, while standing in the garden taking in the green hills and pale gray sky shortly after a brief storm had passed through, I became acutely aware of the fragrant quality of the air, the verdant terrain, and the comforting silence that now and then was broken by a bird's call or by leaves rustling in the wind. As I breathed in the landscape, a message permeated my being, "The time has come. Soon the Great Mother will reappear." Though I still am attempting to decipher the full meaning of these words, at the time they filled me with hope and strength. I feel I experienced a moment of grace that was informed by immersion in a community dedicated to connection with and compassion for all living beings.

If You Sit Long Enough

If you sit long enough in the woods,
nothing happens.

Just the earth's breath rising and falling
up and down tree trunks

which go copper green in the air
as if oxidized.

Just your own breath warming a spot of earth
while your heart beats

and you begin, like all the creatures,
to repeat yourself-

the same thoughts rasping in your head,
over and over,

the same yearnings rising, like the tails
of startled squirrels.

(Marcia Falk, 1996, p. 37)

Conclusions and Implications

The following is an outline of key findings.

- Shift in understanding is a continual process. Learning is cumulative and there is continuity to learning. Each time I examined a narrative recounting of an experiential event further resonances and questions arose for me. I realized that each time I returned to a story I brought a shifted understanding due to previous reflections on it.
- Doing activities in the outdoors informed my emotions, thinking, senses, and muscles. I perceived that my knowledge and learning were enhanced by direct, concrete, multi-modal interaction with an entity. I perceived that being in the outdoors strengthened my sense of well-being. My experiences in the outdoors enlivened my body, mind, and spirit. Witnessing and reflecting on the diversity, messiness, beauty, grandeur, unpredictability, dangers, cycles, and systems of nature moved me to realize that all living things, including me, are an influential part of a biological network.
- Well-being is holistic. Mind, body, emotions, senses, and instincts all are important to health and balance. They all relate to one another and inform one another.
- Shifts in understanding are rooted in experience. Interactive, holistic, embodied experience enhances understanding. I could see more concretely that values, customs, and views are formed by time, place, and perceptions. I noted that systems within my being and external to it were connected.
- Place is a significant to the construction of knowledge since it informs the meaning-making process in multiple ways.

Implications of this study are:

- Professionals in education, health, counseling, and social service need to include the outdoors among their sites for professional development.
- Those in the helping fields need to identify as reflexive professional practitioners.
- Reflection on experience in the outdoors need to become integrated into professional development programs for those in the helping professions.

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