

Coryphaeus

pronounced Kor e fee es
(Leader of a school of thought or of a chorus.)

We work so hard under the sun
Believing what our teachers told us:
That all depends on our efforts,
Focus, determination,
Eyes upon the goal,
Never-wandering steps.

But my heart grew weary of single vision and strayed.
I wandered off the appointed path and found
Among meandering, untraveled ways,
Magical places—
Moonlit groves where laughter dances
Among night-blooming trees
And surprising companions slip from the shadows
And show me where to find the fire.

JUNE, 2007

The Journey is Everything

Part III

Sacred By-Ways

By John Shackelton

In Part I of this series, I asked, What is a curriculum *for*? and elaborated on the limitations of curriculum as a map. I further pointed out how critical it is to keep those limitations in mind by being present to the territory of learning in which the children live. You may recall my echoing the oft-repeated warning that the map is not the territory, and there are very good ways to navigate the learning territory that never get on the curriculum “maps.” In this final part of the series, I seek to bring together some of the truths from Part I and from the reflections about the spiritual in Part II as I look at a more pervasive “curriculum” and its maps. My purpose is to offer an alternative and very old Way to learn that connects intimately with the territory and is more respectful to our belonging on the Earth.

We are accustomed to thinking of learning mostly in regards to schooling, but our children (and we) learn from many sources, not the least from the values of our dominant culture as expressed through that culture’s many lines of communication. I will argue that not only our school curricular maps but also our cultural maps fail to engage critical elements of the territory we live in, and that we therefore are “guided” in often misleading ways. Meanwhile, all around us, the natural world offers both mysteries and messages we miss because the facility for receiving them has been “educated” out of us both at school and in the larger culture.

Schooling creates conceptual maps that largely determine what information students are likely to be aware of and what information they are likely to be unaware of. Very important features of the “territory” we live in are routinely left out—to great consequence. Global warming and a pandemic of wars and poverty are persistent declarations that this is so. The consistent patterns of information communicated through the ecosystems we live in have been drowned out by the louder messages of our cultural maps, and we are paying dearly for our failure to recognize that it is our selective attention that is destroying the world.

As an educator in the 21st century, I feel the responsibility to say that education in our society—both in schools and outside of schools—has long been on a self-destructive path. Perhaps it is not too late to find new paths of learning that can sustain all life on Earth. Perhaps there are sacred by-ways that are very accessible and transforming.

The reality-constituting power of the cultural message systems, in effect, shapes the form the individual's intelligence will take.

Learning to be intelligent within the culture's symbolic systems of communication is, in part, what leads to taking so much of the internalized cultural knowledge for granted.

Dr. C.A. Bowers in *Educating for an Ecologically Sustainable Culture*, page 123

All That Glitters . . .

In the midst of global crisis, ecological issues have been co-opted for the marketplace—repackaged in mottos and fads to sell things. Like the liquor commercials that recommend moderation, media acknowledgement of ecological needs is largely p.r.. In terms of substantive content and real effect, America's cultural maps continue to support conspicuous consumption as a laudable and even necessary human value.

Our culture educates young children to “need” things that help destroy the environment while contributing nothing to their growth as developing humans. Petroleum-based manufacture of toys finds an ever-expanding market because our cultural maps teach both children and parents that life is seriously lacking without them. The media trains children whose parents fail to purchase the latest action figure or electronic game to feel deprived, almost abused.

Why does this work? Because the message goes out day after day, week after, week, year after year, in all seasons of the year, that those things will make them happy and that their parents' purchasing those things is evidence of love. These are pervasive elements of the cultural map, the grand curriculum that instructs our young.

These early lessons become fertile ground for more “advanced” learning: feeling that life is about acquisition and status (even when parents *say* it's not while furnishing a child's room with all the latest stuff) means that in a limited-resource society, life at its core has to be about competition. Children readily absorb this huge cultural message.

The graduating “insight,” evidence of “scholarship” in the cultural education curriculum, surfaces as the logical result of the learning process: *The planet is a collection of natural “resources” for human use, for human purposes, to feed the human economy, to enable “progress” defined as ever-more “wealth” and ease.*

Every day, the media indoctrinate our children in this cultural curriculum, and this appears to have a much greater effect on them than any school curriculum, (though most school curriculums support the same values, even if unconsciously).

Our children breathe this pervasive message; they ingest it; they learn its lessons all too well.

Beneath the rhetoric-of-recycle, undermining efforts to create authentic eco-awareness, the deep learning that identifies material success with fulfillment feeds over-consumption and sabotages parental efforts to nurture a different set of values.

Our personal commitment to saner, more humane living does not automatically transfer to our children; it's not in their DNA.

We can (and should) limit their exposure to the vast cultural curriculum while they are young; we should filter out the violent action figures and sexist toys, the movies that emulate one-liner humor as a superior human skill, and products that displace imaginative play. The more effectively we do the filtering the better, yet we still need a way to help our children as they encounter the inevitable experiences they will have with that dominant cultural map. What to do?

Good Places to Learn

An effective help lies close at hand—as near as the natural world in which we live and breathe. A national study of environment-based education called the State Education and Environmental Roundtable resulted in a 2002 report entitled, “Closing the Achievement Gap.” The conclusion of the ten-year project in sixteen states and 150 schools was that environment-based education yields student gains in social studies, language arts, science, and math in terms of improved grade-point averages and standardized test scores as well as increases in critical thinking and problem-solving skills. The educational establishment has conspicuously ignored the report.

Another term for what the study recommends is place-based education. The place of the learning environment takes varied forms, but always natural ones. For example, a middle school in Portland, Oregon used local rivers, mountains, forests and planted native species in a “garden” or natural play area. Ninety-six percent of the students there met or exceeded state standards in math problem-solving compared to only sixty-five percent at other middle schools in the area.

Yet there are better reasons for moving learning outside the classroom container than increased test scores. A 2003 Cornell University study done with children in grades three through five found that life's stressful events do not “. . . cause as much psychological distress in children who live in high-nature conditions compared with children who live in low-nature conditions.”

North Carolina State professor Robin Moore is the director of the National Learning Initiative. He has researched postmodern childhood play and says that the primary experience of Nature is being replaced by “the secondary, vicarious, often distorted, dual sensory (vision and sound only), one-way experience of television and other electronic media.” He objects strongly to this because, he says, “Children live through their senses. Sensory experiences link the child’s exterior world with their interior, hidden, affective world.”

Dr. Moore goes on to say, “Freedom to explore and play with the outdoor environment through the senses in their own space and time is essential for healthy development of an interior life . . . This type of self-activated, autonomous interaction is what we call free play. Individual children test themselves by interacting with their environment, activating their potential and reconstructing human culture. The content of the environment is a critical factor in this process. A rich open environment will continuously present alternative choices for creative engagement. A rigid, bland environment will limit healthy growth and development of the individual or age group.”

Dr. Moore’s thoughts agree with both the Environmental Roundtable and the Cornell University studies. They also resonate with a candid reflection from Howard Gardner as he added naturalist to his list of multiple intelligences. Said Gardner, *While the ability [to recognize and interact with plants, animals, etc.] doubtless evolved to deal with natural kinds of elements, I believe that it has been hijacked to deal with the world of man-made objects.*

What long-term effects this hijacking will have is yet to be seen, but studies of children already suggest where things are tending.

A Swedish study found that children on asphalt playgrounds played in short segments, frequently interrupting themselves. In contrast, children on more natural playgrounds invented whole sagas that they carried on with day after day. This latter kind of play is a way of making meaning, while the other seems only a way to pass time. Other research has shown that playing on man-made structures (slides, swings, etc.) is characterized by establishing social hierarchy based on superior physical competence. Studying the same children after a natural play area was created with grass and shrubs, researchers observed more fantasy play; furthermore, the basis of social hierarchy shifted from physical ability to language skills and creativity. There is certainly room in child growth for both of these, but the question is,

Are we paying attention to what children learn in each environment?

Quality of life isn’t measured only by what we gain but also by what we trade for it.

Richard Louv in *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder*, page 59

*Now that we are beginning to recognize the ecological consequences of cultural patterns based on . . . an expanding set of human wants, the content of the curriculum can no longer be viewed in the relativistic terms of current educational thought. Teachers now face the challenge, **if they are going to be part of the solution** [emphasis mine] rather than part of the problem, of identifying and placing at the center of the curriculum the more ecologically problematic aspects of the dominant culture: the dominant view of technology, success . . . progress, the environment as a natural resource, the science/progress connection, and so forth.*

Dr. C.A. Bowers in *Educating for an Ecologically Sustainable Culture*, page 133

Becoming the Solution

Public schools have ruled out the spiritual domain in the name of separation of church and state. Many private schools include versions of the spiritual in the name of sectarian religion. In both cases, schooling is known for its emphasis on certainties, not its interest in mystery. Curriculum objectives are most often used to move children toward quantifiable learning and away from wonder and empathetic knowing. I suggest that wonder and empathetic knowing are at the heart of an authentically human and healthy path of learning.

Most of us know what wonder is. Even if we've lost most of it, when we see it in the eyes of a child, there is a moment of recognition, a wistful recollection, before we continue on with adult business. Empathetic knowing is related to wonder, for both partake of self-forgetfulness—a deeply spiritual event.

The encounter with mystery requires unself-conscious absorption, being lost in the present connection. At such times, boundaries between *me* and *not-me* blur, and one forgets the separation and knows directly.

This happens in moments of wonder; it is the essence of empathetic knowing. It is natural for children and remains so until adults teach them that it is worth significantly less than learning based on conscious objectives.

Empathetic knowing involves this forgetfulness of the separation between *me* and *not-me* and calls up from the depth of the *me* a source of understanding only such connection can draw on. If we make room for this way of knowing and honor it even while the children engage the formal curriculum objectives, we support their growth in balancing the human ways of knowing. This is the primary path nurturing their inner journey, their spiritual vitality.

It is also an antidote for the debilitating aspects of internalizing too much of the dominant cultural curriculum that has turned us against the natural world. Knowledge of how to live in harmony with our planet and the other beings that share it with us is different from what normally appears in school curriculums. That eco-knowledge can contribute to children's emotional health as well as the planet's health.

Wherever our dominant cultural maps guide us about Nature, they speak irreverently. Their language about ecology and the balances of Nature is exclusively scientific and technical. And this scientific data is not sheltered in wonder or respect for the Mystery; it carries instead the "superior" energy of knowledge and technical know-how. It teaches the language of control while masking the profound limitations of human control.

Journal entry, June 2006, Ireland.

I sit on the modest balcony of a tiny B&B just above the narrow road that follows the rocky coast of this beautiful peninsula. In the early morning, I sit in rapt wonder, absorbing the peace, the amazing tranquility of the place, thanking the gods for such a gift. Here is not data, facts, things to observe from a distance. Here is Presence. Here at the edge of the world, as though fled from human institutions, lies an outpost of sanity where humankind and Earth still embrace.

After breakfast, I return to the balcony. Before long a tourist coach passes, and I see faces looking out at me and at the green mountain behind me. Immediately, I see that full coach as a microcosm of our current culture (or a very large part of it) wherein people en masse are conveyed inside an artificial world designed for their comfort and convenience, insulated from natural reality, from the planet that bore them, from the places that could nurture them. They look out as they pass but don't see, don't taste, don't receive, don't wonder.

Some time later, another coach appears, and I see two children pressing against a window. The coach is moving slowly because sheep block its way. The children wave at me, and I smile and wave back. If the bus would only stop and let them off, the children could run barefooted in the grass, find fairies on the emerald hillside and gods among the cliffs, delight at the sheep blocking the road, wade into the sea, and know the world that mothered us, their true home. They could do those things because they are still able to kiss the wonder.

Instead, the bus honks its horn at the sheep, and the children will likely continue on human conveyances, both physical and metaphorical, until they become like their elders—content to look out the window at the Earth, much like observing life at a zoo, the natural world little different from bits of information collected from a laboratory, a library, or a computer data base.

Coming Home

We have lost what one modern eco-thinker calls “our ancestral reciprocity with the animate Earth.” As the Cornell University data suggest, a major source of modern stress lies in the lack of intimacy between the human community and the natural landscape. Before civilization, human communities came to know themselves primarily as they were reflected back by the animate landscape with which they directly engaged.

We have lost that kind of self knowledge. What reflects back knowledge of ourselves now is the vast, artificial cultural map mirrored through the media. This man-made environment has separated us from the inner world of our souls that Nature easily speaks to. We need to return to the natural world and spend periods of time in silent waiting, watching, listening.

Dr. Moore’s work and extensive research in Europe has shown that connection to the natural world is not only natural but necessary. It’s sad that we needed formal research to show us what we should have known without it, but our health as individuals and our sanity as a species requires our reverence for the Mystery.

Where will our children learn that?

Where *should* they learn it?

If our survival and the survival of our planet depends on our healthy, holistic connection to the Earth, we need a radical shift from education for self advancement to education for service. Can we create a new cultural message—a new global ethic?

Can we move from No Child Left Behind to No Child Held Inside? Can we create a cultural and school curriculum for beings-called-to-serve?

A Necessary Transformation

Education in schools has mirrored the dominant cultural curriculum in its essence as competition. Learning built on competition is not just about the subjects taught and the skills mastered; it is about a basic way of approaching life. It sees life in terms of things to be possessed and territory to be controlled. Both our dominant school curriculums and our cultural ones impart an attitude about relationship that is self-serving, that is much more about one side of a connection than the other. There is little reciprocation, little balance; it’s mostly a matter of gaining advantage.

Can we alter what children learn in school about how to approach life? Can we shift from competition-for-an-edge to collaboration-for-mutual-success? Can we transform our school-taught values from grasping to giving? From getting more stuff to finding that which is worthy to serve?

Imagine a society whose highest value is service, where those most honored are those who contribute most to the blessing of all. What would life be like if literally millions of people were worthy of the Nobel Peace Prize?

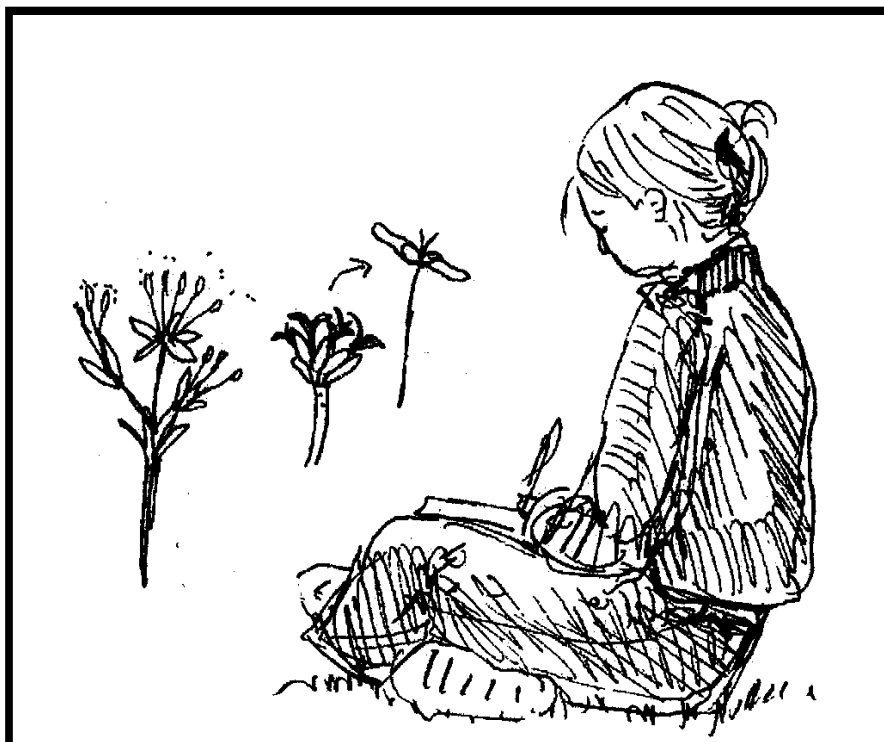
Is that even possible? Is it just Utopian dreaming? It is indeed possible, though it will not make a Utopia. As long as humans are deciding things, the world will go on imperfectly. There will be wars, but perhaps fewer and perhaps long stretches of time between them. There will be inequalities and injustices, but perhaps less egregious and not so wide-spread. There will always be these kinds of things, but we could reach a place where they did not characterize us as a global community, where they were no longer the dominant features of civilization.

What could bring about such a change?

There is an incredibly subtle and powerfully calculating industry of modern dislocation, where that which is deep and lives in the silence within us is completely ignored. The inner world of the soul is suffering a great eviction [at the hands of] the landlord forces of advertising and external social reality. This outer exile impoverishes us.

John O’Donohue in *Anam Cara*, page 142

Our individual journeys make up a collective journey. What we each do may seem inconsequential, but our journeys in the aggregate make up the Great Journey of our species and affect the Greater Journey of our planet.



Learning to Create a New Future

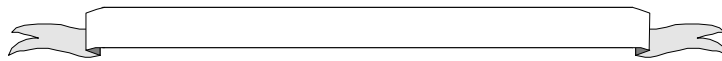
It can begin through only one process—education. We educate our children to make the future, and they've always learned their lessons well and achieved the future we taught them to work for. Today's society is the result of the generation-to-generation curriculums—both from traditional classrooms and from the dominant culture—operating in a continual, self-perpetuating circle of teaching.

Rainbow Mountain has been philosophically on the side of breaking that vicious circle. For thirty years, we've stretched toward the transformation of which I've been speaking in this article. Rainbow has evolved through several periods of struggle to find tools of transformation and articulate principles for respectful teaching. It seems to me that those things are well established.

The calling Rainbow must answer now is both very simple and challengingly complex. It is simple to state: Use all we've learned in our thirty-year history to engage the realities of the dominant culture and help prepare our children to challenge those realities honorably, from a sacred space. Actually doing this will be a great challenge. It will require, on the one hand, a tenacity that could sink to the level of defensive literalism if we are not attentive. On the other hand, it will require a wisdom that understands the difference between essence and form: we will learn deep lessons in holding truths while letting their manifestations evolve. That, as I see it, is the journey to which Rainbow is called.

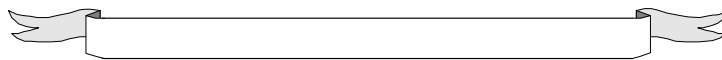
It is a summons to walk a truly spiritual path, a sacred by-way that replicates, in a very small place for a finite time, the evolutionary learning process of the planet. And the Universe sends to the school the people needed for each phase of the journey. For this journey, I recommend the thoughts below from Wangari Maathai, and I offer my own words below as a sacred by-way and an expression of the supreme value and purpose of teaching children.

Journey on, Rainbow Mountain. The blessing I wish for you is that you always search out the sacred by-ways that are respectful of our belonging to the Earth. Every time you do, surprising companions will slip from the shadows and bring you gifts and celebrate with you the wonder of your passage.

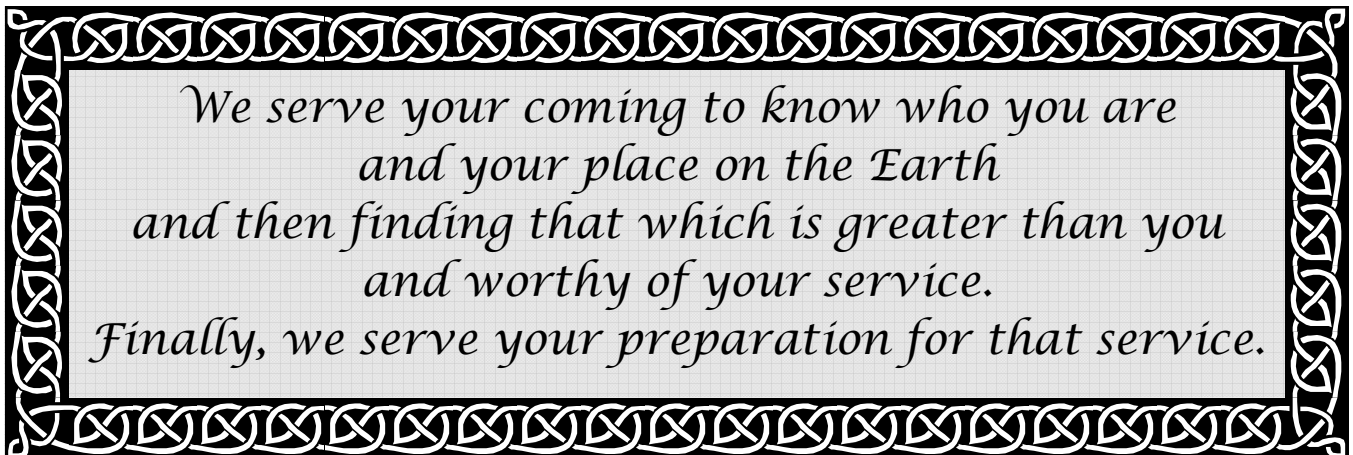


We are called to assist the Earth to heal her wounds, and in the process heal our own, indeed to embrace the whole creation in all its diversity, beauty, and wonder. This will happen if we see the need to revive our sense of belonging to a larger family of life, with which we have shared our evolutionary process.

Wangari Maathai, 2004 winner of the Nobel Peace Prize.



To our children:



*We serve your coming to know who you are
and your place on the Earth
and then finding that which is greater than you
and worthy of your service.
Finally, we serve your preparation for that service.*