

The Truth About Stories:
An Autoethnography Towards Earth Consciousness

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Education
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Master of Education
University of Prince Edward Island

We accept this thesis as conforming
To the required standards

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September 14, 2010

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Abstract

The present ecological crisis reflects a crisis in human consciousness, especially in the western world, where our relationship with the earth and cosmos has been largely shaped and influenced by the stories we have been told in our culture. The old stories, as manifested in the myths and world views of our western cultural, philosophical and religious belief systems, emphasized humanity's dominion over nature and the benefits of economic, scientific and technological progress that regard the earth as having value in meeting our own ends.

A series of autoethnographic narratives and reflections suggest that technological progress alone will not curb the current ecological destruction of the earth. There is a need for new stories; for a re-storying about the earth that includes our interconnectedness with the planet. Earth consciousness is described as a relational and embodied understanding of ourselves vis-à-vis the earth. Earth consciousness fosters an understanding that humanity is part of the earth, part of the universe, not a separate entity. Respect, relationship and reciprocity are suggested as our best hope for the future, lying in our capacity for an attitude of reverence, wonder and awe at the creative, life-sustaining power of the universe.

Acknowledgements

Writing this thesis has not been easy on my family as, for many evenings and weekends, my nose has been in books and studies or else I have been tuned out of the fray of ordinary family life. I wish to thank my wife and life-long partner Cathy for putting up with my nights of restless sleep, bursts of excited blabbering and periods of quiet contemplation. To my girls, Amy, Sarah and Bethany, and my son, Alex; I wish to thank you for understanding that my absences, in body or in spirit, were necessary to finish this project.

I wish to acknowledge all my Professors in the Master of Education program at the University of Prince Edward Island. Together they helped me become more aware of the need for critical thinking and that good pedagogy starts with an examination of self. Special thanks go out to Professors Fiona Walton and Suzanne Thomas whose encouragements, kind smiles and wise counsel helped me to find the courage and confidence I needed and for whom unorthodoxy did not intimidate. Our early morning meetings, sometimes with a view of the beautiful North Shore and with coffee and scones, will be surely missed by me.

I wish to extend my sincere appreciation to Drs. Graham Pike and Basil Favaro for their careful and insightful reading of my final draft. Their affirmations of my ideas and positive responses to my writings mean a great deal to me.

I wish to acknowledge all those voices from my past, human and non-human, who have contributed to whom I have become. Life is a road and I wish to extend my appreciation to all who have been signs, bridges, highways, guardrails, corners and potholes for my journey so far.

And finally I wish to acknowledge the profound influence Rev. Thomas Berry O.P. has had on my writings. Thomas Berry's vision for a new story for humanity has been both inspiring and challenging for me. Sadly, Thomas Berry died on June 1, 2009 while I was writing this thesis. He was 94.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence;
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Robert Frost from The Road Not Taken

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CHAPTER ONE:

PROLOGUE

The Road Less Traveled

Something imponderable shifting out there in the dark. The earth itself contracting with the cold...He walked out into the road and stood. The silence. The salitter drying from the earth. The mudstained shapes of flooded cities burned to the waterline. At a crossroads a ground set with dolmen stones where the spoken bones of oracles lay moldering. No sound but the wind. What will you say? (McCarthy, 2006, p. 220)

The image of a road is a fitting metaphor for this thesis journey. In Cormac McCarthy's Pulitzer Prize winning novel entitled *The Road* (2006), an unnamed man, perhaps symbolic of Everyman, and his son are traveling together across a post-apocalyptic American landscape towards the sea. The cause of the cataclysmic event is never explained, but the roads are awash in a thick, grey ash such that they often need to breathe through masks and danger lurks in every ditch and over every ridge. A dark and bleak read, the novel not only speaks to the possibility of large scale ecological disaster, but also of the importance of roads and of stories. The road, for the man and his son, was a lifeline. For me, a road suggests that there is a place to go but also suggests from whence one came. That is the great thing about roads, rarely are we at the end and even if we do find ourselves at an impasse, we can always turn around, go back, and find an alternate route. Not only that, throughout a journey on a road one never knows when a hidden pothole, obstacle or blind corner changes the direction and impacts the journey. Similarly, just when we think we've seen it all, we

come across a wide-open expanse of open fields made brilliant with blooming wildflowers or an encounter with a sudden cliff edge reveals a most spectacular sheer rock face or sunset. Surprises, it seems, always makes the ride more interesting. Life is like that, roads are important.

As the man and his son in *The Road* travel the foreboding landscape, stories also become a lifeline of a different sort. Throughout their brushes with danger and amid their struggle to obtain even the most basic of human needs, the man and his boy often get lost in storied moments of poignancy; the stories told by the father connected the boy with the people and places of his past; stories became the signals that there is always hope for the future no matter how dreary and overwhelming the present circumstance. Of all the meager effects that they carried, their memories and the stories they told may well have been the weapon that shielded them best from despair and insanity. As a story, McCarthy's *The Road* is an important environmental book; without graphs, data, studies and projections from famous scientists, the book demands an emotional response from the reader and creates a glimpse of the real and terrible effects wide-scale environmental disaster might look like. Stories can convince us of where we want to go down the road.

From the very beginning of this thesis process, I have always insisted that it be a journey of personal discovery. Although cliché, 'life as a journey' or 'life is a highway' are apt ways of describing how I approach my time on this earth. No two days have been the same and the views from the windshields of my life continue to provide fascination and discovery. I guess I am at a point in the road where I have had to take a long, hard look at where I have come from and where I might find my future

destinations; will they be warm, sandy beaches or cold, foreboding tundra? Do I take the well worn path or the road less traveled? As the result of my research inquiry, I find I do not have many answers, and certainly have more questions than inklings of truth. But then, that was never the point.

The Old Dirt Road

There is an old dirt road I know and love, it connects the main highway running through my village with the North Shore. Locally called the *"Fox Ranch Road,"* it was once the lone home of a family that had a large silver fox farming operation along the West side. The remnants of the farm can still be found; an old stacked sandstone foundation outlines where the farmhouse used to sit, now covered in army-green moss, it sinks lower into the mud each passing year. Traces of the hand-dug well, once lined with rocks down to the water table, peeks above the forest floor only a few steps from where the dwelling once stood. In the woods, tangles of timbers, staples and wire still hold the memory of a labyrinth of cages that meandered through the roughly four acres of trees. On many occasions I swear I could still hear the ghosts of workers and their bosses happily whistling as they go about their chores amid the huge beech and maple grove; feeding, breeding, killing and skinning. Faint echoes of foxes and their pups yip in the rustling trees.

The road itself is a meandering river of copper clay and sharp shale packed by a hundred and fifty years of weary travelers, iron-shawed Belgians and scores of cars and trucks. Two parallel furrows etched into the surface seem to converge as the road disappears into the distant woods. It is a picture

perfect, postcard worthy dirt road; iconic Prince Edward Island, wild and scenic. Gentle hills and sloping valleys cut through the ancient primeval forest like a snake slithers through the grass and on either side saplings stretch from the furrowed ditch to lick the life-giving rays from a high noon sun. In summer, they take on a red-cast as the wind swept sands swirl in clouds of thick, chalk-like sandy dust. In winter, frost and snow outline each branch as *if dusted with confectioner's sugar. The forest, a rich deciduous salad, still* retains its original splendor and diversity; I constantly marvel that, for whatever reason, it has managed to *escape the lumber company's teeth.*

Beneath the canopy, well hidden from the sky, lies a beautiful carpet of furry mosses and fronds of ferns. In the spring, fiddleheads begin to unfurl their graceful curves as if moving to a slow waltz and there are pockets of Lady Slipper orchids here and there; pink moccasins atop a greenish hook. The forest floor is a map of activity and it is easy to get lost in the quiet laps of the giant trees. At the bottom of one of the gullies, a bubbling spring gurgles *the freshest water I've ever tasted; ancient underground cisterns boil but their* streams run quiet and clear surfacing only at this magical place.

As a boy growing up in the nearby village, the Fox Ranch Road always held some sort *of mystery for me. It was a favorite destination for my family's* Sunday afternoon hiking excursions. My memories of those special family times are still quite vivid; we would don our black and red-soled rubber boots, pull on thick woolen sweaters over our heads, and set out with excitement to walk the elder dirt road. My brothers and I would secretly hope for a passing

car so that we could jump into the deep ditches, squealing with delight at our narrow escape. Truth be known, the Fox Ranch Road provided endless possibilities for our young minds and bodies to discover all manner of flora and fauna. It was for us a magical place; we were the Lost Boys of Never-Never Land.

On a particularly bright and crisp autumn afternoon, I remember our group coming across a long forgotten path. The floor was covered in crimson and tawny leaves puffed by the brisk fall winds while shards of light streaked the air. My mother, an experienced Girl Guide leader, was the person in charge during adventures and opportunities like these; she began to swim through the brief band of under-brush which eventually gave way to a crisp aisle unmistakable as another road. Huge roots, the tapered and gnarled feet of the giant tree-folk, crossed the path intermittently and the trunks and crowns of the trees formed a long corridor ending at a farm field. And what treasures we found! Scattered about were old rusty tin can artifacts, the discarded bodies of unrecognizable cars, beautiful blue Noxzema jars and, in a hidden hollow, a heap of livestock bones, teeth and horns. It was a panacea of discovery and once again, the old Fox Ranch Road, albeit reluctantly, gave up its secrets.

Now that I'm older, I find myself going back to the old road. I often bring my son with me and he finds the same delights that I did. But, how shall I honor the old road with him? I can only guess at who may have traveled its dusty trail. Were there vagabonds in tattered and dirty cloths in search of a

meager offering for a day's work and a dry place to rest? Or maybe sinewy traders would venture to the ranch in search of that perfect fur. Were there traveling salesmen and merchants, dragging their suitcases and duffel bags of the latest brushes, gadgets, toiletries and spice? A midwife? A priest? Shall I honor its builders? Surely the road is the product of the toil of many over many months; axe and bucksaws, and perherons to yard. Today, only the leisurely hiker or the occasional curious explorer venture down the Fox Ranch Road but if one listens carefully, echoes of lives in connection to the road and its stories can be heard in the sound of the wind and rustling trees.

I have come to respect and cherish the old road and I think I know *why. It's winding and rolling body does not lend itself to the hurried rat-race of today but reminds me that some things are better left alone. Progress always comes at a cost and the gentle ribbon of sand and clay speaks of a simpler time. The Fox Ranch Road is a reminder of the great changes that have taken place and its stories offer a chance to step back and savor its kind and gentle way. (Excerpt from autoethnographic journal)*

The Bridge

Under the road that I travel several times daily, there is an old bridge of wooden beams buttressed by a terrace of sod and chiseled stone. We call it the Black Bridge and it has linked my community with other communities on the North Shore for generations. Under the bridge flows a tiny and leisurely brook that funnels the overflow from a pond hidden behind a curtain of trees, rushes and brush. Over the years and after crossing the Black Bridge thousands of times, I have come to realize

that it symbolizes a part of my life which has emerged through my writing. It is at the Black Bridge, amid the stream and pond, rushes and trees, where I feel most interconnected to something greater; this place has given me a profound sense of respect and reverence for the gifts of the earth and its inner functioning and I believe it has informed who I have become. The Black Bridge's quaint vestige framed against the pastoral landscape of fields and sky is not about a romantic notion of nature nor does it provide a frivolous sense of abandon and escape; rather it speaks to me of a wisdom and insight into the very nature of life on this planet—rhythms and patterns, cycles and seasons, life and death—all are connected to the whole and I am connected to its story. Its narrative, along with others, has become my narrative. Additionally, the Black Bridge carries me home every day. Like roads, bridges are important too.

If the body of research is likened to a wooden bridge, even one as worn and familiar as the Black Bridge, and each truss represents the contribution of each researcher, then it begs the question as to how my research inquiry will add to the overall strength and integrity of the entire structure. How will the builder's blueprint ultimately place the timbers and struts of my research? Will the parts be of soft pine or of strong, sturdy cedar? Will it stand against the elements just as the old Black Bridge has? Or will it go mostly unnoticed, driven over without regard for the strength of its back as most bridges are? Time, that great master and miser of days and years, will ultimately measure the depth and breadth of my voice. I must admit, throughout these past months I have been challenged and have had to confront a whole range of emotions ranging from self-doubt, confusion and fear of the unknown, to moments of inspiration and deep learning. As an aphorism, a bridge connects and

provides a link but can also mean a span over some otherwise rough terrain. The road, although often bumpy or hidden by fog or a foot of snow, has nevertheless been full of happy surprises and highways of discovery not to mention the possibility of providing bridges of greater understanding and insight.

Autoethnographies are described by Sparkes (as cited in Wall, 2006) as “highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding” (p. 2). As a method of narrative inquiry, “the author of an evocative narrative writes in the first person, making him or her the object of research and thus breaching the conventional separation of researcher and subject (researchee)” (Belbase, Luitel, & Taylor, 2008, p. 3). Before beginning this thesis, I had the strong impression that quantitative research methodologies embodied scientific methods leading to the acquisition of empirical data which was the preferred path to the advancement of human knowledge; positivism meant rigor. The scales of educational research were tipped in favor of quantitative methodologies which appeared to carry more weight. Qualitative research seemed to be the poor cousin of quantitative inquiry; autoethnography was oft considered a threatening, mysterious and serious breach of the research landscape, relegated to a couple of paragraphs in the research methodology textbooks. According to Wall (2006), “ways of inquiry that connect with real people, their lives, and their issues are seen as soft and fluffy and, although nice, not valuable in the scientific community” (p. 2). With the advent of postmodernism, issues of subjectivity, socially constructed knowledge, interpretation, legitimating, and situating all contribute to the possibility of many critical theories and methodologies to emerge (Wall, 2006, p. 2).

For Richardson (as cited in Wall, 2006), “having partial, local, and/or historical knowledge is still knowing” (p. 2). Lincoln (1997), in her critique of the Modern polemic of any discourse being universally right and true, credits the Postmodern analysis that claims “all texts are created from partial perspectives, and... furthermore, that is the best we can hope for” (p. 37). It is through this epistemological door that autoethnography creeps in.

The questioning of the dominant scientific paradigm, the making room for other ways of knowing, and the growing emphasis on the power of research to change the world and create a space for sharing of unique, subjective, and evocative stories of experience that contribute to our understanding of the social world and allow us to reflect on what could be different because of what we have learned. (Wall, 2006, p. 3)

Etymologically, autoethnography is constructed from three terms; auto or self, ethno or the cultural link, and graphy or the “application of the research process” (Wall, 2006, p. 6). From my reading, I have come to realize that autoethnography, and narrative inquiries in general, resist and defy being placed into any constraining definitional boundaries. There are as many ways of interpreting it as there are authors writing about it (Jones, 2005). Uncomfortable as it may seem to some, it may be best to describe autoethnography as a textual representation of a researcher’s personal experiences in conversation with the cultural and social, all with a view to unpack and confront the assumptions on which he or she stands. Adams and Jones (2008) refer to this space as a “hinge;” autoethnography can shift our ways of being and knowing and transform categories, boundaries and identities (p. 376). For Spry (2001, as cited

in Jones, 2005), autoethnography is “a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others in social contexts” (p. 765). As a method of inquiry, it may be the best medium for weaving a story about the intricate connections we have with the earth.

I have come to realize that my life’s story is a complex web of relational encounters; a conglomerate of experiences situated over a particular time, at particular places. As such, I cannot consider myself apart from the wider stories, culture and community of which I am a product of untold interactions with others (Chang, 2008, p. 17). As a relational being, my life’s story is connected to the stories of many others, both human and non-human, and, like so many overlapping Venn diagrams, the telling and consideration of certain personal narratives helps me to understand, critique and draw insights about myself and the cultural contexts which have chiseled, shaped and shaved my life-world as text. Autoethnography is a vehicle for critiquing the situatedness of self and the Other in a cultural and social context. As such, it becomes a reflection on the researcher’s experience of self in relation to the beliefs, assumptions, biases and practices of Others. In autoethnography, the researcher is the subject of the research which becomes an embodied account of experiences in a particular time, place and culture. It therefore seeks to “delineate the relationship of self or selves and others/communities/cultures” (Adams & Jones, 2008, p. 374).

Positionality is the interplay between self and Others. According to Madison (2005):

Subjectivity is certainly within the domain of positionality, but positionality requires that we direct our attention beyond our individual or subjective

selves. Instead, we attend to how our subjectivity in relation to the Other informs and is informed by our engagement and representation of the Other.

We are not simply subjects, but we are subjects in dialogue with the other. (p. 9)

For Madison, critical ethnography is not an individual or exclusive experience but implies a conversation between the researcher and the Other. For me, although framed as a personal narrative, writing an autoethnography is about unearthing the beliefs and assumptions I have acquired as a relational being in the world. Although personal narratives appear as one voice, they do not stand alone nor were they born in a vacuum; the space created is a reflection of the writer's interpretation of his or her experience in relation to the Other. There are caveats, I am well aware of the story of Narcissus and do not wish to share his fate, but perhaps like Faust, after much trial and error, I might find some semblance of redemption.

Because autoethnography is a form of narrative inquiry, it relies heavily on stories as a way of knowing. By using stories, or what Barone (2007) calls narrative constructions (p. 456, as cited in Coulter & Smith, 2009, p. 577), autoethnographic researchers let readers into an "emotional process" (Ellis, 1997, p. 130). For me, this offers a clue as to the purpose of writing autoethnographically and as to why I have chosen it as my method of inquiry. Rather than attempting to describe an objective state of the world, or what some might call 'Truth,' or historical truth; narrative inquiries are more concerned with what may be called narrative truth or 'truth.' For Ellis (1997), "Narrative truth seeks to keep the past alive in the present; through narrative we learn to understand the meanings and significance of the past as

incomplete, tentative, and revisable” (p. 129). There is a difference between literal truth and storied truth (Coulter & Smith, 2009, p. 578). This present narrative inquiry portrays my experience in context, in storied form, in order to disrupt, deconstruct, and most especially, question the stories that have been told regarding our place in the world and of our relationship to the earth.

Our understanding of Others, even non-human Others, can only be accessed from the point of view of our own experience which includes our personal histories, beliefs and cultures. This is the genesis of some of the skepticism surrounding and associated with narrative inquiries in general, and with autoethnographies in particular—issues of legitimation, representation, personal experience and rigor persist (Adams & Jones, 2008). Autoethnography is not so much about the recounting of facts and figures but maybe characterized as being more about meaning-making and significance. According to Cole and Knowles (2001), the issues many methodologists have with narrative inquiries are based on the dominant positivist paradigm’s quest for legitimating and certainty; facts, percentages, predictions and prescriptions all frame the positivist research paradigm (p. 124). Narrative inquiries, they suggest, should be “judged according to the quality of its crafting, the nature of its communicability, and its pragmatic value” (p. 124). Perhaps, they ask, the issues of validity, legitimating, certainty and rigor cannot be applied to narrative inquiries as they are understood in the positivist tradition? One cannot judge a horse using the same criteria used to judge a dog. What is needed is more appropriate language and criteria.

In this context, writing an autoethnography is more of an “orientation” (Gingrich-Philbrook, 2005, p. 298, as cited in Adams & Jones, 2008, p. 375) than a strict method of inquiry. To reframe the narrative voice, autoethnography looks inward to an examination of self, but also looks outward as an examination of self experienced in the world. For me, this ought not be considered a reflection of a strict, if not mutually exclusive, duality between fact and fiction, realism and imagination, description and interpretation. Barone (2009) suggests that these perceptible polarities do not have to be dichotomous but can be dialectical; that is, there is an acknowledgement of the tensions within a text and that a dialogue is possible between the personal and cultural, the self and Others, the text and reader. To highlight his thinking, Barone uses Bakhtin’s description of texts either being centripetal where they “pull a reader inward into a finally correct, unambiguous, and literal reading of the text” (p. 594), or are centrifugal where the texts have tendencies to “pull outward into the possibility of multiple voices” (p. 594). Centrifugal texts are polyphonic, multiple and imperfect and, as dialogic in nature, result in a conversation, not only between the self and Other, but also between text and reader. The purpose is not to provide answers and prescriptions, but instead aims to “primarily raise questions” (p. 594).

My work is offered as a questioning text meant to provide the reader with a vehicle for interrupting and disrupting the prevailing stories in our Western culture that lead to the subjugation of the earth as primarily being a resource bank for humanity’s progress as a species. I use stories because they are accessible; stories and personal narratives are familiar to most and may open up spaces for Others to engage

in the text in multiple ways. I, like Jones (2005), believe our words matter and that autoethnography can be categorized as “Making a text present. Demanding attention and participation. Implicating all involved. Refusing closure or categorization” (p. 765). The use of narrative is offered as a means to engage the reader on multiple levels. Narrative inquiry involves:

Setting a scene, telling a story, weaving intricate connections among life and art, experience and theory, evocation and explanation... and then letting go, hoping readers who will bring the same careful attention to your words in the context of their own lives. (p. 765)

This thesis is not an autobiography like Augustine’s Confessions, nor is it a description of some epic journey of Homeric proportions; so too does it fail at being a memoir of particularly important people or events. It is, however, a reflexive telling of a personal journey of struggle and discovery, one man’s honest and authentic attempt at reconciling the stories and assumptions of a life which, for some stories have lost their relevance and meaning and engendered in me a certain restlessness and discomfort with much of what I have formally been taught and have come to believe. There is an assured vulnerability to such an undertaking; I have had to call into question many core values, assumptions and beliefs held by my family and community. Like a fledgling shedding its protective down and attempting to leave the nest for the first time, a glimpse over the edge may persuade a turning back and a recoiling into the familiar warmth of the old stories. But, with a bit of encouragement, courage and a leap of faith, the fall is normally brief and the possibility of soaring is worth the risk. Finding my voice through the stories of my life has given me the

potential of adding my own contribution to the bridge. But more than that, it is hoped that each reader who finds this present work in their hands, will be engaged by the stories it tells and the questions it raises and may with me, possibly imagine a new way of storying the earth and of being in the world.

Letting Go

Rushing through life as we do, we are at odds not only with time, but with our senses as well. It seems we have to go back to a childlike state and try to experience things in a straightforward, unpremeditated way, as nature surely intended us to do. (Krenov, 1993, p. 28)

Trees and wood have always been a part of my story. Both of my grandfathers were carpenters and lumberjacks and my father has been a carpenter all of his life. To use a most appropriate metaphor, I was the apple *that didn't fall far from the tree. As a boy I spent countless hours at the elbows of my forefathers in musty shops or on bustling jobsites. Wood and its uses were integrated into the fabric of our family's very survival; often the wood milled, trimmed and fastened would have been cut from our own woodlot. I became an accomplished professional cabinetmaker in the family business and was quite content with the idea of doing that for the rest of my life. Blind curves in the road often leave one in unexpected locations.*

Today I spend a lot of time doing woodworking for the enjoyment of it; *it's in my blood. I concentrate on smaller things now by finding and rescuing the remnants of fallen gentle trees and creating from their branches and trunks all manner of woodenware, furniture, bowls and plates. For me,*

woodworking is a spiritual exercise; somehow the unlocking and discovery of the intricate and unique beauty and mystery within each piece of wood provides me with inklings and hints of the divine.

Woodworking is a process from conception to execution. It is a process of creativity in that something unique and new is brought into being, but it is also a process of discovery; I often have to let go of my plans and intentions for a piece and allow the wood to take on its own form and texture. In that sense, woodworking is an act of humility and patience; I will sometimes keep a piece of wood around for years before it eventually speaks to me of its desire, hopes and final form and function. Like any art, creative work is a dialogue and, as odd as it may seem, pushing woodworking to the level I have involves forming a relationship with the medium and allowing each piece of wood to help determine its own fate. Wood, as an organic and vital material, demands more than simple technical proficiency, but instead burdens the craftsman to develop an ability to intuitively know when to take one more minute slice to reveal an intricate grain pattern or to discover a hitherto unknown jewel of spalt or a splash of deep color. Hidden pockets of bark or wild grain can be integral to the creative integrity of a piece.

My approach to woodworking has evolved over the years to a point where my practice of molding and working with wood has informed who I am and has taught me a lot about life. As a novice woodworker, I often expressed frustration with less than perfect wood, flawed results and my limited skill level; on many days in the shop I produced more kindling than recognized

work. Today, I am able to recognize the dharma of woodworking as a synergy of process, a process where I am able to let go of any expectations I may have and be present to the moment. Some time ago, I made a conscious decision to not let my work be hijacked by commercial success, visions of my own competency and success or a search for that elusive perfect form. My ego, it *turns out, interrupts the flow of creativity and disconnects me from the wood's* true destiny; ego deafens the shape being forged under the zing of a well sharpened gouge and numbs the touch to the crispness of a gentle spoke-shaved curve. I need to get out of the way when doing woodworking all the while emptying myself in order to allow my work to embody and blend my desires and hopes with those of the wood. The studio becomes a sanctuary of spontaneity and bliss uncomplicated by the messiness of the world. There, surrounded by the smell of freshly cut sawdust, well worn hand tools, piles of collected timber and my favorite inspirational books, woodworking becomes sensuous. The creation of softened corners, textured surfaces and the telltale *marks of a craftsman's hands all speak to the uniqueness of the piece. The* medium then becomes the message; far from being an instrumental part of a one-way relationship, I like to regard the wood I encounter as gifts that open up to me worlds of possibilities. I often become the earthen vessel and the wood the *potter's hands*. (Excerpt from autoethnographic journal)

Life as Narrative

“We began with telling our researcher stories of experience. Other beginnings, other stories, were possible. We began in the midst. We end in the midst”
(Clandinin & Connelly, 2000. p. 187).

Contained in the following pages are the results of countless hours of introspection, reading and discussion, but also of many hours walking through the woods or on the red sandy beaches, or just being quiet and allowing the eagles, trees and whales to have their say. The stories from my life experiences are my attempts at unpacking the extent to which I have participated in the old story of humanity’s dominion over the earth and my struggles to find new ones. As an educator, a husband and especially as a Dad to three girls and one boy, I have grave concerns about a planet we have put in peril. Now, as I spend time skiing the back roads on powdery snow with my son or camping on balmy summer’s weekends with my daughters, I find myself wanting them to know a new story about our place in the earth community. So far I have refused to tell them the old one.

Stories are what make us who we are. By stories I do not mean the ones we might hear sitting around the living room with Fire-Side Al. The stories I am referring to are those which tell us what we believe about our origins and fate, about what we ultimately value or not. Not all old stories are bad, but the ecological crisis is clearly a human effect and regarding the earth as solely an instrument of progress surely begs the question as to whether the old story of our separateness from and dominion over nature should be examined. This thesis suggests that the old story is that of humanity’s dominion over and ‘apart from’ the earth and, as a result, the ecological

crisis is a crisis in human thinking and consciousness, and that if real and profound changes in how the earth is being abused are to take place, then we need to find new stories, ones where we are ‘a part of’ nature. We need to adopt what I call an earth consciousness if large-scale ecological disasters are to be averted.

CHAPTER TWO: A PLANET IN PERIL

Crisis: Humanity as a Geophysical Force

Our world seems fraught with, what some might pessimistically categorize, as insurmountable obstacles to peace and stability. Our present day context, replete with concerns over terrorism and wars, nuclear proliferation and totalitarian governments, the pressures of economic globalization, poverty, disease, and the exponential growth in the human population, has conspired to place humanity at its own peril. Added to that rather bleak global context is an increasing awareness of the serious and immanent ecological crisis which the human superspecies have created (Knudtson & Suzuki, 1992; Suzuki & Dressel, 1999). In particular, we are caught in the belly of the beast by what Ayers (1999) calls the four “megaphenomena” (p. 26) or what I call the four headless horsemen: the rising level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere leading to global warming; the rising rates of extinction of species; the rising consumption of resources; and the rising human population. Pandora’s Box has been breached, we have what is tantamount to a perfect storm and humans may be the ultimate invasive species. Ever since Rachel Carson’s book, *Silent Spring* was published in 1962, the year I was born, outlining the danger inherent in our widespread use of DDT, our awareness of the damage we have inflicted to the earth has steadily grown in our collective consciousness to the point where, in a document issued in 1992 and entitled, *World Scientists’ Warning to Humanity* (as cited in Knudtson & Suzuki, 1992), over 1500 of the world’s leading scientists warned:

Human beings and the natural world are on a collision course. Human activities inflict harsh and often irreversible damage on the environment and on critical resources. If not checked, many of our current practices put at serious risk the future we wish for human society and the animal and plant kingdoms, and may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner that we know. Fundamental changes are urgent if we wish to avoid the collision our present course will bring about. (p. xxiii)

The warning went on to list areas of concern including the air, water, forests and oceans and human population growth. Then the tone grows more ominous:

No more than one or a few more decades remain before the chance to avert the threats we now confront will be lost and the prospects for humanity immeasurably diminished. We, the undersigned, senior members of the world's scientific community, hereby warn all humanity of what lies ahead. A great change in our stewardship of the earth and life on it is required if vast human misery is to be avoided and our global home on this planet is not to be irretrievably mutilated. (p. xxiv)

Since the time of that warning, it is without doubt that the scope of the ecological degradation has deepened and remains largely unchecked. To put it in perspective, Knudtson and Suzuki (1992) go on to outline the scale of acceleration which happened in just fourteen years.

During this time, 1.08 billion people have been added to the human population; 1.1 trillion tons of topsoil have been lost; 90 per cent of the major marine fishes have been fished out; toxic pollution fouls the remotest parts of

the planet, spread through air, water and soil; more than half of all forests have been torn down, and if the cutting and burning go unchecked, most of the remainder will be gone within decades; atmospheric carbon has increased by 21 billion tons, with effects on climate that are now undeniable; an estimated 700,000 species have vanished forever; cancer has become the number-one killer for the first time; deserts have grown; wetlands have been drained; and habitats have been torn apart. (p. xxiv)

In the big picture, for the first time in the 4.6 billion year history of the planet earth, we are capable of and indeed are altering the physical, chemical and biological planetary systems on a geological scale; we have become, what Edward O. Wilson (2002) calls, a “geophysical force” (p. 23). The world’s recent economic downturn, not unlike the 9/11 terrorists’ attack in New York, affords us the opportunity to ask deeper questions about the meaning and purpose of our lives and of our activities, sustainable or not.

That there is an ecological crisis is, in many ways, a non-starter. The science and statistics are in, arguing against it has become a *reductio ad absurdum*, we are a global force and the environmental mess we have created will existentially test our species like no other phenomenon. There is no need for a debate now; why take the chance? Everywhere we are bombarded by media releases and images of ecological degradation; fish kills, droughts, Arctic and Antarctic glacial melts, global warming and toxic wastes are but samples. There is a sense of awareness, and even urgency, yet there still appears to be a disconnect between what we know, what we believe and

what we do; what Thomas Berry (1990) calls our cultural “autism” (p. 16). Maybe the global environmental crisis has become too familiar.

The Emperor’s New Clothes

Ed Ayers published a paper entitled, *Why Are We Not Astonished?* in 1999 for the Worldwatch Institute. In it he describes an incident that occurred in 1792 as the British Captain James Cook sailed into a bay in what is known today as Australia. The sudden and unprecedented appearance of the *Endeavor*, a huge tall-ship with towering hornbeam masts and a thick oak-planked hull, garnered no perceptible reaction from the Aborigines fishing near the shore. According to Robert Hughes (as cited in Ayers, 1999), an English historian, “the Australians took no notice. They displayed neither fear nor interest and went on fishing” (p. 26). It was as if nothing unusual was happening and the *Endeavor* was all but ignored. Feeling a spark of confidence in the apparent friendliness of the Aborigines, the Europeans proceeded to lower their landing dories to the water and began to row towards the shore. Perked and then startled and alarmed, the Indigenous fishers suddenly saw something that had meaning to them, something they could relate to from their experience. Small boats approaching the shoreline meant invasion and a threat; in a state of panic, they fled into the bush.

For Ayers, the current population of humans on the earth is analogous to the Aborigines encountering the large ship *Endeavor* for the first time. “We are confronted by something so completely outside of our experience that we really don’t see it, even when the evidence is overwhelming. For us, that “something” is a blitz of enormous biological and physical alterations in the world that has been sustaining us”

(Ayers, 1999, p. 26). Maybe the global environmental crisis is on such a fantastic scale that, like those admiring the Emperor's new cloths, we cannot conceive of it.

The records of history, as well as of recent psychological research, suggest that on those extraordinary occasions when people are suddenly confronted with something that is utterly alien to their experience, they may in effect go blank while the neurons race around in search of a familiar pattern of synapses—some memory, or myth, or clear expectation. Consciousness is a connecting of sensory stimuli and meaning, and if no connection is made, there may be a failure of consciousness. You may not see anything at all.

(Ayers, 1999, p. 25)

That there is an ecological crisis is a crisis in human consciousness; we have been telling the wrong stories. Rather than being ecological, the stories have been “egological” (Fox, 1983, p. 15).

A Contorted Circus of Geese

As a young boy, I used to spend loads of time with my Dad. My father is an honest, wise, quiet and unassuming man who has little time for garrulousness. He also loves to spend most of his time outdoors. From him my brothers and I learned how to negotiate a canoe up a riotous stream or just *float with the carefree and quiet current on an evening's pond. It was with Dad that we endured many sleepless nights in a thin nylon tent as the rain pelted its furry against the flysheet, dousing the remnant glowing embers in the campfire and pooling usually just under where we were to sleep. It always rained when we went camping and it became a running joke as to how Dad*

“Can pick ‘em.” We had lots of fun with our Dad and would look forward to discovering hidden garter snakes on the railway tracks as they warmed themselves in the warm summer’s sun, doing cannonball dives from the wharf’s end, or exploring islands and inlets off of Malpeque Bay in my grandfather’s old leaky boat. We would go for long walks in the woods in the fall and enjoyed kicking the crisp autumn leaves with our rubber boots. Winter brought skating on frozen ponds, ice fishing in a dark and stinky shack and the comforts of steaming wet woolen mittens. Spring, for the most part, was muddy and wet, but the prospects of catching tadpoles and smelts excited every bone in our bodies. Each season had its highlights and as boys, being inside seemed torturous and cruel. Thankfully, Dad felt the same way.

One of the things I learned from my Dad, despite my distractions as a lad, was to be present to the moment and not waste time wishing for something, somewhere or sometime better. Dad was the one who was the first to notice the silhouette of a resting red-tail hawk or the still cameo of a great *blue heron against the dusk. He delighted in the slap of a beaver’s escape or in the roll of a hungry rainbow trout under glass-like water. To him, being outdoors invigorated the soul and nothing was better than visiting a quiet fishing hole or a productive clam bed. Often child-like, his experience of life has granted him an appreciation for the environment and he taught his boys, more by example than by didactics, to appreciate the complexities and simple pleasures of the world and nature around us.*

It's against the story of my childhood outdoors with Dad that I was confronted with an incident which became a watershed moment for me, one which has left an indelible and profound influence in my life. I think I was about twelve at the time, maybe thirteen, but at an age as impressionable as any I suppose, when I was appointed to accompany Dad on his weekly sojourn to the local dump. In those days, long before any provincial waste management system was conceived, many small communities had small landfill sites into which everything not wanted was thrown. On this particular *Saturday, as we drove our old '71 Chevy truck down the cedar-lined red clay* lane to the Lot 16 dump, we had no idea that what awaited us would affect us in such a deep way. There, in a heap of red-stained feathers, was a mound of about 30-35 Canada geese, downed by lead and steel shot, an obvious result of a hunting spree without conscience. Dad and I stood in stunned silence amid the stench of the garbage mixed with the sweet aroma of rotting leaves, and contemplated the needless slaughter of those once proud birds. The image of the tangle of brownish wings, haphazardly thrown bodies, broken and drooping necks, some eyes bulging, others pecked-out by the opportunistic and ravenous gulls, blackish tongues falling from the corners of beaks, yellow webbed feet sticking in the air, and sullen heads with the characteristic white chin-strap to be held high no more, stays with me even today. It was an eerie circus of contorted bodies amid the landscape of broken glass, soup cans, discarded furniture and slimy waste. What sense of entitlement does one need in order to snuff out as sport the lives of so many beautiful birds whose annual

tasks is to bark out the arrival of spring and autumn? What attitude towards *the earth's living creatures, and indeed towards the living earth, is needed to unceremoniously and unconscientiously toss so many of these migrants into a heap without so much as affording them the dignity of feeding a hungry crowd or at least to stuff a pillow with their down?*

I have returned to that moment with Dad many times. Then, I was horrified at the wonton waste of a precious resource although it has never changed my acceptance of responsible hunting. As a result of that experience though, geese have become for me symbols of the wild and I always welcome their hearty honks and gagging gatherings in golden fields where they converse and give comfort and encouragement to each other for the long flights to the north in *spring and to the south in fall. Today, I've come to realize that the song of the goose is a part of the earth's song, often a lament over the liberties humanity has taken.*

And God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every bird of the air, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered." (Gen. 9: 1-3, Revised Standard Version)

(Excerpt from autoethnographic journal)

On Death and Dying

Perhaps another way to understand why there seems to be a disconnect between what we know and what we do, or rather why it is that our awareness of environmental degradation does not lead to deep conscious changes in our *weltanschauung*, is to think of the planetary crisis as if it were a personal illness. First, we have to admit there is a problem, in this case a disease, or, more aptly, a disease. According to Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (1969), when there is serious, often terminal illness with ourselves or with someone in our family, we go through a series of four stages. Our first inclination is towards denial, or perhaps skepticism. “Denial functions as a buffer after unexpected shocking news” (p. 39); we become terrified and scared and try to bury the issue. Obviously, environmental issues are not going away yet it seems at times easier to deny there is a problem and just go on with our lives like we always have. The second stage, anger, happens when we realize the truth of the situation and our powerlessness towards it. Whether we consider the Inuit of Canada’s north struggling against the loss of their traditional lifestyle, or the people of coastal Bangladesh who endure regular floods, anger is a normal reaction. The third stage, bargaining, happens as we try to “succeed in entering some sort of agreement which can postpone the inevitable happening” (p. 82). The Earth Summit at Rio, the Kyoto Accord and the Copenhagen Climate Change Conference are examples of efforts to have wide spread agreements on serious ecological concerns but all, and others, have so far fallen short. We can only hope that the fourth stage, acceptance, does not come.

A patient will reach a stage during which he is neither depressed nor angry about his "fate." He will have been able to express his previous feelings, his envy for the living and the healthy, his anger at those who do not have to face their end soon. He will have mourned the impending loss of so many meaningful people and places and he will contemplate his coming end with a certain degree of quiet expectation. (p. 112)

There are voices crying out from the wilderness. Like John the Baptist, many today are giving voice to the earth's cries. For Ayers (1999), that is the difference between the encounter the Aborigines had with Captain Cook's shore boats and today. "In the world at the outset of the new millennium, while there may be billions of people who don't see the thing that confronts us, there are at least a small number who have some inkling of it" (p. 26). As with the *World's Scientists' Warning to Humanity*, many scientists, authors, political leaders and commentators have sounded the trumpet. There is good reason to hope. Some of the people who have most influenced me, like David Suzuki, Thomas Berry and Al Gore, have all helped make environmental issues more mainstream and have all pointed to our need for deep, conscious and systemic changes.

Our western culture has told us stories that the earth's primary worth is in its utilitarian or instrumental value for humans. The old story has duped us into consciously or unconsciously regarding the planet as only a source for our growth as a species. Over and over we victimize the earth thereby putting ourselves at peril. If Abraham Maslow was correct, our single most basic needs are that of our physical needs for life; our basic biological needs all come from nature. Like flippantly

throwing an afternoon's sport into the dump, our collective attitude towards the earth has failed to garner the respect it deserves. What we need is not just Band-Aid solutions, actions which would condemn us to a fate similar to Sisyphus, bracing his shoulder against the rock, straining, sweating and toiling to roll the great huge boulder up the hill, only to see it rumble and bounce back to whence it came, perhaps with greater momentum. Required is a deep shift in our own consciousness based on a new story, one based on a sense of reverence and awe rooted in our connected relationship with the planet and one which opens up the possibility of what James Conlon (1994) calls a "prophetic cultural action."

There is a new story being told. The new story is about a living universe. We have failed to understand that the universe is alive. The best way to get in touch with the immense notion of a living universe is through story. In this way we come to see that the universe story is, in fact, our story too. (p. 3)

Winnie the Pooh and Galleon's Lap

Some of my earliest memories involve being told stories. All my grandparents were great storytellers and I believe they helped me to be grounded and aware of whom I am. More vivid for me is the memory of every *evening's bedtime routine when my dad would sit on the edge of the bed while holding one of my younger siblings, and tell or read stories to us. As time went on, and our family grew, the more crowded it got on the small bed. I remember curling up around my father, taking great comfort from his familiar voice and breath, and listening to his tales of Shep, the lost dog, or of other*

such sad lore. Sometimes he would sing the stories which would always lull us into the intended slumber.

My favorite stories were the tales and adventures of Winnie the Pooh; we had all the books and even the old vinyl albums to follow along with. I longed to be like Christopher Robin; a young boy who would spend countless *hours and days in the forest at Pooh's Corner where he would* do mostly nothing but laugh, tease and occasionally help his animal friends. There was Winnie the Pooh of course, the Bear of Very Little Brain, to whom delightful poems and songs would just pop into his head; the scrupulous and fastidious Rabbit and all his relations; the energetic and annoying bouncing Tigger; the melancholic and depressed Eeyore the donkey; the shy and timid Piglet; the wise old Owl; the motherly Kanga and her cleverly named infant Roo; and all the other birds and animals of the forest. I was always amazed at how at any given time I could identify with one of the characters. But it was Christopher Robin I admired most, his escape became mine and I anxiously anticipated all *the stories A. A. Milne so beautifully crafted. Christopher Robin's whole world revolved around the forest and we never were told what his life was like outside of it. It didn't matter, life was grand in the forest, in that lovingly sort of way.*

One Pooh story stands out for me, it was the last in the series which described the send-off Pooh and all the others were giving Christopher Robin. He was going away, this time for good. They all knew things would be different.

Christopher Robin is going.

At least I think he is.

Where?

Nobody knows.

But he is going. (Milne, 1956, p. 165)

I knew things would be different too. Christopher Robin was growing up and *so was I; part of me didn't care to. In the end, Christopher Robin was left with the lovable bear and each knew their time together was growing short.*

Christopher Robin beckoned to his friend, "Come on, Pooh" (p. 170), we're going "Nowhere" (p. 171). 'Nowhere' ended up being an enchanted place on the top of the forest called Galleons Lap. There, amid the sixty-something trees standing in a circle, free of "gorse and bracken and heather" (p. 173) and carpeted in "close-set grass, quiet, smooth and green" (p. 173),

Christopher Robin and Pooh spent their last moments together.

It was the only place in the Forest where you could sit down carelessly, without getting up again almost at once and looking for somewhere else. Sitting there they could see the whole world spread out until it reached the sky, and whatever there was all the world over was with them in Galleons Lap. (p. 173)

I'm not sure if listening to the adventures of Christopher Robin and Winnie the Pooh was the beginning of something for me, or the end or both. But now, as I reflect back on parts of my life and the journey I've been on, perhaps Dad's stories helped me to understand that, like the little boy in A. A.

Milne's stories, I'm a child of the world and that the animals, birds and trees, although they don't speak, nevertheless have something to say. And perhaps, like the Silly Old Bear himself, my life has been a promise to revisit the Enchanted Forest and not forget Christopher Robin's plea, "Pooh, promise you won't forget about me, ever. Not even when I'm a hundred" (p. 179) and, with eyes still fixed on the world, reach out for a tiny, soft paw and say, "Pooh," said Christopher Robin earnestly, "if I— if I'm not quite" he stopped and tried again— "Pooh, whatever happens, you will understand, won't you?"

"Understand what?"

"Oh, nothing." He laughed and jumped to his feet. "Come on!"

"Where?" said Pooh.

"Anywhere," said Christopher Robin. (p. 179)

(Excerpt from autoethnographic journal)

The Stories We Tell

Thomas King (2003), author and star of the once popular CBC radio series *The Dead Dog Café*, says that, "The truth about stories is that that's all we are" (p. 2). I like this quote; it not only speaks to what we believe and know as individuals, but also to our communal, historical and cultural contexts. The truth about stories is that they are the very foundation that shapes our consciousness (Uhl, 2004, p. 230). It is as if each of us is at the center of a giant spider's web with each strand of silk extending into our past, present and even future situations as it moves through time. Without the web we would not be connected to anything. Families, cultures, geographical locals,

educational experiences, religious beliefs and many, many more all contribute their stories to the making of who we are.

Thomas Berry (1990) once wrote that children love to be told stories because they somehow illuminate the world. Even as adults we might ask for a story.

Tell me a story of the river and the valley and the streams and the woodlands and wetlands, of the shellfish and finfish. Tell me a story. A story of where we are and how we got here and the characters and roles that we play. Tell me a story, a story that will be my story as well as the story of everyone and everything about me, the story that brings us together in a valley community, a story that brings together the human community with every living being in the valley, a story that brings us together under the arc of the great blue sky in the day and the starry heavens at night, a story that will drench us with rain and dry us in the wind, a story told by humans to one another. (p. 171)

We all love to hear stories and some of us love to tell them; they are the stuff of imagination and are touchstones for our commonalities and collective experiences. Berry points out the unifying aspect of stories; they tell us who we are vis-à-vis the world and help us to grapple with mystery, pain, origins and fate. Stories, legends and myths provide meaning and context, not only to individuals, but also to communities and whole cultures. It is these human stories that shape our very consciousness and provide identity and direction for our lives. Stories, I contend, provide the basis and foundation for our life-world values and underpin the cultural ethos into which we are born. In my journey, this has become a central insight for me, “A culture’s story is a living mythology that explains how things came to be and how we are to act” (Uhl,

2004, p. 230). By stories I mean not only those tales of our childhood, like *The Three Little Pigs* and *Little Red Riding Hood*, and in deference to Hans Christian Anderson and the Brothers Grimm, and even A. A. Milne, but also those expressions of what a culture or society believe to be true.

Dropping the Philosopher's Stone

As a young undergraduate I was taken with the discipline of philosophy, the love of wisdom, so much so that I pursued it as an honors degree major. Throughout that time, I distinctly remember being particularly distraught trying to come to terms with epistemology, the study of knowledge and of how we know the world. I wrestled with the rationalism of Plato and his allegory of the cave; was seduced by the genius of Aristotle and his categories; journeyed to the City of God with the neo-platonic Augustine; shook my head in disbelief at the radical idealism of David Hume; and sat with René Descartes doubting everything but my existence. Being, essence, existence, universals, particulars, substance, form, rationalism and empiricism all swam around in my head in one giant granny-knot of confusion; all were part of the lexicon of epistemology. I remember, especially as a freshman, being swayed at each successive argument, I felt like a boat with no keel against a North-East gale. Many times during the alchemy of those times, I thought I dropped the Philosopher's Stone. What it did teach me, and what I ultimately held on to, was that our ontology, what we hold reality to be, gives rise to our epistemological assumptions or how we perceive and know the world, and sometimes vice versa. What I have come to understand, despite my initial reticence and objections, and thanks to my professors in the Master of Education program, is that postmodern philosophy, at least from my limited

understanding of it, has offered me a way to think differently about what constitutes knowing and about how epistemology is the foundation onto which our house is built. According to Sarah Wall (2006), “The essence of postmodernism is that many ways of knowing and inquiring are legitimate and that no one way should be privileged” (p. 2). I have had to return to and reconsider that old Socratic dictum, “Know thyself.”

I, like many others, grew up and was educated to believe that the only legitimate and sure knowledge was associated with positivism, which I equated with science. Even in my years studying philosophy, the ‘science’ of logic or reasoning seemed to at least contain certitude as it contained proofs; propositions and conclusions, deduction and induction, and the seemingly oxymoronic certainty of fallacies. Knowledge and truth, I believed, was something apart from my subjectivity and consciousness; objective facts, mathematical formulae and quantitative data were the only firm foundation onto which true knowledge was established. But I had to go outside myself to discover it, conform my mind to its structure and guard against the plethora of pressures, heresies and temptations to stray. This way of knowing, I have come to understand, is the West’s unconscious affirmation of the hegemonic residue of modernity and the enlightenment project. The quest for empirical knowledge and objective truth, according to Wall (2006), has socialized many into believing “that “real” science is quantitative, experimental, and understood by only a select and elite few” (p. 2) and that “the researcher ostensibly puts bias and subjectivity aside in the scientific research process by denying his or her identity” (p. 2). This is the quicksand I spent most of my intellectual life struggling against, only to sink deeper and more tightly in its grip.

Postmodernism's Promise

The gift of postmodernism is in shaking the once firmly rooted tree of our Western society's somewhat unconscious blessing, affirmation and prejudice towards the "façade of objectivity and freedom from bias in the dominant positivist paradigm" (Wall, 2006, p. 2). The modernist monkeys are losing grips on the branches. Postmodernism, defined by Michael Zimmerman (as cited in Atkisson, 1997), is a "movement that looks for alternatives to the basic political, social, epistemological, metaphysical, scientific and gender orientated categories of modernity" (p. 4). As such, he states that postmodernism also rejects "the Enlightenment and its consequences" (p. 4). For Wonacott (2001), postmodern's hallmark is viewing truth and knowledge as "not based on fixed foundation of objective reality. Instead, truths are located in specific sociocultural contexts, outside of which no vantage point exists" (p. 3). Far from denying or eliminating the traditional scientific method, or philosophy and rational thought for that matter, the goal of postmodernism is to "question its dominance and to demonstrate that it is possible to gain and share knowledge in many ways. From a postmodern viewpoint, having partial, local, and/or historical knowledge is still knowing" (Wall, 2006, p. 2). Lather (1991), citing Simon and Dippo, states, "We seem somewhere in the midst of a shift away from the concept of a found world, 'out there,' and toward a concept of constructed worlds" (p. 86). In a sense, the once very stable foundation of Modernity and the Enlightenment has crumbled as if they were giant houses of cards. What postmodernity has done in effect is create a context of doubt about any hegemonic truth claims and has opened

the door for the legitimating of many ways of knowing; it has removed the Archimedean point. For me, this has come with a huge sigh of relief.

Constructed Selves

That much of our knowledge, particularly our self-knowledge and identity, is socially and culturally constructed, either by the stories we tell each other or by the specific situatedness of ourselves in geographic location and time, has become evident to me. One need only to imagine, for a moment, being born to a different time and culture as evidence that our worldview, values and place in the fabric of life would be different and in fact we would be different selves. Born into a different time and place, one might be a polygamist, eat warm seal livers, pray to a different god(s), speak a radically different language or follow daily rituals foreign to us in the West. A culture's story is the story of its people and determines how things are and how we are to act. Each of us, from the time of our birth, is subjected to a constant and continuous series and stream of messages, signals and assumptions which we often have no choice but to adopt. It is a fluid and organic process and each of us may understand and interpret the messages differently. We are complex social constructs and embody the stories, myths and messages from our culture. Like viewing the world through multi-focal glasses, our very selves are filtered through the lenses of our culture. Fivush and Buckner (1997) state it well.

We argue that the self is not simply "influenced" by social factors, but that the very core of self-understanding is constructed through, and reflects on, social interactions. Rather than understanding the self in interpersonal space, we argue for understanding the self as a social-cultural process. (p. 176)

The stories I heard growing up were about being white, male, middle class, Acadian, Roman Catholic, Canadian, and a multiplicity of other signals and messages which have become a part of my identity.

The Lenses and Filters of Culture

When I was younger, I fancied myself as a landscape photographer with a keen eye for detail. My camera, a rather sophisticated single reflex lens model for the time, came with several different detachable lenses and filters. Our view of the world and our understanding of our place in it can be likened to the metaphor of a camera. Not only is our culture, identity and what we believe about the world filtered through the various lenses and filters, it is also the only way through which we can access and interact with the world and interpret its meaning. The camera, as a metaphor for our culture and stories, is the only medium we have to access, interpret and be in the world and that is why the stories we tell are so important.

To me, the ecological crisis is a crisis of human consciousness indicating that we have been telling and believing the wrong stories. For Uhl (2004), this is the first essential step in addressing the current global environmental crisis (p. 230). Secondly, it is important to realize how the modern Western culture and story has shaped our consciousness and our relationship to the earth. Finally, if we are to avert a major disaster, we must create or at least discover a new story, “one that engenders a more enlightened consciousness and leads humanity out of crisis, toward a just and life-sustaining world” (p. 230).

The Stories I've Heard

Back in the seventies, I recall spending many contented hours sitting on the edge of my great-grandmother's bed listening to her stories or just spending time together. At the time, I was learning to play the button accordion and I'm sure that she must have endured many unpleasant hours listening to the tentative squawks of the old green squeeze-box. Her room was a cordoned off corner of the massive living room at the front corner of my grandparents' old drafty farmhouse. Bright and spacious, her room wafted of heavy perfume mixed with the sour smell of old age and the walls were covered with religious imagery including several crucifixes and a hanging Rosary the size of a hula hoop. Mémé Chaisson spent most of her last days in that room saying her prayers, gazing out the picture window at the beautiful lilac hedge and, from her wheelchair in one corner, writing to her daughter in Boston; she lived to be ninety-nine and was alert until her sun set for the last time. It was in that room where her story became a part of mine and it was where I was fortunate enough to learn hers.

One of the things my great grandmother wanted to be was a doctor; she let it slip out one day as we were just talking about what I was going to be when I grew-up. She was a tall, stately woman who always carried herself with dignity and was well read and well versed. But on that day, the day she spoke quietly about her girlhood dream of being a practicing physician who healed those who suffered, I think I remember a small pearl of a tear roll down her face from behind her thick, wire-framed glasses and a faint look of

regret strained her soft and wrinkled face. Wanting to be a doctor was a part of *Mémé Chaisson's story*, but the overall story of her time, the late Nineteenth century in rural Prince Edward Island, was that women did not become educated nor become doctors; teachers maybe, nurses for sure, but not doctors. The story told to her *was that it was a man's world*; women were expected to get married, have children, tend the house, pick berries and make jam or else become a nun. Her story of hard work on the farmstead and the thickness and strength of her hands, cracked and hardened by caustic lye soap, hand milking the cows, reaping the crops and decades of pure physical labor, betrayed and symbolized those years of toil. Fittingly, one of the last gifts she gave me before she died *was a first edition of Thomas Merton's The Seven Story Mountain*, a book wrapped in a leather jacket with a beautiful butterfly stained with vivid natural dyes and embossed to bring out its patterned texture. She made that cover with her own hands but now, all these *years later, I'm struck with the title and the truth about stories.* (Excerpt from autoethnographic journal)

Narrative and the Representation of Experience

Like my great-grandmother Chaisson, I am a product of a story, or maybe of many stories, and those stories, far from being only a simple recounting of the biographical 'facts' of my life, are about understanding myself in terms of narrative, what Clandinin and Connelly (2000) call, "narrative fragments" (p. 17). Each life, including my own, is "enacted in storied moments of time and space, and reflected upon and understood in terms of narrative unities and discontinuities (p. 17).

Clandinin and Connelly assert that narrative is “the best way of representing and understanding experience” (p. 18). For Jerome Bruner (1996), “it is very likely the case that the most natural and easiest way in which we organize our experience and our knowledge is in terms of the narrative form” (p. 121). In other words, stories have implications for who we are, how we relate to the other, and to our understanding and adoption of a worldview and ethos (Allen, 1975, p. 3). In our relationship with the earth, the story is not only about the positivist way of knowing; an accumulation of facts, concepts and verifiable propositions only provides a partial picture, like viewing a television screen too closely as to see only a series of disconnected dots. Reductionism fails to comprehend how the parts relate to the whole and risks deconstructing the earth as a mechanistic collection of cogs, wheels, springs and chains. For Allen, “the point is that knowing and being encompasses more than information and empirical knowledge” (p. 3), but also include all those traditions, customs and narratives told from one generation to the next, passed on in continuity from elder to youth, to also include our “personal relationships and responses” (p. 2). As such, the totality of our life experiences, including our perceptions, emotions, decisions and actions, get stirred into the batter. Every life is a declaration of experience and identity and ultimately pays homage to the stories we were told.

Myths and Meaning-Making

That “no man (sic) is an island unto himself” is evident. The degree to which we are constructed as members of the human family lies largely to the extent that we take part in the stories, but more particularly, to the extent that we participate in the myths of our time and place. Myths are types of stories that have influence over the

basic core values and worldviews by which we live. On one hand, on the surface at least, they are sometimes viewed as falsehoods, fables and superstitions about the world, its peoples and their beliefs. Classical Greek mythology is an anthropomorphic account of the antics of the Mount Olympian pantheon where jealousies and dysfunction were the norm. The cannibalistic Chronos or the infidelities of Zeus can hardly be taken to have represented real-life characters or be the stuff of credible historical inquiry; but then, that was unlikely the intent.

On a deeper level, a myth is “a fictitious story which explains the meaning of life” (Seels & Fredette, 1993, p. 3). As such, they are powerful stories which express, at the deepest levels, a way to make sense of and experience life. In this context, Chronos and Zeus may be projections of the best and the worst humans can be. All people respond to mythologies; in fact, according to Northrop Frye (1982), “Mythology is not a datum but a factum of human existence: it belongs to the world of culture and civilization that man (sic) has made and still inhabits” (p. 37). For Austin (1990), “As long as we continue to be sentient beings we shall continue to need myth, since myth is the primary ground on which we articulate our experience of ourselves in our social and natural environment” (p. 5). Much different than campfire, bedtime or entertainment type stories, myths encompass the totality of what we accept, mostly unconsciously, as truth and, as Joseph Campbell states (2002), “...mythology is metaphorical of the psychological posture of the people to whom it pertains” (p. xiv). Like Jung’s archetypes, Plato’s pure forms or many religious mythologies and symbolisms, myths contain universal themes and commonalities albeit understood differently in various locations (Campbell, 2002).

When it comes to our relationship with the earth, myths have played a particularly powerful and dubious role in shaping our attitudes and actions towards the planet. For Norman Austin (1990), humans have created a “second body” of signifiers, language and artistic forms, which became “by happy accident, or inspiration, schooled to transcend the body of nature” (p. 4). By use of language and other symbolic systems, humans found ways of constructing the self and the self was thought of as independent of nature. The best way to do this is by using the power of myth as a vehicle for the message of our separation from the earth. Northrop Frye (1982) puts it best.

But the real interest of myth is to draw a circumference around a human community and look inward toward that community, not to inquire into the operations of nature. Naturally it will draw elements from nature, just as creative design in painting or sculpture would do. But mythology is not a direct response to the natural environment; it is part of the imaginative insulation that separates us from that environment. (p. 37)

And so, somewhere along the line our stories and myths in the West have emphasized our alienation and separation from the earth. These are the stories out of which I have been formed, our religious, political, academic, cultural and economical stories have mostly all been stories and myths of domination of humanity over the earth and its resources, what I call the paradigm of human hubris.

Gentle Giants of the Sea

I can't remember when my fascination with whales first began, nor why. There is something about those mighty beasts that speaks to a very deep

part of my soul. Maybe the answer is contained in the mystery of the ocean itself; great expanses of black water which makes up some seventy percent of our planetary home. To me, although I live on an island, the ocean was *always something "out there,"* accessible only to the few adventurous sorts or old salts, yet completely understood by none. The oceans are the stuff of dreams, teeming with life and perhaps containing within the totality of our desires and fears; deep archetypes reminiscent of our ancient evolutionary past. Whales are masters of the deep and, although their lungs crave the surface air, they live most of their lives submerged in seemingly effortless flight while engaged in sweet and eerily beautiful song.

A more probable account of my captivation with whales lies within famous literary depictions of the great beasts themselves. As a boy I can recall going to the theatre with my family to watch the 1940 Walt Disney classic *Pinocchio*. *At one point in Pinocchio's journey to become a real boy, he and Jiminy Cricket, acting on a cue from the Blue Fairy, were swallowed by Monstro, a terrifying sperm whale, while searching for his father Geppetto.* This singular act of heroism, although it cost him his life, earned Pinocchio what he always wanted, he became a real boy. I was struggling to become a man at that time, but I can clearly remember the feeling of dread I had for the puppet and his friends as they pondered possible avenues of escape from their cavernous keep. Rendolent of the biblical story of Jonah, Monstro personified *humanity's struggle with evil and as such, whales were stained with maleficence; fearful Leviathans intent on destroying all that is good.* "Then

Jonah prayed to *the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, saying, 'I called to the Lord, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and thou didst hear my voice''* (Jonah 2:1-2).

But in ways, the most famous whale antagonist was Moby Dick, Herman Melville's *mythical and atypical ivory-toothed pure white sperm whale* which became an object of obsession for the gnarly and bitter Captain Ahab. I read his book years ago, a tale of revenge towards the great white *whale's reluctance for capture* and taste for human blood. What struck me most was *Melville's portrayal of the whale as the embodiment of evil* and that he had the will and singular intention for destroying his pursuers.

"All that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the less of things; all truth and malice in it; all that cracks the sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made *practically assailable, in Moby Dick*" (Melville, 1851/2004, p. 155).

Again, the reputation of whales was corrupt and tarnished, leaving me with a distorted and confused view of these magnificent creatures. In the *words of Captain Ahab himself, "...to the last I grapple with thee; from hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake I spit my last breath at thee"* (p. 484). Like *the west coast Orca, a 'killer' was to be mistrusted, especially in matters of life and death*, and so whales embodied the ancient battle between light and darkness, the hero and the villain, the vanquished and the saved. Thankfully,

and with much relief, through time I came to know them as much different and *the ones I've met have become some of my most important teachers.*

I've been on several whale watching excursions in my life, mostly in the Bay of Fundy, the body of water which separates Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Maine. Known for the highest tides in the world, the Bay of Fundy is a Canadian national treasure and natural wonder of the world where the tides can ebb and flow some forty-five feet at a given moon, rising and falling on the black, slick volcanic basalt cliffs twice a day. The bay is also known for harboring a rich diversity of life, including tons of krill, those shrimp-like crustaceans which make the Bay of Fundy the preferred summer feeding grounds for a myriad of whale species and as a result, it has become the Mecca for cetacean enthusiasts from around the globe and has spawned an important eco-tourism sector in the area. I used to spend much of my summers there; the call of the whales drew me to the bay like a magnet attracts steel.

One particular excursion stands out in my mind and is one I will never forget. It was a beautiful, crisp autumn season several years ago when my wife, Cathy, and I decided to take our children on a whale watching tour in the Bay of Fundy. *As we left the ferry dock at Black's Harbor, New* Brunswick, I could feel the excitement building as we steamed towards what promised to be a wonderful family adventure. Grand Manan is a small island to the south of Saint John and is a part of New Brunswick. Noted for its dulce

production, it has become one of the principal destinations for viewing and encountering wild whales. This was to be a wonderful family vacation.

Early the next morning, we made our way to the dock where we were to meet our captain. Captain Richard was all that we expected, an older, thin framed gentleman with a white beard complete with a black brimmed blue *captain's hat, anchor badge to boot. He welcomed us aboard his concrete hulled ketch, assured us of its safety, and we were shortly on our way. That morning, it was dead calm and the water was glassy smooth. The fog was as thick as the fish chowder we would later eat for lunch. Not being able to use the sails and not being able to see through the soupy mist, Captain Richard reverted to diesel power and GPS navigation as we cruised south passing salmon weirs, busy fishers and pelagic birds. After two hours of sailing we had reached a spot over some 600 fathoms deep, he finally cut the power and we glided through the water like a paper airplane flies through the air. What happened next was truly amazing.*

The fog was still hovering above the calm waters and there was a quiet stillness to the air as we gradually floated to a stop. Then, a barely audible swoosh broke the silence as a whale exhaled its stale air; one or two at first, then, as if cued by a conductor, a sudden cacophony of swooshes erupted in an almost orchestrated syncopated rhythm. As the fog finally gave way to the *sun's strength, we realized to our delight, that we were surrounded by a great pod of whales which appeared to be joyously and playfully ushering in the new day. Suddenly, we were surrounded by the huge creatures, all blowing*

out billowing plumes of misty breath as they effortlessly slipped in and out of the surface, revealing their giant tail flukes as they prepared for another dive. All around were whale footprints, temporary circles of strangely boiling water, triggered by a mighty thrust of the tail, just above its descending trajectory. It was at that moment that I felt a certain ecstasy and a sense of profound emotion; not fear, but a sensitivity and feeling arising from the depths of my being, like reuniting with a long lost friend, I would call it euphoric. All on board sat in quiet awe and just uttered the occasional gasp at this rare and meaningful experience.

We had an extraordinary day that September. Whales breached and fed, taking huge truck load sized mouthfuls of water and then straining out krill through their hanging baleen plates; they played and sang haunting songs to each other; we saw dozens of humpbacks and even saw thirty or so highly endangered North Atlantic right whales, about ten percent of the estimated total world population. Yet, from amongst the steady stream of encounters, one moment from that day crisply stands out. At one point, a giant humpback which, it seemed to me, was about sixty feet long, decided to check out our ship. Turning to face us, he torpedoed himself right for the middle of the starboard side, a scene reminiscent of a World War II U-Boat attack as he pushed a rolling wave with his snout and left a foamy, white water fan in his wake. I grabbed and held on tightly to my son and braced myself for the jolt. This was the stuff of bad dreams that sit you up in the night. Maybe Captain Ahab was right? But, at the last possible second, the great whale slowed,

turned parallel with the ship, and there, not five feet from the hull, raised his massive head and barnacled snout, and gazed with curiosity at the crowd assembling to see him. I could see my own reflection in his softball sized eye; who, I asked myself, was watching whom? When his interest was sated, he gently and silently slipped back beneath the bay like a submarine emptying its airlocks and swam away.

Sometimes you don't know when life-altering moments happen to you, it's only upon reflection, and with an open and honest spirit, that the true meaning of an event becomes evident. So it was with the Bay of Fundy whales. What started off as a simple family vacation, ended up changing my outlook in a real and profound way. I began to see whales as the harbingers of another way of being in the world. In the serene environment of that infamous bay, I experienced a deep sense of peace and privilege. The whales I encountered that autumn day did not stir-up feelings of fantasy or fear, lamentation or loathing, but instead, these magnificent and majestic creatures helped me to confront my own attitudes and self-awareness regarding the natural world and my place in it. That day I entered into a communion with those gentle giants of the sea and their natural surroundings; I saw and was seen. It became not only about preservation, conservation or an end to the harpoon's flight, but, more important for me at the time, was about entering into their world and appreciating their intrinsic value. Whales, despite enduring humanity's centuries old assault, remain as one of this planet's enduring icons of hope and symbols of nature's grandeur. As well, they have much to

teach us as they are extremely social, nurturing, playful, and communicative and are rarely violent, values we can use more of in our daily relationships with ourselves and with the earth.

A number of years ago, while I was teaching in a school in the western part of the province, a report came one day in May that a sperm whale had beached itself on a Kildare shore. I thought about that whale all day, musing to myself that it must have had a death-wish as *I've heard of whales and dolphins* doing this before. At the end of the school day, I decided to go down and take a look for myself as I had never seen a sperm whale. Yet again, the call of the whales beckoned me.

Sperm whales are one of the toothed whales like the Orcas, their ivory prized by scrimshaw engravers of old. They feed by locating squid and fish and carnivorously eating them whole. Sperm whales can dive up to six kilometers deep. Solitary and nomadic by nature, sperm whales can live as many as 70-100 years, can grow to 20 meters long and have the largest brains in the animal kingdom. It was surprising to have one of these creatures appear on the shores of P.E.I.; a visit from Moby Dick or Monstro? It was an event I will not forget.

As I approached the shore where the whale was reported to be, I could see him lying in about two feet of water. He was nestled in between two shoals about fifty feet from the shore. A great sadness came over me as I silently walked to where others had gathered; my head down and my hands in my trouser pockets. He was still living, his lungs heaving and straining under the

weight of his gigantic mass, his breaths quickened and shortened and his tail listlessly bobbed up and down as if shear will could propel him to deeper water. His skin, shiny and grey, bore the scars of many encounters with *merchant ships or fishers' nets*; the flesh was torn in places from his spine. I found myself wondering what was going through his mind? Here was an ordinarily shy and allusive creature turned into a spectacle of amusement. In his agony, he endured and tolerated approaching people; what could he do otherwise but accept his fate and the Via Dolorosa ahead? The shallow waters of the Kildare Capes became his Garden of Gethsemane producing agony and unease, pain and confusion; emotions I think shared by many standing on the shore. Soon, veterinarians, dressed in orange colored slicks, *began to mount the Leviathan in an effort to bring its suffering to an end. I'll* never forget the scene as they attempted to drive a sharpened pipe into the *creature's heart; one man holding the pipe as if a fence post*, the other swinging the maul, hoping to provide a way to pour down some toxic concoction designed to bring respite from the suffering and induce permanent sleep. The sound of the sledge-hammer striking steel echoed off the capes—clink, clink, clink— they reminded me of modern centurions at an extraordinary passion play. The great whale, flinching at each blow, would not give up its dignity as the vets, unable to penetrate the web of blubber, sinew, cartilage and bone, gave up their heroic act. The whale, exhausted and relieved, died an hour or so later. I was reminded of an old Crosby, Stills and Nash song called The Last Whale:

Over the years you swam the ocean

Following feelings of your own

Now you are washed up on the shoreline

I can see your body lie

It's a shame you have to die

To put shadow on our eye. (Crosby, Stills, & Nash, 2004)

My encounters with whales have helped me to accept the mystery contained within us all. Whales have given me a direct and immediate sense of the splendor and elegance of creation but also of its shadow side; pain, *suffering and death. The lessons I've learned from whales isn't just about them, but about some of the deep oceans and caverns of humanity's soul.* Whales are intelligent creatures and may be at least as social as ourselves and they have proven themselves to act benignly towards the environment and towards ourselves. Yet, over the years, we have chosen to violently and systematically slaughter them to the point where many species are on the brink of extinction. There is nothing like human hubris to cause havoc on the seas. *And so, as we've abused our 'dominion' over nearly all of the planet, the whales are telling us that there is a different way to be. Maybe we need to heal ourselves before the earth can be ultimately saved from us.* (Excerpt from autoethnographic journal)

You Shall Have Dominion

Personally, I'd want to hear a creation story, a story that recounts how the world was formed, how things came to be, for contained within creation

stories are relationships that help to define the nature of the universe and how cultures understand the world in which they exist. (King, 2003, p. 10)

Since ancient times, the notion that humans should dominate nature has been a part of humanity's cultural ethos and our myths. The Epic of Gilgamesh, possibly one of our oldest written stories, depends on an ecological disaster as the basis of the young king's heroism. Even Utnapistim, the wise old sage from the North, could not lead him to escape his humanity and his quest for immortality nevertheless ended in vain. The Judeo-Christian tradition, which posits a transcendent God unto whom humans imagine themselves in "his" likeness, sees God as exhibiting unlimited dominion and control over nature, spurring a worldwide flood for the retribution of sins. Indeed, in Genesis, one might note the ontological foundation for environmental degradation as humans are set apart from the world and are, as a matter of course, granted superior status, instructed to provide names for all the beasts of the land, birds in the sky and fish of the sea and granted dominion over them; the myth of earth as the Horn of Plenty still persists today. The creation myth of Genesis has imbued us with a profound sense of paradise lost as we became exiled into a world of pain and death; the Garden of Eden remains a powerful mythological symbol for our disconnect from nature as the earth became a springboard for diving into the pool of paradise; we see ourselves as having to escape our exile and find our true home (Dalton, 1990; O'Murchu, 2000). The myth of unlimited economic, social and technological growth, the primacy of the individual, anthropocentrism, patriarchal dominance and many others are the myths which I have lived with and are a part of my culture's story and mythology. The process of disrupting and deconstructing their

power and rooting out their antagonisms towards the earth where, as it were, they were used to explain and justify our mistreatment of the environment is an important step for me and a humble exercise in realizing my participation in assuming that the world was created for me. Solving the ecological crisis will involve disrupting and deconstructing the old myths of human arrogance towards the earth and adopting new stories to tell.

Myth ~ Anthropocentrism

Formal education is a human activity and “by what is included or excluded, students are taught that they are part of or apart from the natural world” (Orr, 2004, p. 12). My education was a typical journey from grade to grade, subject to subject. I was told that the main reason to stay in school was to be able to get a good job, preferably better than my father’s. The earth, I learned, was there to offer me the ‘good life,’ and an education would allow me to win the benefits of the modern march towards economic prosperity. Care for the earth and a relationship with the earth was just not in the curriculum. For the most part, my education happened in classrooms and focused on the skills I needed to be successful in the modern world. I now know that the core premise onto which my education was built was of human mastery and control over nature to meet our own ends. Alienation and disconnection from the earth was never considered and the bedrock of the whole enterprise “resulted from modern industrialized societies’ cultivation of which the earth (or ‘nature’) is construed and exploited as an object of instrumental value” (Gough & Kesson, 1992, p. 2).

Many recent authors have written about the apparent and increasing disconnection humanity has had with the earth (Berry, 1999; Knudtson & Suzuki, 1992; Miller, 2000; Swimme & Berry, 1992). Part of the reasons for this disconnect and disharmony can be traced and is rooted in the deep historical and cultural understanding of who we have seen ourselves vis-à-vis the natural world. Faulconer (1993), using Historical Research Methodology, has traced the evolution of the underlying beliefs in environmental consciousness from the 1940's to the present. Although each decade had differing foci of concern, she found that over time the ecological debates have centered around two fundamental, yet polar opposite, viewpoints. One places humanity as being over and above nature where human individuals and societies are considered the owners, managers and stewards of the earth and its resources; the other regards the totality of humanity as being equal citizens within the community of subjects on the earth; anthropocentrism versus ecocentrism. For most of Occidental thought and history, humanity has understood itself as being over and above nature and has espoused a "proclamation of difference" (Gough & Kesson, 1992, p. 2); individuals and societies have considered themselves to be the owners, managers and stewards of the land and of the world. This paradigm or world view, which follows the basic tenants of Western epistemological and scientific assumptions; namely, that humans are separate and distinct from nature, assumes the world to be ordered, predictable and mechanistic. Dunlap (1980) argues that this 'exceptionalist' attitude has its roots in the anthropocentrism of most Western thought where human beings have considered themselves as being separate

and distinct from nature and should therefore conduct themselves as having dominion over the earth using its resources widely for strictly human ends.

An alternate view to the anthropocentric ethos is that of ecocentrism or, what some call Deep Ecology. Michael Zimmerman (as cited in Atkisson, 1997) describes Deep Ecology as being founded on two basic principles:

One is the scientific insight into the interrelatedness of all systems of life on Earth, together with the idea that anthropocentrism— human centeredness— is a misguided way of seeing things. Deep Ecologists say an ecocentric attitude is more consistent with the truth about the nature of life on Earth. Instead of regarding humans as something completely unique or chosen by God, they see us as integral threads in the fabric of life. They believe we need to develop a less dominating posture towards the earth if we and the planet are to survive. (p. 2)

In the ecocentric view, the world, and in fact the universe is seen as an organic, interrelated communion of subjects (Berry, 1999; Swimme & Berry, 1992). Deep Ecology, a term coined by Swedish philosopher Arne Naess in 1973, rejects anthropocentrism and seeks to clarify and dispel the underlying presuppositions of the West's economic and consumerist approach to value. For Deep Ecologists, all forms of life have intrinsic value.

Education can either help or hinder the evolution of environmental awareness and praxis relative to contemporary ecological concerns. However, many educators operate unconsciously within modernity's ideology of human autonomy from and

dominion over the natural world. Education built on anthropocentrism will only address symptoms.

Education has the choice to open the door to a new model of environmental education founded on an ethic of ecocentricity that accepts the moral imperative to help students construct a value system that works for the natural world, or to unwittingly perpetuate a set of beliefs that actually works against the creation of a truly sustainable system. (Faulconer, 1993, p. 16)

Any true reform of the way education is conceived and practiced, as reflective of the way we perceive ourselves in relation to the earth, would have to examine closely the world view of anthropocentrism. Anthropocentrism, by definition, imagines the earth as only a commodity, and its human-centered, metaphorical and value-laden language serves only to exacerbate the paradigms of environmental destruction. According to Swimme and Berry (1992), “Education might well be defined as knowing the story of the universe, of the planet Earth, of life systems, and of consciousness, all as a single story” (p. 256). Education in all its forms must recognize that we are a part of the earth community, not apart from it.

Myth ~ Scientific and Technological Progress

Belief in technological fixes is, in some ways, symptomatic of a wider faith in human inventiveness and modern science. Nearing the status of a secular cult, science and technology have served humanity as it makes discoveries about the world which have proven to be of great benefit to humanity, while, at the same time, have added to our anthropocentric self-conception where all nature can be understood, manipulated and managed. The hegemony of scientific and technological discourses has led to the

myth in which, given enough time, money and knowledge, we can manage the earth with all its complexity despite the current overwhelming ecocrisis. In other words, this myth is predicated on an assumption that our rationally formulated procedures, which are imagined to be value free, are part of a mechanistic world view which is our ultimate “expression of progress and modernization, and “Man’s” power to control nature” (Bowers, 1993, p. 167). Given the scale of the ecological disruption to the earth now, it is increasingly difficult to continue maintaining the once rock-hard beliefs and values of the modern progressive model which appears to be deepening the crisis. We walk on the cusp of a double-edged sword and many do not challenge the hegemonic truth claims of the technology/scientific paradigm where everything can be managed and controlled for the good of humanity. David Orr warns:

What might be managed, however, is us: human desires, economics, politics, and communities. But our attention is caught by those things that avoid hard choices implied by politics, morality, ethics, and common sense. It makes for better sense to reshape ourselves to fit a finite planet than to reshape the planet to fit our infinite wants. (2004, p. 9)

Many people, including governments and education systems, place their faith in new technologies as the solution to the earth’s ecological woes. True, appropriate and affordable clean technology is important, and, paradoxically, science and technology have played an indispensable role in bringing about our awareness with respect to the ecocrisis, supplying us with many of the indicators which are outside of our immediate experience, but, in the end, it cannot bear the weight of the total cornucopian dream.

One other effect of the wide spread and ubiquitous use of technology happens, in C. A. Bowers' words, "as the student uses the computer for specific educational purposes, the computer is helping to alter the symbolic foundations of the students' culture" (1995, p. 12). Computers and other forms of digital technologies have great utilitarian value and contribute much to our world, however, it is possible that the line between reality and the virtual reality of bits and bytes can get blurred, and given the corner-stone status of technology in schools, almost to the point of being a core subject, it is wise for education to consider all its possible effects.

Many of the current cultural patterns in Western, globalized societies are formed by modernity's insistence on the subjugation and exploitation of nature as humanity's primary role in inhabiting the earth. According to Bowers (1995), computers can hide these patterns hence deepening and reinforcing ecological degradation.

Cultural orientations amplified through educational computing are the very same cultural orientations that have contributed to destroying the environment in the name of progress: an anthropocentric view of the universe, an instrumental way of knowing, a view of knowledge that maintains the mythic dimensions of modern science where facts are kept separate from values, the emphasis on individual thought as being based on data, and the assumption that new and experimental knowledge should have more authority in people's lives than forms of knowledge that have evolved over generations. (p. 12)

Societal reform, with a view to increasing our relationship with the earth, while not denying the importance and utility of technology, must strive to inculcate in us a

sense of our dependence on natural systems and our interdependence with all other forms of life.

Myth ~ Self-help and the Primacy of the Individual

One of the most pervasive myths of the modernist ideology is the assumption of the primacy of the individual, one which is called the “narcissistic orientation” by C. A. Bowers (1995, p. 16), and is defined by Edmund O’Sullivan (1999) as the belief that the individual is an “autonomous social unit” (p. 193). One need only to view the plethora of self-help books available at a local bookstore or appreciate the popularity of television shows like Oprah or Dr. Phil. Although in the context of education, C. A. Bowers (1995) outlines part of the problem:

Today, professors of education and classroom teachers continue to ignore the possibility that the ecological crisis might have profound implications for rethinking core liberal assumptions that make the student’s direct experience the epicenter of the learning process. Teaching students about recycling, the dangers of polluting the environment and the characteristics of such natural systems as wetlands and primal forests are not seen as being in conflict with also reinforcing the modern view on the primacy of the student’s own subjective experience. (p. 16)

The dilemma with individualism is that it leads to a lack of deep understanding about integration, dependency and community which can, for O’Sullivan (1999), lead to a profound alienation and a self truncated from the earth (p. 224).

The down side of individualism is now being felt at all levels of cultural life. The self-encapsulated individual...has profound implications for the loss of a cosmological sense that links the individuals to the wider community and subsequently to the universe itself. (p. 194)

Another consequence for O'Sullivan (1999) is that individualism actually entrenches the old, anthropomorphic, mechanistic view of the world inherited from modernity and is responsible for elevating the growing ecocrisis. "From the mechanistic and individualistic world view, that creates nature as a mechanism, we ultimately see the subversion of the integral community, supposedly for our own advantage" (p. 224). Even when there is a sense of community, that sense is often limited to the human community; "the world outside of the human is excluded" (p. 193).

The myth of individualism, or individual autonomy, also "hides the multiple dependencies upon patterns of thinking, use of technologies, and the reenactment of social conventions" (Bowers, 1993, p. 26). We must be able to instill in ourselves a sense of the wider world and communities and of our interdependence with the earth community as a whole.

Myth ~ Mind over Matter

Perhaps the most maligned and targeted thinker for environmental writers is poor old René Descartes, that 17th Century French philosopher who was so tortured by his quest for certitude that his brand of rationalism, made explicit in his now infamous cogito ergo sum, is synonymous with modernity and its effects. In employing strict and methodical doubt, Descartes' great project was to emancipate

humanity from idealism with the development and primacy of reason. Cartesianism is the quintessential expression of an anthropocentric stance mired in the language of binaries. Descartes (cited in Anscombe & Geach, 1637/1977) writes:

I have, on one hand, a clear and distinct idea of myself taken simply as a conscious, not an extended, being; and, on the other hand, a distinct idea of body, taken simply as an extended, not a conscious, being; so it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and could exist without it. (pp. 114-115)

Descartes' dualism of mind and body leads him to where the natural world is wholly distinct from humans (p. 69), and is seen as mechanical (p. 120), operating from a Natural Law perspective like wind-up clockworks. For Thomas Berry (2006), Cartesian thought has led to a "desouled" (p. 26) world where there is only mind and extension. According to Thomas Berry, until the relatively recent advent of modernity, every "living organism was by definition an ensouled being" (p. 26); that is, everything was animated or had an anima, the Greek word for soul. Descartes (1637/1977), with several strokes of a feather quill pen, almost single-handedly shattered this understanding by dividing the world into mind and matter; *res cogitans* and *res extensa*.

Matter was to be known by mathematical measurement. The animal world was simply an extension of material forces coming together by a synchronicity of their activities. He identified every living being as mechanism. There was no vital principle, not even a vital biological principle. What was not mind was matter. This removal of soul began the whole mechanistic trend of the modern world. (p. 26)

The environmental crisis currently facing the earth community has proven the limits of modernity as its influences still underpin our cultural, economic and educational structures. Our disconnection from the natural order of things can be viewed as a consequence of the rationalistic and dualistic residue of modernity. Barrett and White (2001) state,

The modernist hierarchy of primary “rational” egoism and its technological activities over “secondary,” “irrational” processes of iconic and metaphoric communication may be viewed as responsible for the ecological crisis. This is so because modernist rationality amplified by industrial technology has disrupted the living forms and patterns of species and ecosystems for the purposes of rational egotistical advantage. (p. 244)

Michel Foucault (1984), in his now famous essay, *What is Enlightenment?*, accurately characterizes modernity “rather as an attitude than as a period of history. And by ‘attitude,’ I mean a mode of relating to contemporary reality; a voluntary choice made by certain people; in the end, a way of thinking and feeling” (p. 5). Modernity, having influenced our self-conception as being distinct from nature, and as having spawned the Enlightenment project “of secularized authority and redemption” is no longer philosophically tenable; it is “the ‘no longer’ . . . with its central assumption of human capacity to shape ourselves and our worlds” (Lather, 1991, p. 87). Modernity’s assertion is that since we have intellect, culture and technology, then we are an ‘exception’ from the world with no ecological constraints (Dunlap, 1980).

Today we live in a postmodern world. Postmodernity, especially in the wake of modern and enlightenment human arrogance, has rightly critiqued the epistemological and metaphysical assumptions so entrenched in the fabric of the modern structures over the last 300 years. If we are to confront the current and growing ecological crisis, then education must adopt a new consciousness, one which shifts our modern, and in some ways postmodern, self-understanding from the dualistic, anthropocentric world view of ourselves as subjects and all else as objects, to a more ecocentric world view paradigm where we see ourselves as being interdependent with all other beings on the earth in a communion of subjects.

Myth ~ The Real Original Sin

In an article written by Lynn White Jr. (1967), he states that the “Christian dogma of man’s (sic) transcendence of and rightful master over, nature” (p. 11) can be viewed as one of the root causes of our ecological ills. As such, “Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt” (p. 11). Growing up, and even today, I never heard a word in our church regarding the sanctity of the earth excepting when the old hymn, For the Beauty of the Earth was chosen as the processional by the adult choir. If anything, nature and the natural world were seen as manifestations of the power of the creator God, if for nothing else, to show how much better it would be once we passed on. True liberation only occurred after death when we would be released from our earthly flesh and join the communion of saints in Heaven. I could never understand why, if this was the case, we should look forward to the resurrection of the body at the parousia or believe that Jesus was able to become fully human. To me, the

immanence of God was and is far too under-stated and the incarnation can be construed as to indicate a divinity in nature.

From Thomas Berry's perspective, "We are radically orientated away from the natural world. It has no rights; it exists for human utility, even if for spiritual utility" (1990, p. 80). To him, our historic sense of the divine, especially in the west, has mostly been verbal and textual. The revelation of the divine has been passed on through scriptures and traditions; human words and actions, but rarely through nature. As a species, whether one is a believer or not, our anthropocentric sense of being at the center of the universe and that all things apart from us, animate and inanimate, are there for our use, is embedded in our collective psyches and operates, mostly unconsciously, just under the surface of our skin as we go about our daily activities. Many religious stories and beliefs have contributed to this collective archetype of entitlement; burning the forests, over-fishing the seas, polluting the air, and digging up the landscapes are seen as advancing the human project and the instrumental value placed on the earth and its resources are, in some ways, divinely sanctioned.

It is difficult to truly over-estimate the power formal religions have over established world views. Theism, the relatively recent notion that God is at once wholly immanent and wholly transcendent, is more often a given, with the later emphasized. For most Western religions in particular, humans are the crowning glory of creation, the very *raison d'être* for a bountiful earth, and are created in the image of the transcendent God. However, for at least ninety percent of human existence on the earth, we lived in relative harmony within the land in tribal societies scattered throughout the world; our primal connection with the earth, and in some cases with

the universe itself, was a given and the cycles of the days, months and years provided a touchstone for a deep relationship with the wider realities (O'Murchu, 2000, p. 56). Although not entirely benign (Krech, 2000), the majority of our earthly history has been at least sustainable; the earth, by virtue of our dependence on it for our very existence, was considered sacred and worthy of respect. With the advent of formal religions, and the accompanying stories of our origins, humanity's experience of being on the earth has become one of domination and exile; of sin and redemption.

The well known Genesis creation story, where God set in motion all the celestial bodies and created the earth ex nihilo, complete with all the beasts, birds and fish; and seeing that it needed a steward, created the disobedient man from the dust of the earth and a woman from his rib, has deeply conditioned us into believing that the earth is ours for the taking and that the human subjugation of the planet has been ordained by God. The creation story of Genesis has imbued us with a profound sense of paradise lost as we became exiled into a world of pain and death. By disobeying God and giving into temptation at the trunk of the Tree of Knowledge, Adam set forth a 'fall' from grace known as Original Sin. Called 'The Fall,' Christianity has grown to reject anything prior to the beginning of soteriological history. According to O'Murchu (2000):

The sacred story of the previous millennia — the immediacy of spiritual connection with the elements of nature, with the rhythms of wind and sea, with the changing and cyclic seasons, with the tradition of the Great Mother Earth Goddess — is subjected to the barbaric forces of patriarchal domination.

Humans are expelled from the garden of life; we become strangers in a foreign land. (p. 57)

Carolyn Merchant (2004) sums it up nicely, “With the Fall from Eden, humanity abandons an original, ‘untouched’ nature and enters history. Nature is now a fallen world and humans fallen beings” (p. 18). For Berry (2006), the belief in the fallen nature of humanity, born with the sting and stain of original sin, has exacerbated our feelings of exile and of “the loss of primordial innocence” (p. 26). Our exile, symbolized by Adam and Eve’s banishment from the Garden of Eden, can be broken with a Messiah, one who saves and can redeem the world. Whereas initially the stars, beasts and all God’s creation were good, and even the dust of the earth from which Adam was fashioned was good, in the wake of his disobedience, the ground becomes cursed and Heaven becomes the recovered garden (Merchant, 2004). Fall/Redemption spirituality means that “We are redeemed not simply from sin but from the natural world itself” (Berry, 2006, p. 26). Our home became somewhere else and sometime later; the earth, maligned and condemned because of human choice, became a temporal home as if Babylon, a stop over to the land of milk and honey; the Garden of Eden became the Garden of Gethsemane, a Diaspora of pain, suffering and death, endured with the hope of better things to come.

For me, the Genesis myth, as normally interpreted, has had such enormous power to frame the natural world as wholly other and objectified the earth to the point where we had all but lost our emotional, aesthetic, ethical and even physical connection with it. According to Thomas Berry (1990), “The natural world is the larger sacred community to which we belong” (p. 81) and “it is the wonder and

majesty of the universe that evokes the sense of the divine origin and sacred character of the universe” (2006, p. 26). The key is to regard the universe as a communion of living subjects, not a collection of unrelated objects. Matthew Fox (1983), a proponent of creation-centered spirituality, rejects fall/redemption spirituality, a spiritual view that regards nature and humanity as ‘fallen’ and looks for God in individual souls (p. 11). Fox argues for a “global awakening” (p. 15) where all religions realize that they share one thing in common: creation.

As we move from an egological to an ecological consciousness, this basic understanding of our true interdependence will overcome our tendencies to make battle with each other. Teilhard de Chardin felt this way when he wrote that “our consciousness, rising above the growing (but still too limited) circles of family, country and race, shall finally discover that the only natural and real human unity is the spirit of the earth.” All humans are born from the earth, are nurtured from it, and are destined to return to it. What is more universal than that? All religions, when they are true to themselves, celebrate this truth. (pp. 15-16)

Myth ~ In the Name of the Father

Perhaps one of the most pervasive social structures to have contributed to the ecological crisis is what I consider the pathological dominance of patriarchy.

Patriarchy is a gender issue and it is a term used to categorize social structures as having a deep and systemic male bias and prejudice. From the Latin pater meaning ‘father,’ patriarchal tendencies have been a part of human existence in almost every society and in every historical period. For Thomas Berry (1990), patriarchy has

influenced Western ideals in four historical establishments: in Classical empires, ecclesiastical organizations, nation-state notions and in the modern corporate establishments. Hence it is hooked into our educational, religious, political and economic structures as a subversive principle which has led to the subjugation of generations of women. For Patrick Curry (2006), the “master mentality” has always been present in human history and can be linked to the “capitalist and techno-scientific exploitation of nature” (p. 96). Boosted by the binary language of modernity, patriarchy can be analyzed as:

Dualism, whereby all life is ordered into two opposing categories; value-laden hierarchies, whereby dualism is not neutral, but what is ‘up’ has more value than what is ‘down’; and the role of what is ‘lower’ is to serve the needs of what is ‘higher’. (p. 96)

For Curry (2006), the relevant dualisms are set-up as a hierarchy of value; humanity over nature, male over female, and reason over emotion (p. 96). One might also add mind over matter, spirit over body, heaven over earth and culture over nature.

According to the “master mentality,” the second of the terms are regarded as feminine and are subordinate to the first. These value-laden hierarchies, institutionalized and promulgated by Christianity and the dominance of Greek philosophy, have been affirmed by modernity and the Scientific Revolution which regarded reason as the pinnacle of human characteristics and science as the highest expression of reason. According to Curry (2006), this implicitly and firmly excluded women and as such, modern science became deeply prejudiced against both women and nature (p. 96). The patriarchal equation, rooted in the dualisms of modernity, can be written as:

“humanity = male = reason, over and against nature = female = emotion” (p. 97). Patriarchy and the assumption of gender roles linked to the so often shameful treatment of women, is a systemic structure onto which the educational, religious, political and economic edifices of Western civilization are built. For Thomas Berry (1990), “Patriarchy becomes the original sin, the primordial and all-encompassing evil through all generations of Western society during the past five millennia” (p. 144).

One answer to the over-arching patriarchal structure has been feminism. Feminism, since its earliest times, has sought to deconstruct the hegemony of male dominance by arguing for the difference between gender and sex and by extending to women “the subjectivity, agency, autonomy, and claims to culture assumed ‘naturally’ by men” (Longenecker, 2007, p. 1). Central to the feminist discourse has always been the relationship of women to nature (p. 1). Ecofeminism is a particular branch of feminism which makes the connection between the subjugation of women and ecological degradation. According to Karen Warren (2000), the term ‘ecofeminism’ is an umbrella reference for a variety of positions which are collectively concerned with the “unjustified domination-subordinate relationships” (p. xiv). She refers to “Others” as all those excluded, marginalized and devalued; besides women, the term “Other” can also refer to people of color, children, the poor and to those she refers to as “earth Others” or nature (p. 1). Using gender analysis as her starting point, Warren views ecofeminism “as a feminist approach when exploring women-other human Other-nature interconnections” (p. 2). According to the dominant myth of patriarchy, both women and nature share in a subordinate and

instrumental relationship with men and both are deemed to be of the feminine gender as a means of control and exploitation. The “unjustified domination-subordinate relationships” (Warren, 2000, p. xiv) have allowed nature, as assumed to be more closely affiliated with the feminine, to be viewed as mostly instrumental by societies where patriarchy exists as a social sanction.

It is not difficult to see how the old story of male dominance has contributed to human abuse of the earth. In his seminal book entitled *Original Blessing* (1983), Matthew Fox argues that the old religious story emphasizes what have been regarded as masculine traits. The old story is patriarchal, ascetic, introspective, egological, particular, elitist, dualistic and is described as climbing Jacob’s ladder. A creation-centered story focuses on being feminine, aesthetic, cosmic, ecological, universal, inclusive, dialectic and is described as dancing Sara’s circle (pp. 316-317). This is the challenge, to disrupt the old stories of domination and exile and to tell different stories, stories which befriend the earth and are in keeping with our true nature as children of the earth, connected to the wider story of the universe itself.

CHAPTER THREE:

WONDER, AWE AND THE EARTH AS SACRED REALITY

A Lesson from Ants

In the parking lot where I currently have my office, there are several colonies of tenacious and tiny brown ants that have made their homes beneath the fissures in the black asphalt. Attracted by their mounds of red sand, I stopped one sunny afternoon to observe their purposeful and seemingly urgent activity as, like Aesop's fabled ant preparing for the winter's meager offerings, they scurried and scooted in and out of the ant-world entrance, busily carrying out the duties of their assigned cast, unselfishly working constantly for the common good of the whole. Feeling like a child again, I stooped to get a closer look at one particularly busy community. I could see one ant at a time in quick succession carry out one grain of sand from the apple seed sized door and strategically place it on the ever expanding berm surrounding the hole; it looked like a sliced in half, cinnamon encrusted bagel which no doubt served to hold back the flood waters of even a modest rain. Fixated and fascinated, my thoughts turned to what an amazing organism an ant colony is which, in this instance, after millions of years of evolution, was able to eek out survival just under my car tires in the middle of a seemingly barren sheet of tar and aggregate. Excavating from their subterranean caves and tunnels, they created a secret world seldom noticed by us unless done so in the middle of a well manicured lawn. Some set out on long-distance foraging expeditions returning later by following the scent of the exact path in order to share their well earned caché; "The ants go marching one by one, hurrah, hurrah." In the words of Joni Mitchell, we may have "paved paradise and put up a parking

lot,” yet the lives of these ants defy her lament and prove that life on this planet, even if considered minutia or a nuisance, is truly wondrous and awe inspiring. Harvard’s Edward O. Wilson, a respected and noted authority on the earth’s biodiversity, has spent most of his life studying ants. For him, even though most of us live in human-created environments of concrete, asphalt and glass, the opportunity to come in contact with the world’s wild creatures are most evident in the tiniest quarters and garrets of the world; the ant world is our world.

They are everywhere, dark and ruddy specks that zigzag across the ground and down holes, milligram-weight inhabitants of an alien civilization who hide their daily rounds from our eyes. For over 50 million years, ants have been overwhelmingly dominant insects everywhere on the land outside the polar and alpine ice fields. By my estimate, between 1 and 10 million billion individuals are alive at any moment, all of them together weighing, to the nearest order of magnitude, as much as the totality of human beings. (as cited in Suzuki, 2003, p. 199)

For Wilson, the lesson of ants offers a truly sobering thought:

If we were to vanish today, the land environment would return to the fertile balance that existed before the human population explosion.... But if the ants were to disappear, tens of thousands of other plant and animal species would perish also, simplifying and weakening the land ecosystem almost everywhere. (p. 199)

We are connected, or rather interconnected, with the tiniest of worlds, but also with the largest of realities, the universe. We stand on the cusp of the micro and the macro;

the arris and intersection of many worlds.

We Are Stardust

For we will recover our sense of the wonder and our sense of the sacred only if we appreciate the universe beyond ourselves as a revelatory experience of that numinous presence whence all things come into being. Indeed, the universe is the primary sacred reality. (Berry, 1999, p. 49)

When Joni Mitchell first stepped onto the wet stage at Woodstock forty years ago, the lyrics to one of the songs she performed proved to be both poetic and prophetic.

We are stardust

Billion year old carbon

We are golden

Caught in the devil's bargain

And we've got to get ourselves back to the garden

It is a curious and humble thought to entertain that, as Carl Sagan once said, "*We are made of stardust.*" For the majority of humanity's recorded history, we, at least in the West, have seen ourselves as privileged creatures in the *cosmic hierarchy, fashioned in the image of an unseen god.* "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he *created them*" (Gen. 1:27). To have received this status in the grand scheme of things was to prop our species up onto the proverbial pedestal; it is no wonder we have been cursed with the arrogance of believing that we are at the center of all that exists and revolves around the earth. For centuries,

perhaps millennia, our Ptolemaic consciousness has displaced our concern for and rootedness in the earth with an upwards heavenly gaze and a longing for the land of milk and honey. *“Our Father, who art in Heaven” seemed like a long ways away yet was as close as our last breath; “Thy will be done on Earth” but a springboard to everlasting and eternal bliss.*

My experience of the universe and of being a citizen of the earth is quite different. I know the old story *well, where somehow Adam’s folly and disobedience earned humanity’s carnal nature and permanent excommunication from what was once paradise; a land that God saw as good. The world then became our adopted place, a cursed land to which Adam was sent “to till the ground from which he was taken” (Gen. 3:23), but not our home; our redemptive home became somewhere else. It is interesting to see how this experience of being exiled became the primary reference for so many successive generations. I was born into the twentieth century, a time when the old story of the universe was being shaken to its roots as NASA’s Apollo program burst through gravity’s pull and took us to the moon; no more do we need to resurrect the sun each morning with the sacrifice of an Aztec virgin’s blood or wonder at the strength of Atlas staining under the weight of the world’s mountains and oceans; Dante’s terrible Inferno has been doused and we do not search the four corners of the earth for Milton’s paradise lost. Our cosmic understanding of our place in the universe became deeper than perhaps even Galileo’s wildest dreams; the earth became known as “Spaceship Earth,” spinning and hurtling through the ether carrying with it,*

as far as we know, the totality of life; we became universe sojourners hitchhiking through space and time. For many, God has been liberated from her paradise prison and has become accessible throughout the great liturgy of the universe. *I like what Annie Dillard had to say, "It could be that God has not absconded but spread, as our vision and understanding of the universe have spread, to a fabric of spirit and sense so grand and subtle, so powerful in a new way, that we can only feel blindly of its hem" (1974. p. 7).*

Now the understanding of our origins has shifted. To children of the twentieth century, it is recognized that we are a product of untold interactions in an ever expanding universe web; be it from that first hydrogen atom and *the initial "Big Bang" some 14.5 billion years ago, to the formation of galaxies, the solar systems, the earth and its millions of life species.* To put it in some sort of historical perspective, if the timeline of the universe was compressed into one year and its beginning coincided with midnight on January 1st, our sun would not form until Sept. 1st at 8:00 a.m.; dinosaurs would appear on Dec. 27th at 3:00 a.m. only to disappear three days later; humans, ever late on the scene, peek out from the African savannas on Dec. 31st at 11:39 p.m. First cities appear in Mesopotamia 21 minutes later and Columbus sets sail from Europe with one second left before midnight on Dec. 31st. We are connected to a larger process; a process that, by either happenstance or design, has generated our spinning solar system out of a *giant star's explosion which set forth the perfect conditions of matter and gravity for the formation of our elegant and warm blue planet; millions of*

monkeys at millions of typewriters would never have conceived the script.
According to our cosmic origins, we are stardust.

I live out in the country away from the incessant noise and light *pollution found near urban landscapes. I'm comfortable there; I love the quiet* and the sense of peace which especially pervades the still, cooling nights. One of my favorite things to do is to go out on clear nights when there is no cloud ceiling, lie down on the cool grass, usually only in the company of crickets and my old dog, and wonder with awe at the amazing lattice-work of pictures painted on the blue-black sky, like sparkles on a cake or rhinestones glued to *Nut's body. If I allow myself, I feel like I've been transported to a whole other* space and time, a place in between the past and the present, insignificance and grandeur, and up and down. Lying down under the stars affords me the opportunity to just be and to contemplate all that there is; the seen and unseen, our earth and our participation in the grand story of the universe.

As humans, we orientate ourselves by referencing other beings, events or stories. We are not meant to be alone or disconnected from all that is around us. But to actually understand ourselves as participating in and dependent on something larger than ourselves requires a slowing down and *an appreciation of the universe's wider realities. Many of us get up in the* morning and go about our business in a relatively taken-for-grantedness state. Rituals of the mundane, the trivial and the pressures of contemporary living often blanket and numb our sense of awe and mystery such that appreciating and hearing the voice of the earth and of the universe seems drowned in the

deep cultural pathology of the human rat-race. But, lying under the darkening sky, propped up on the gentle curve of the earth, with the moist dew dampening my back and the palms of my hands, is the cure that most often shakes me from my gratuitous slumber. Before my senses and present to my *consciousness is what Thomas Berry calls a “revelatory experience,” the expanse of the universe which is the “manifestation of the ultimate mysteries of existence itself”* (2006, p. 20). It is the experiencing of the universe from its own orientation and reference that fascinates me. When peering into the *evening sky’s deep well, all my normal and familiar reference points somehow* fade into the surrounding blackness and, like riding the spaceship Enterprise, *I’m carried at warp-speed* into a sense of disillusionment and abandon, like sliding around a Mobius strip of space and time with no apparent end. Looking up or peering down is neither here nor there; heaven and hell often trade places.

Ptolemy and Copernicus quarreled about the nature of the universe but neither was correct. Our earth home, the third rock from the sun, is hurtling around our life-giving star at 170 miles per second, 1.5 million miles per day, all the while captivating morning, noon and night by tilting and turning on its own axis once every twenty-four hours— all sense of direction becomes lost. Meanwhile, the moon, that pock-faced keeper of the tides and suspected perpetrator of lunacy, runs its monthly gamut around the earth, *ducking in and out of the planet’s shadow, never showing her darkest side,*

preferring instead to always present her familiar, comforting smile and laughing eyes.

From my country home and from the vantage point of the earth, the mystery of the universe becomes even deeper as I peer through the lens of the atmosphere beyond brother sun and sister moon. When I consider that we are part of the Milky Way, so named for the great swathe of stars smeared across the night sky (yet, in truth, resembling a brilliant spinning Frisbee fattened at its center), the vastness of motion and matter overwhelms me. There are 250 billion stars in our Milky Way shining like jewels in a black velvet case, and some scientists suggest that there may be 100 billion galaxies; that means that there could be more stars in the universe than there are grains of sand on the earth!

Twinkle, twinkle, little star.

How I wonder what you are

Try as I might, my human mind is simply incapable of fathoming or grasping the enormity of it all. As well, our galaxy revolves around the center of the universe once every 250 million years; the last time we were at this place in space the tectonic plates of Pangaea still held their grip to each other as the first Great Dying mass extinction befell the earth. At this time, humanity was but a remote possibility in the evolutionary game of chance.

Another experience which grips my being when pondering the stars is that what *I'm looking at no longer exists except as galactic images projected against the sky's screen. We think we know time even though we cannot see it,*

touch it or even hear it. What we see is its effects on our aging bodies and on old weathered barn boards or feel its pressure as deadlines loom. The space-time continuum, from the point of view of the universe, challenges our fleeting present moments, the only moments which truly exist, and bids us to expand who we are in the grander story of the universe. *The sun's warming rays* require 8.3 minutes to traverse the distance from fission to my face. Alkaid, the outer handle of the Big Dipper constellation, is 210 light years away; the light perceived *today began its journey as Napoleon's men happened upon the Rosetta Stone in Egypt*. The galaxy Andromeda, sometimes visible to the naked eye and located, some would say tragically, between her mother, Cassiopeia, and her lover, Perseus, is 2.2 million light years away; a short distance by deep space standards, but the twinkle we see began its cosmic journey at about the same time as mammals were just beginning to evolve. Some stars we see no longer exist. Looking into the sky is experiencing the *distant past upon a projector's screen and is an opportunity to participate in and hold the universe's own memory*— our time is but a blip on the film tape of the universe's history.

I like to think of the universe as a vast soup of creative energy. Whether conceiving its deduced cosmogenesis well beyond where sight can reach to the imperceptible dark recesses of deep space; or pondering mysterious matter-sucking black holes to distant galaxies; stars and solar systems to all manner of planetary bodies; a swift meteor of white light arching over the horizon, or all other exotic stellar and cosmic objects; each

contains within it a mystery and each is connected to the whole. Far from being mostly uncomfortable nothingness, a term fraught with existential angst, or keyed to the predictable tick of wound-up clockworks, like the Cartesian Deus ex Machina, the universe instead dazzles and engages with brilliant light and hopeful possibilities; as Thomas Berry has said, the universe is best understood as a “*communion of subjects*” (2006, p. 17).

A few years ago, I vividly remember being treated to a cosmic light show which still affects me today. It was a warm, balmy evening in August, probably about five years ago, when, as I was spending time with my son in our backyard, the sky unexpectedly burst into a kaleidoscope of movement and color. Before our eyes, and to our disbelief, large fingers of the Northern Lights began to climb the distant horizons to meet what seemed to be directly above our heads. I had seen the visitors from the north before, but not with this intensity. Shards of shimmering flame-like tongues arched upwards from all around us to form an apex under which we stood; it was like standing in a giant beach ball dome looking towards the multi-colored end. Thought was not a possibility at the time as both my son and I just stood in quiet awe and exchanged glances of surprise and honor as the streaks of light, riding the wings of powerful solar winds, moved in a poetic and rhythmic dance of indigo and deep pink shades. I cannot recall experiencing such a sight before or since, but the natural fireworks of that evening’s Aurora Borealis spoke to a deep part of my being; it was like a blind man gaining sight for the first time. Maybe it was the waving movement, perhaps it was the accompanying

haunting sound like an exhaling accordion, or maybe it was because of the height of the spectacle *in the evening's atmosphere; regardless, it was a privilege to be in its creative presence.* I remember reading somewhere that Inuit healers often made journeys into the lights in order to save souls from certain death. The veil of dancing lights that evening placed on my soul a new appreciation for the life-giving creative energies the earth, and indeed the universe, has for us. It was for me, the beginning of a healing journey back to my cosmic home.

What strikes me most about reflecting on the universe is that, in a sense, it reflects right back to us the meaning of our own existence. Humans are, so far, the culmination of the creative expansion of the universe and of evolutionary time; we are self-conscious and, although limited, can reflect the cosmos *itself in that consciousness. According to Annie Dillard, "the point is that not only does time fly and do we die, but that in these reckless conditions we live at all, and are vouchsafed, for the duration of certain inexplicable moments, to know it"* (1974, p. 79). Lying on my back, pondering time and such a fantastic and elegant universe, billions of light years across, with its spiraling galaxies, symmetrical solar systems and exploding super novae, keeps me awash with humility and I wonder how humanity could ever think it could be master of it all. The universe story is our story and, although we are products of its ever evolving and creative processes, and are dependent on its unseen forces, it ultimately brings us back to the earth. As far as we know, even given the vast expanse of the universe with its untold and infinite number

of planetary possibilities, there is only one place in the entire cosmos which nurtures life, our green, blue and white haven in the heavens. The earth, as Swimme and Berry (1992) are fond of *saying, is “a one time endowment”* (p. 246); *we don't get any other chances, our existence, indeed our very being, hinges on a knife blade interplay of place and history but, ultimately on the hospitable gifts of an unique planet— water, wind, fire and soil. The odds for such a happening defy all calculations. But, for much of our history, we have been absent from our earth home, preferring instead to dream of a new heaven and a new earth or we have been absorbed by the cogs and cams of our industrial and technological Shangri-la. Earth is our home, the planet of life, creativity, celebration and mystery; the earth of dry deserts, rolling tundra and flat prairie, of sky-scraping mountains, vibrant seas and rippling rivers and quiet creeks; it is the world of all creatures from the tiniest ants to the largest of beasts; fragrant flowers, furry mosses and stately trees; arctic ice, noisy rainforests and the black bottoms of oceans; all parts of this beautiful planet beckon us to embrace its sacred dimensions and life-giving splendor. In fact, Eden has not disappeared but continues to sustain us each and every moment.*

Our life is a faint tracing on the surface of mystery, like the idle, curved tunnels of leaf miners on the face of a leaf. We must somehow take a wider view, look at the whole landscape, really see it, and *describe what's going on here. Then we can at least wail the right*

question into the swaddling band of darkness, or, if it comes to that, choir the proper praise. (Dillard, 1974, p. 9)

The fact is we are a part of a truly living and sacred planet, the only one for which we can honestly say is home, and we are connected to and are interdependent on it all. (Excerpt from autoethnographic journal)

Earth as Home

When the first N.A.S.A. pictures of this beautiful blue-green planet filtered their way into the consciousness of humanity in 1969, the Apollo 11 mission managed to change our fundamental perspective of the earth forever. Although sometimes overused, the term ‘paradigm shift’ is most apt when describing the change in consciousness experienced at that time. No longer did we feel confined by the heaviness of gravity on our feet, able only to look out into the vast expanse of the unknown universe and dream. The lunar space missions provided fodder for an almost collective fantasy of escaping the planet all together. Pop culture began to dream about life on Mars, deep space and time travel. The popular television series Star Trek viewed space as the “final frontier” and its expressed mission of each episode was to “explore strange new worlds; to seek out new life and new civilizations; to boldly go where no man has gone before.” However, the truth is that the space programs of the late sixties and seventies set out to discover the moon and space as new frontiers, but, in a curious and ironic twist of intention, ended up discovering our only home, the earth.

The pictures of the earth taken from space mirrored to us a vision of a fragile, beautiful and somewhat lonely home. From space, there are no evident political or

state boundaries and ideologies are dissolved by clouds; territorial borders only exist on human constructed maps. The bright, whirling ball, against the backdrop of a pitch black curtain, as seen from space, is a mosaic of giant land masses of greens, browns and whites and vibrant oceans of green and blue hues. Viewed from 1000's of miles away, earthen deserts bleed into forests and seas; mountain ranges, like the spines of the Titans, curve along coasts and tectonic edges; archipelagoes dot the ocean landscapes; ice caps crown the poles like broken-in-half egg shells; and, in the words of Roberta Bondar, Canada's first female astronaut, "the oceans are connections rather than boundaries" (1994, p. 30). Upon returning from their space missions, most astronauts report an overwhelming feeling of gratitude, reverence and spiritual connection to the earth as home. Bondar (1994) reflects that, "a cold foreboding sweeps over me, looking away from the earth. There is nothing else that can support life as I know it. It is little wonder that I quickly look back at the Earth for reassurance that I do have a home" (p. 50). If absence makes the heart grow fonder, then it is not surprising that many astronauts express experiencing a deep metanoia or conversion as they contemplate the earth's face from space. Taylor Wang (as cited in Space quotations, 2009), a Chinese cosmonaut, relates, "A Chinese tale tells of some men sent to harm a young girl who, upon seeing her beauty, become her protectors rather than her violators. That's how I felt seeing the Earth for the first time. I could not help but love and cherish her" (para. 8). Testimonials like Wang's and Bondar's confirm the wisdom of T. S. Eliot:

We shall not cease from exploration

And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time (as cited in Fecit, 2000, Quartet 4, Part V, Para. 3)

Perhaps the greatest lesson to be learned from humanity's expeditions into space lies not in mapping-out the lunar landscape or discovering whether precious water cisterns exist on Mars, but instead has been in the sudden and profound realization of the sheer beauty, elegance, creativity and tenuousness of the only planet we can call home. As Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry state, "We know of no other place in the universe with such gorgeous self-expression as exists on Earth" (1992, p. 263). For them, the earth surpassed other planets as the locus for the development of life and mind as other places in the solar system did not develop the necessary balance to support life. In the larger story of the universe, the earth is unique.

What did earth have that the other planets did not have? Nothing spectacular— only the proper size enabling gravitational and electromagnetic balance. Nothing extraordinary— just a position with respect to the Sun that enabled Earth to establish a temperature range where complex molecules formed. These arrangements of matter enabled the solar system to advance to earth's creativity. Had this particular amount of stellar material not congregated in such size and at such a place, the solar system would probably have remained a lifeless place throughout its billions of years of existence. But such balance and such possibilities did emerge, and Earth became the advanced edge of cosmogenesis in the solar system. (p. 84)

All of this speaks to a place in the vast, ever-expanding and overwhelmingly mostly

inhospitable universe where, after eons of development, we have become heirs to its legacy. According to Joseph Campbell (2002), “We are, in fact, productions of this earth. We are, as it were, its organs. Our eyes are the eyes of this earth; our knowledge is the earth’s knowledge. And the earth as we know, is a production of space” (p. 2). Loren Acton (as cited in Space quotations, 2008), a former U.S. astronaut, spoke of it this way:

Looking outward to the blackness of space, sprinkled with the glory of a universe of lights, I saw majesty— but no welcome. Below was a welcoming planet. There, contained in the thin, moving, incredibly fragile shell of the biosphere is everything that is dear to you, all the human drama and comedy.

That’s where life is; that’s where all the good stuff is. (para. 29)

I’ve heard it said that the biosphere can be likened to a thin coat of varnish or a film of plastic-wrap on a sphere the size of a basketball. Here, on our earth home, as far as we know, is the only place where the ‘good stuff’ happens. When one thinks of the exact circumstances which, not only sustain and support life, but also gave possibility to the creation of life, wonder and awe are but dim reflections of the infinite complexities and diversity of life made possible on this planet. We might be tempted to ask with Job:

But ask the beasts, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; or the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this? In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of all mankind. (Job 12: 7-10)

In this domain, small seeds grow to become the exact species of their parents, be they stately grasses or the most delicate flower; salt waters ebb and flow as oceans lap against sandy beaches where starfish and snails live on the cusp of the tides; the liturgy of the seasons bring winter's snow or spring's torrential rains from emptying fat-bellied clouds; rivers weave and meander through the hem of the land; tangled briars and brambles choke the edge of fields like giant Gordian knots; it is a world of wonder to think of fragrant wildflowers, silky butterflies, the dance of bumblebees, migrating hummingbirds, the intricacy of a feather, the engineering marvel of an orb spider's web and June bugs gathered at a porch light. For me, one of the greatest instruments of wonder is the many and various species of trees that grow all around us. Often taken for granted, these giants of the flora world have been the life-blood for umpteen generations of humans as sources of shelter, food and heat; it would be difficult to imagine living without them. Consider how treeless landscapes are often considered barren and how many childhood memories involve sitting in their shade, listening to the breeze whistle hauntingly through rustling leaves or climbing their great branches like being cradled in giant arms while enjoying our foolishnesses. The brilliant yellow birch, the prickly tamaracks, the thick pines and fir, the lowly alders, the elegant elms, the sweet apple and cherry trees, and the stately maples and oaks, all give enormous pleasure and aesthetic value to our lives and stand as reminders of our dependence on the earth and its resources. All of these things and an infinite list more, not only provide a buffer against the virtual, but speak at a fundamental level to the sheer majesty and wonder of living on the earth; we need to regain, in the words of James Conlon, a sense of "radical amazement" (1994, p. 5). I think Louis

Armstrong (1994) understood this well:

I see skies of blue, and clouds of white

The bright blessed day, dark sacred night

And I think to myself

What a wonderful world (Track 1)

We need to appreciate and recapture the poetry of the earth, its colorful and textured canvas, its rhythmic and melodic musical score, its narrative text and its gift of the diversity of life.

The Shadow Side of Awe

Most definitions of awe include fear and dread as a condition of experiencing it. Related to the Greek word *achos* or ‘pain,’ Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary (1981) defines awe as “the power to inspire dread” and “emotion in which dread, veneration, and wonder are variously mingled” (p. 78). Mixed emotions of reverence, respect and dread surround any experience of awe yet we often use related words like ‘awesome’ and ‘awestruck’ as descriptors for euphoric and joyful experiences. In a way, the word ‘awful’ might be closer to the original meaning of ‘awe.’ Shakespeare used it as a way of establishing authority; “Conscience is but a word that cowards use, devise at first to keep the strong in awe” (King Richard III, Act V, Scene III). Such can be our experience of awe at the natural world. Quite apart from the jaw-dropping occurrence of wonder and admiration at a spectacular waterfall or a crimson sunset, awe sits in an ambiguous space where it can also mean trepidation, apprehension and fear. Powerful earthquakes and hurricanes, vicious volcanoes and tornados, lightening splitting the sky and tidal and heat waves all beckon us to appreciate the tenuousness

of life and the destructive forces the earth can lash out with. Thomas Berry (1999) calls this the 'wild,' that part of the physical reality of the universe which can instill fear and for which we have little control.

There is an ultimate wildness in all this, for the universe, as existence itself, is a terrifying as well as benign mode of being. If it grants us amazing powers over much of its functioning we must always remember that any arrogance on our part will ultimately be called to account. The beginning of wisdom in any human activity is a certain reverence before the primordial mystery of existence, for the world about us is a fearsome mode of being. (p. 50)

We may have landed on the moon and managed to split the atom, we have harnessed the wind and dammed the rivers, we have taken to the skies and explored the black ocean bottom, but if the recent experiences of Hurricane Katrina, the Icelandic volcano, the 2004 tsunami and the Haiti earthquake have taught us anything, it is that in the face of nature's most violent moments, we remain powerless to prevent and must live according to the deeper laws of nature and of existence. We still cannot calm a storm or quench a drought; living on the earth with a sense of awe means not only appreciating the sheer beauty and aesthetic qualities of the world and of nature, but it also means giving-up any hubris we might harbor towards the 'wild' dimension of the earth. Berry (1999) says, "This we need to know: how to participate creatively in the wildness of the world about us" (p. 51). Life it seems is an exhilarating tight-rope walk between survival and demise.

Our Sacred Home

I sometimes wonder whether what is missing in contemporary life is a sense

of the sacredness of the earth and in the land. From the Latin *sacrare* meaning holy or worthy of religious veneration, most of us tend to associate the sacred with the rituals, symbols and spaces of formal religions. A part of my identity includes being raised in the Catholic faith tradition, in a Catholic family, in a very Catholic parish community. As a boy, I can remember always being instructed to remove my hat before entering church as an act of respect for the holy and talking was seldom allowed except in hushed, whispering tones. For me, the pungent smell of incense, the sounds of noontime Angelus bells, the communal celebration of Eucharist, the sight of spiraling steeples against the sky and the scary experience of a dark confessional box still conjure up feelings of the holy and numinous. But the sense conveyed was that therein lies the only avenue for getting in touch with the sacred, through the Church. In my parish life-world, the sacred was held in direct opposition to the secular of worldly and temporal affairs. We were oft told that we “were in the world, not of the world.” “If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” (John 15:19). Fear of God, judgment and an afterlife in Heaven were the backbones for belief and I can remember feeling very alone in trying to prove my worthiness; only the Church held the keys to the kingdom. Little wonder ecological degradation of the earth was never noticed or cared about; there was only room for the I-Thou relationship between the individual and God made famous by the writings of Martin Buber and other believing existentialists. Thomas Berry, a Catholic priest, states it this way;

Our religious traditions have little relevance to what is happening. Our

Western religions exist in a different world, a world of covenant relations with the divine, a world little concerned with the natural environment or with the earth community. Our sacred community is seen primarily as one concerned with human-divine relations, with little attraction toward a shared community existence within the larger world of the living. Our iconoclasm is such that we can hardly think of ourselves within a multispecies community or consider that this community of the natural world is the primary locus for the meeting of the divine and the human. (2006, p. 48)

Today I have come to appreciate the sacred as being a much wider reality that to includes the entire natural world. Unlike Moses wandering around in the wilderness in search of the Promised Land, one need only to awaken to the sound of hungry finches welcoming the dawn or view the scarlet horizon at dusk in order to experience the sacred; it is as ubiquitous as the air; no need to chase another time and place, the Land of Milk and Honey is as close as the ground beneath our feet. My self-identification and subjectivity includes being conscious that I am a part of the world, embodied in the whole earth community and in the wider universe itself. It's a different way of being religious. Again, Berry (2006) puts it this way:

Presently, those of us who are heirs to the biblical tradition are trying to be religious in accordance with written scriptures and covenant relations with the divine based on a juridic model. This can be effective only as long as it functions within the awesome awakening to the divine evoked by our experience of the natural world. We become religious by fulfilling our role within the larger community of the universe itself. The natural world is both

the primary source of religious understanding and the primary religious community. In the natural world, we discover the mysterious power whence all things come into being. In humans, this religious community reflects on and celebrates itself and its numinous origins in a special mode of conscious self-awareness (p. 46).

My Sacred Place

Whatever preserves and enhances this meadow in the natural cycles of its transformation is good; whatever opposes this meadow or negates it is not good. My life orientation is that simple. (Berry, 1999, p. 13)

Sacred places are all around; they exist as places of the heart and of the soul; compass points for life travelers. As a young boy, I regarded the sacred as being attached to what was happening at the Church; Eucharist, Corpus Christi, Tantum Ergo and the Holy Tridium were all part of my *family's vernacular. Life for us revolved around the liturgical year swinging from intense joy, fellowship and celebration to remorse and the beating of our breasts. In church I never got the sense that the holy was extended out through the worn wooden doors to embrace the sustaining land or up higher than the vaulted nave to include all of the sky. Even during burials, in what we understood as the closest thing to Holy Ground, the precious red clay of the cemetery was covered with green carpet, shielding the mourners from the inevitable cold and damp confines of the earth. There was water in the font, wheat in the tabernacle and fire in the Pascal candle, but somehow these ordinary symbols of the secular had to be transformed in order to be worthy*

of our weekly sacrifice; earth has given and human hands have made. God it seemed was quite literally placed in a box and the hymns from the choir loft *oft sung the world's requiem*. What I've learned since then is that the sacred cannot be confined and refuses to be defined by narrow dogma and human religious constructs, but is in fact, as many, if not all Indigenous societies know, synonymous with the earth herself; the sustainer of all life and the giver of all that is good. We need to hear as Moses did on Mount Horeb, "Put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground" (*Exodus 3:5*).

According to James A. Swan (1990), there are three distinct types of sacred places (p. 35). The first are human built structures with no special geographic significance excepting being approximate to human communities. Some are simple country churches, others maybe the loci of great pilgrimages where the draw of the holy attracts the devout, the searching or even the curious. Shrines, synagogues, temples and cathedrals are all human crafted *buildings which express humanity's need for transcendence and getting in touch with the holy*. Sacred buildings such as *St. Peter's Basilica* in Rome, the *Taj Mahal* in Agra or the *Black Stone Temple* in Mecca, are all places designated by design and location for people to get in touch with the numinous. People identify with these places as touchstones of the holy, intersecting regularly with those important moments of transition in their lives— birth, initiation and death.

The second type of sacred place uses sacred design and location to draw together a greater and wider cosmological significance which lends those places to the deeper realities of astrological and astronomical alignment. One may conjure up images of the ancient Druids gathering in front of the eastern alter stone at Stonehenge, eagerly anticipating the annual Summer Solstice sunrise or, maybe follow in the footsteps of a wondering Athenian priest, intent on discovering uncovered secrets in Delphi, the *Oracle's burden in Apollo's garden*. Similarly, the Great Pyramids at Giza were intended to be the cosmic yardsticks by which heaven and earth are measured. The Bighorn Medicine Wheel in Wyoming, built on top of a mountain 700 years ago by the Crow people, still holds a sacred significance for Turtle Island's Aboriginal peoples. All of these places and more are special places of ritual where cosmologies are built and where the universal is compressed into a singular place, "where the larger whole has become condensed into a symbolic statement or form: a microcosm of the *macrocosm*" (Swan, 1990, p. 35).

The third type of sacred space has no special markings, no universal cosmological significance, or no evidence of magnificent human crafted edifices in marble or stone and is much more common. Personal sacred places may be a stretch of white sandy beach where the ocean horizon meets the sky; a quiet glen where the wind sweeps over the waving grasses; a secret forest spot shaded by the arms of trees and betrayed only by a well worn path; or a vibrant meadow where wild daisies and dandelions dance in the breeze

and are kissed by silken butterflies in the summer. These are places where one gets to touch the natural order of things and taste the sacred life of our earth home. *My sacred place is like this. It is a small spot that I've known all my life, introduced to me many years ago by my grandfather, it has become a place of healing and nurturing where it shelters me from the complexity of the human world and embraces me when I am in need of solitude. Everyone should have a place like this where, like Thoreau's Walden Pond, "I have, as it were, my own sun and moon and stars, and a little world all to myself"* (Thoreau, 1845/1985, p. 226) *and where one can become aware that "Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads"* (p. 483). Having a personal sacred place brings a renewed sense to being grounded.

Known locally as the Black Bridge, so named for the thick creosote timber trusses which give strength to the expanse, it is a special place mostly hidden from the well traversed roadway. To get to it, one must take a road less traveled, usually on foot, through a quarter mile or so of a winding brick colored lane which opens up to a small pond. The pond, flanked by green-skinned poplars and pale paper birches, flows to the northeast corner where it drains itself through a narrow and windy creek, out under the bridge, and empties into a tidal estuary where, during summer low tides, stately and shy blue herons stand as patient sentinels, waiting to skewer a wandering minnow or a lazy yellow tommycod. The estuary lines the north side of my current property and remains obedient to the *moon's* tidal pull on Malpeque Bay.

At the south end of Black Bridge Pond, there is evidence of a once mighty boreal forest; there, great grey and weathered trunks poke through the flooded tree graveyard, like broken and splintered fallen soldiers enduring *Noah's* curse. Now their sunken limbs and wet roots provide shade to lively trout as they dart in and out of the shadows with flashes of iridescent silver-like lightning in the distant western sky. Sometimes it is an eerie sight, especially when the early morning sunrise just begins its first look at the day and the mist appears to hover over the still, watery mirror. Beyond the submerged landscape, and out from the woods, flows the water from its source as it returns to the ancient call of the sea. To the west lies a huge expanse of a spongy shallow marsh dotted with hills of marsh grass and stands of bulrushes. Several red-winged blackbirds build their nests there in the spring, their safety from foxes and the like partially guaranteed by the thick brush and stagnant water. David Francey, a Canadian Juno Award winning folksong writer, said it best about red-winged blackbirds when he wrote:

Safe as Moses in the rushes

Builds his home on the river wide

Every time I hear him singing

Makes me feel like spring inside (Francey, 1999)

In fact, the best time to discover the Black Bridge is in the spring as the bones of winter are being broken and life seems to erupt in a joyful yawn that ends the cold slumber of ice and snow. The creek is particularly spectacular as the stones become awash in whitewater as the pond sheds its

frozen skin in the strengthening sun. Torrents of water funnel and rush over the elder rocks, carving and creasing their faces, as it descends to a pool bubbling with spring excitement. This part of the creek has changed a lot in *my lifetime, the stones giving way to time and constant erosion. "The finest workers in stone are not copper or steel tools, but the gentle touches of air and water working at their leisure with a liberal allowance of time"* said Thoreau of his creek; I find the same for mine.

Spring is the time when the creek is at its loudest, no babbling brook or gentle stream, but the sometimes deafening resonance of the constant splash of foam and froth in a hurry to escape the swollen pond. Down below *and to the north, the creek fans out like an outstretched hand holding a baby's head*; there the cowslips, their gilded crowns shining in the sun, gather in clumps near the banks, their roots drinking in the fresh spring run-off and their flowers offering ruby favors to fairies. It is a magical time to be around the pond and the creek, especially in the evening. Just after dusk, the air erupts with the sounds of peepers and leopard frogs as the hopeful suitors boisterously sing their ballads of courtly love. On some evenings, the baritone chorus is accompanied by a cricket string section privileging me to the most beautiful symphonic concert. All around are sights, sounds and signs of renewed life; spring signals the circle of life and hope fills every bud and branch. Like *The Tree that Survived the Winter* (Fahy, 1989), new life bursts from the hardships of winter, *"Growing! Yes. I am growing," the tree acknowledged. "I have survived the winter and I am growing." She shivered*

with delight as she admired her new appearance, letting a few raindrops fall *on the violets that enjoyed the shelter of her trunk. "It is good to be alive," she told them" (p. 19).*

As a boy, I always looked forward to April, a time when great schools of ocean smelts would return to the place of their birth to honor their primeval *urge to spawn in the creek's headwater. The brook's bottom would be hidden* for days as the tawny-backed fish competed with each other for a spot beneath the cascade. Upon fulfilling their duty to the species, smelts die just the same as sockeye salmon do in the mighty Fraser. As their spent, twisted and rigored bodies float towards the sea, flocks of herring gulls would gather to frolic, screaming at their good fortune and gorging themselves as if *at a king's banquet*. Spring is also a time of plenty, the meager offerings of winter soon forgotten.

As spring gives way to the summer's heat, the water slows to a trickle in the Black Bridge brook. The bottom is hidden now as the towering cattails frame the *stream's course, their leaf tips pointing to the heavens, their prongs curved inwards* as if preparing a triumphant road to Jerusalem. All around *white Queen Ann's lace, amber goldenrods and pale blue asters turn their faces to the sun, their blooms busily inspected by thimble-sized bumblebees, legs drooping with puffy yellow pollen*. The pond has lowered its assault on the muddy banks and has settled into a much calmer demeanor being whipped up only occasionally by August storms. Surface moss and algae, known as pond-scum, has shrunk its surface size and if one looks closely, the bulging

eyes of green frogs can be seen poking through the surface tension, their bodies floating below *as if in suspended animation*. “*Be still and don’t blink,*” they must think. Frogs are a worried and nervous sort and will bolt with a *splash if they think they’ve been seen*. Pond bugs skate and dart around all day, constantly on the prowl for food or are just restless. Dragonflies and damselflies, resplendent with delicately crocheted wings and tapered bodies, hover over the water like mythical medieval creatures looking to satisfy their ravenous appetites on insect serfs. Summertime is busy on a pond and the short time of plenty is not wasted by its residents.

If one is brave enough to endure the incessant buzzing of black flies and mosquitoes in uncovered ears, a visit to the pond in the evening reveals a whole other life world of the place. Shadows move when the moon allows and quick, unfamiliar noises rustling in the bushes startle the traveler quickening the pace. Fireflies dazzle the eyes by showing off their green glow and trout jump at every opportunity to feed leaving concentric waves to catch the moonlight. Evening sights and sounds on a pond and creek confront the visitor with mystery and diversity and a sense of being alive.

The autumn is my favorite season. The north-west winds and cooler temperatures energize me after enduring the humidity and heat of the summer *months yet foreshadow the coming winter’s bleakness*. What I love most is the smell of fall; a fresh, musty aroma of decaying leaves on the moist earth. So too with the colors, vibrant crimson leaves of the maple against the subdued yellows of the birch in early fall, fading later to tree skeletons against a

graying sky; the evergreen fir and spruce continue to hold the promise of spring. Autumn is a time for preparing and the pond and creek are busy in anticipation of the deep sleep ahead.

Geese, saluting Churchill at every pass, are wary of the hunter's muzzle aimed at their exposed breasts yet noisily announce their approach, only to be silenced by my sight; what remains is the whistle of their wings against the crisp air and, more often than not, a change of flight plan. Black ducks and teal ducks nervously paddle for an opposite shore of the pond, twitching their tails in a curious wiggle of defiance. Silly red and grey squirrels taunt me from the trees and seem to delight in being pesky and brash; when they are not talking, they are busy stalking the winter cupboards from autumn's store by stuffing every nook and cranny with pine nuts and seeds. Beavers, always industrious, continue to pad and pack mud against their den at the west end of the pond; now it looks like a curious earthen igloo of sticks and clay. Their compulsive chewing often creates victims out of the trees, their boles chewed to the pith like sharpened pencils point to point.

The creek bed is also in a state of preparation. Although the flowing water has slowed, it continues to meander with slow determination under the bridge and out to the sea. It is almost as if a cleansing is taking place, flushing *the debris from the summer's activity in readiness for winter's cover and spring's renewal. The water is clear and cool, just as the season is clear and cool, and all manner of life prepares for the inevitable coldness of the winter's bite.*

Despite the wind and weather, winter brings a quiet stillness to the *Black Bridge*. Now a rink, the pond hides its life beneath the skaters' blades sheltering and slowing its creatures and current from the drifting snows. I've noticed that the snow is never pure white but is layers and shades of baby blues and grays; I think it depends on the sky's mood. As the winter deepens and the Arctic air bites the flesh, the trees stand against the cold as proud sentinels, their bones cracking and echoing every recoil of Jack's whip. The snow usually lies deep around the pond; rabbits, foxes and coyotes leave their calling cards in the snow. From the bushes, brave winter finches and chickadees search for every seed and pod. Blue jays compete for my attention by flashing their brilliant blue, white and gray plumage; colors which seem to match their arrogant personalities. Blue-black ravens swoosh from tree to tree, their guttural calls, like the cluck one makes by lifting the tongue against the roof of the mouth and pressing down, echoes from the distant woods as if there were twice as many of them present. Wildlife in winter are survivors; the sharp blade of the cold not cutting too deeply.

In the creek, down by the waterfalls, the snow likes to lean and gently curve over the bank like the crest of a wave. The ice that forms over the rocks is crystal clear and delicately stitched over the moving water like the finest French lace falls from the edge of a table. The sound of the creek in winter is unmistakably that of a babbling brook and all around the light is subdued. I can watch it for hours as ice is made while some drips off the runny nose of

the icicles; change, as said Heraclites, is the only constant, especially around a creek and every time I visit I see something new.

My sacred place is not Ayer's Rock, the Grand Canyon, Machu Picchu, the Ganges River or any other UNESCO world heritage site. It does not have the grandeur of the Rockies, the wide expanse of the Prairies or the mystique of the North, but the same sky moves over it, the same four seasons grace each year and the winds that shiver the pond have swirled and touched some of the remotest lands on earth. As the years pass and both the Black Bridge and I get older, I find myself appreciating more and more the impact my little sacred place has had on my consciousness. Maybe it's in the attitude I've developed towards the earth and my place in it or perhaps it's about coming to know myself better as intricately connected to the universe as expressed in a tiny pond and black veined creek. The more I become aware of the interrelated patterns existing all around me, the more mystery and awe become apparent.

Thomas Berry once described his whole life's work as being influenced by a single moment in his youth, one which he continues to revisit in his memory even today. For him, the small meadow across the creek from his childhood home impacted him so profoundly that, in a sense, it determined his life's direction. "Yet as the years pass this moment returns to me, and whenever I think about my basic life attitude and the whole trend of my mind and the causes to which I have given my efforts, I seem to come back to this moment and the impact it has had on my feeling for what is real and

worthwhile in life” (Berry, 1999, p. 13). As stated earlier, for Berry what is good must also be good for his meadow. My sacred place is like that for me; once it was a wonderful childhood playground, now it sings to me the truth of who I am. The Black Bridge has become a place of healing, peace, and purification, it also is a place to dream, remember and be inspired— surely these are the effects of the truly sacred.

I have other sacred places; some I share with family and friends, some I do not, but the Black Bridge has been with me the longest and hopefully will always be there when I need to connect and reflect. The words of Henry David Thoreau (1845/1985) best capture my feeling towards my special place, “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived” (p. 394.)

(Excerpt from autoethnographic journal)

Aboriginal Wisdom and Sacred Earth

Appreciating the universal sense of the sacred means giving up the rigid and narrow secular and profane bifurcation that formal religions have largely adopted. Perhaps to avoid the religious connotation of the sacred we should be using ‘spirituality’ as a way to describe the sense of connection we have to the universe community. For George J. Sefa Dei, “Spirituality and spiritual discourses broach ideas and ontologies that emphasize connectedness, belongingness, identifications, well-being, love, compassion, peaceful co-existence with nature and among groups” (2002, p. 123). Sefa Dei writes of values, values which are not necessarily focal

points for formal religions' dogma concerning the earth. The spiritual perspective, which some would say is inherent in human existence, recognizes the spiritual nature of earth and leads us to "see ourselves connected to something larger than ourselves. This 'something' has a mysterious quality that can give rise to a sense of awe and wonder" (Miller, 2002, p. 95) where there is "an unmediated relationship where we experience an organic connection with life itself" (p. 99). Albert Einstein once said;

A human being is part of the whole, called by us 'universe,' a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separate from the rest—a kind of optical delusion of consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desire and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. (Special Dictionary, 2009, para. 2)

For me, "widening our circle of compassion" is a wonderful description of what spirituality should mean. When it comes to living on this earth, appreciating its grand beauty and sustaining gifts and "widening our circle of compassion," many have written that we may have lost a profound sense of the sacredness and spirituality of place (Berry, 1990, 1999; Knudtson & Suzuki, 1992; O'Murchu, 2000; Swimme & Berry, 1992). The labyrinth of the modern world has conditioned us and sheltered us from maintaining a connection with the earth and the Minotaur still howls and waits not far away. Peter Knudtson and David Suzuki write:

In most societies of the past, people knew that everything is connected to

everything else. This understanding leads to the recognition that everything we do has consequences and therefore carries responsibilities. But today we have lost that insight. We stumble into the future gazing at nature as if we are outside of it, separated by our intellect, which seems to enable us to escape both the constraints of the natural world and our own biology. Instead of a single interconnected whole, we live in a shattered world of disconnected fragments. (1992, p. XXV)

Perhaps the best avenue for understanding our place in the universe and to rediscovering our connection to the earth as a sacred reality is in opening up ourselves and listening to the traditional knowledge and wisdoms of Indigenous peoples. In Canada and throughout the world, Aboriginal peoples are reclaiming recognition and their rightful place as peoples with a unique and distinct relationship to the environment and the land on which they have lived for millennia. More and more, it is becoming increasingly clear that the knowledge they have acquired, knowledge which is “empirical and technologically sound, guided by principles and rules that have evolved over generations and thousands of years in specific geographic locations and is passed down from one generation to generation in a dynamic evolving way” (Lambrou, 2008, p. 2), is becoming more accepted “by those in power” as they realize “the usefulness of the knowledge... in the Nature-Humanity relationship” (p. 1). For Aboriginal peoples, the holistic nature of their ecological knowledge is founded on the development of their culture and on their very being on this earth; “the survival of one necessitates the survival of the other” (p. 1).

Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge is “qualitative, intuitive, holistic, moral,

spiritual, considers ‘mind’ and ‘matter’ together, is based on empirical observations, is generated and held by the users themselves, and is diachronic (long-time series of information on one locality)” (Mailhot as cited in Lambrou, 2008, p. 2). For Thomas Berry, “Indigenous wisdom is distinguished by its intimacy with and participation in the functioning of the natural world” (1999, p. 177). For Aboriginal peoples, direct contact with the natural world includes not only understanding and living in harmony with the physical world, but also in the spiritual beliefs and values that support their cosmology. Central to this comprehension is regarding nature and the land as sacred and all life as interdependent (Lambrou, 2008, pp. 1-2). Mi’kmaq Elder Albert Marshall states it this way,

So this is what we truly believe. This is what reinforces our spiritualities: that no being is greater than the next, that we are part and parcel, we are equal, and that each one of us has a responsibility to the balance of the system (Cape Breton University, 2001, On Spiritual Reality, Section 6).

Kawagley and Barnhardt (1998), after studying several Alaskan First Nation groups, found that, despite Indigenous cultures’ 400 year plus upheaval due to colonialization, assimilation and western ideological pressure, many core Aboriginal values, beliefs, practices and world views have survived and are thriving. Among the wisdom which Indigenous Traditional Knowledge and cultures can contribute to our understanding of the world include: a long-term perspective where the depth of Indigenous knowledge is linked to a long-term habitation and understanding of a place passed down through generations; interconnectedness of all things where Aboriginal wisdom is based on direct experience of the world and where there is a

recognition of the interdependent relationships between all things; the parts are only important insofar as they relate to the whole; adaptation to change where Traditional Knowledge is continuously adapted to fit the time and place while not abandoning core values; and, a commitment to the commons where the whole is greater than the parts (p. 13).

The Mi'kmaq First Nation people have lived in the Atlantic Region of Canada for millennia. Like most Aboriginal peoples of North America, their traditional territory followed and was dictated by the natural contours of the land and their lives were grounded in the connection they had with the natural world. Mi'kmaki, the name given by the Mi'kmaq to their traditional lands, is mostly surrounding the Gulf of St. Lawrence and includes the Gaspé Peninsula of Quebec, all of Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia, and parts of New Brunswick, Newfoundland and the state of Maine. Containing some 10,000 kilometers of coastline, Mi'kmaki was a rich source of life and resources which created and sustained the Mi'kmaq way of life. For the Mi'kmaq, the land, along with the bays, estuaries, rivers and streams, were sacred and were imbued with an animus or soul. In this context, "Native peoples have always known that the land has life: many call it Mother Earth. The living land includes not only soil and rock, but the water and sky, the plants and animals, the people, and all the changes that occur" (Leavitt, 1995, p. 52). The Mi'kmaq would have always thought about "the land," not "land" and would have used mostly verbal forms of words in talking about it and as such, "their knowledge of the land is organized entirely in relation to people" (p. 52). Rather than describing the land from an observational point of view by using, for example, longitude, latitude and other

objective points on a map, Aboriginal spirituality acknowledges that “all forms of life attached to the land are interconnected, spiritually and physically” (Moore, 1997, p.

1). Sr. Dorothy Moore relates:

I believe, that our Mi’kmaq ancestors lived and practiced a life-style that was deeply spiritual, bestowing great respect to all elements of life on land and water. I believe, that our ancestors constantly gave thanks to the Creator Spirit. It was because of this respect that nothing was ever abused. People took and used only what was needed at the time. Nothing was hoarded (sic) for the sake of hoarding (sic). Nothing was ever taken without first making an offering to the Spirit of that object, be it an animal, bird, fish, plant or tree, in return for giving of itself. The sacredness of all things was connected with the Great Spirit. For the Aboriginal people, the idea that land could be owned by an individual made very little sense. (pp. 1-2)

The Sacred Circle

Perhaps the best expression of the “sacredness of all things” for the Mi’kmaq is the use of the Medicine Wheel. The Medicine Wheel is an international and ancient symbol used by many Aboriginal peoples in North and South America (Leavitt, 1995, p. xvi) and is a fitting metaphor for beginning to appreciate the sacredness and balance in the natural world. According to Leavitt (1995):

The circle represents the wholeness of the Native way of life. It is a perfectly balanced shape without top or bottom, length or width. The circle is more than a static shape; it also represents movement. The repeating cycles of nature move in circles—the seasons; birth, growth, death, and decay; cycles of

community and social life. Expanding ripples, like ripples in a pond, represent the development of the human mind, heart, body and spirit. (p. xvi)

Black Elk, a now infamous Oglala Sioux Elder about whom much has been written, has spoken about the power of the circle.

You have noticed that everything an Indian (sic) does is in a circle, and that is because the Power of the World always works in circles, and everything tries to be round....The sky is round, and I have heard that the earth is round like a ball, and so are the stars. The wind, in its greatest power, whirls. Birds make their nests in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours. The sun comes forth and goes down again in a circle. The moon does the same, and both are round. (Philip, 1997, p. 38)

I have given a lot of thought to circles and their meaning for me. The Greeks thought that the circle was the perfect form; no beginning nor end, alpha nor omega. The symbol of the circle is one of the simplest yet most profound symbols for situating ourselves in the world; it is no accident that there are precious few right angles in nature. Yet for us in the West, our consciousness seems to be often orientated in straight lines. Consider the sayings 'toeing the line,' 'walking a straight path,' 'straight as an arrow,' and 'straightening out one's life'; all suggest it is better to be linear than circular. History and time are conceived as being linear by having a definite beginning, middle and end. However, we do sit around a table, have circles of friends and participate in the constant cyclical patterns of days, weeks, months, and years. I find as I grow older, my life is lived in ever widening rings like when one tosses a stone into still water. Children are born, others die and still others return to

being children as dementia or Alzheimer's sets in. It's the circle of life so beautifully sung about in the opening scene of Disney's *The Lion King* as Sarabi is shown holding the young Simba being blessed by the shamanic Rafiki and celebrated by the animals:

But the sun rolling high
 Through the sapphire sky
 Keeps great and small on the endless round
 It's the Circle of Life
 And it moves us all
 Through despair and hope
 Through faith and love
 Till we find our place
 On the path unwinding
 In the Circle of Life (Hahn, Allers, & Minkoff, 1994)

The Medicine Wheel captures this well and illustrates the depth of understanding Aboriginal peoples have to offer. In the Medicine Wheel, which is to be situated horizontally, a picture of the wholeness and interconnectedness of all things is immediately seen. Commonly based on the four sacred or cardinal directions; North, East, South and West, the Medicine Wheel offers a metaphor for understanding our interdependencies. For the Mi'kmaq people, there are seven sacred directions; in addition to the four compass points, there is 'above' representing the Great Spirit; 'below' representing Mother earth; and 'within' representing ourselves. The Mi'kmaq Medicine Wheel is "represented in a sphere-like dream catcher that has a center and a

three-dimensional cross” (Augustine, 1998, pp. 54-55). For every direction there are teachings and ceremonies which all relate to the Mi’kmaq creation story (p. 54). For Stephen J. Augustine, the ceremonies and prayers of the Mi’kmaq show the spiritual connection Aboriginal people have with all aspects of life.

We are always grateful for what we get everyday and we do not take for granted everything we receive. There is a reciprocal relationship between us and Mother Earth. The very foundation of our world view is that we belong to Mother Earth, She does not belong to us. We do not exercise power over everything for spiritual, economic or political purposes. We have as many rights as a blade of grass or the Canada Geese and nothing more. (1998, p. 57)

The following prayer speaks to this connection and attention given to Mother Earth:

A Mi’kmaq Prayer to the Seven Directions:

Oh Great Spirit, you have created all life.

We know that you live in everything; in every person, in every place.

We ask you to come to us; to be with us; to help us.

Oh Great Spirit of the East, where the sun rises.

Who holds our life with the opportunity of each day in your hands.

Protect us so that we do not lose our gifts and the hope of today through laziness.

Oh Great Spirit of the South,

Whose fragrance speaks of the coming spring and warmer days of summer.

As you speak to our hearts, remove our fears;

dispel our hatred; renew our love for one another.

Teach us in your wisdom they that are strong, must also be kind.

That justice must show mercy and the brave—compassion.

Oh Great Spirit of the West,

where the sun sets and where the mountains soar to the sky.

Bless us with peace that comes with striving to follow a well-disciplined life.

Teach us that dying is better than living where we die of ourselves.

Just as the sun glories not in the ending of a day

but the promises hope for a new tomorrow.

Oh Great Spirit of the North,

Who gives breath to the winds that brings us the cold air

and sends snow to cover the earth with its beauty.

Strengthen us and let us be thankful for the cold,

the storms and for the beauty of wintertime

as your beauty covers over Mother Earth.

Oh Great Spirit of the heavens,

where the blue of the sky and the countless stars of the night.

Speak to us of your greatness.

Where the flowering plants speak of your nearness,

while we lift up our spirit and hearts to you.

Oh Great Spirit of our Mother Earth,

The provider of all that we use to sustain us.

Help us to always give thanks for your gifts.

Oh Great Spirit of my soul, which burns in our hearts.

Speak to us so that we will always be thankful for the life you give us,
and let us always be ready to give up this life
and come to you without shame. (Native Council of Prince Edward Island,
2009. p. 3)

CHAPTER FOUR: EARTH CONSCIOUSNESS

Gaia and the Old Story

No one can argue that the emergence of the human species upon the earth has been a benign event. Armed with the proverbial Promethean Fire, humanity, from its very first forays into the African savanna some 1.5 million years ago, has had the ability to recognize itself as being in the environment and has had an unprecedented ability to change, manipulate and adapt the physical environment to suit its needs, wants and desires. According to Ulric Neisser (1988), the human person has multiple selves, one he understands to be the ecological self, a part of our psyche “as perceived with respect to the physical environment: ‘I’ am the person here in this place, engaged in this particular activity” (p. 36). For Neisser, we are aware of our ecological selves as “an embodied actor as well as an observer; it initiates movements, perceives their consequences, and takes pleasure in its own affectivity” (p. 39). Fortified with the power of our brains, humans have, more than any other creature, molded the environment to such an extent as to place our own existence in jeopardy. Up until recently, the vastness of the world’s oceans and forests, atmosphere and lands have seemed to have duped the earth’s human population into believing that its gifts flow from an eternal horn of plenty, a “world without end, Amen.” However, as we are finding out now, no matter how deep the well, it always has a bottom. The instrumental and utilitarian value of the earth’s resources have, particularly in the last two centuries, initiated a feeding frenzy as humans and their societies have chewed and clawed, morsel by morsel, at the bones, blood and skin of

the planet. Consumerism, as demagogue and champion of the West, has brought us to the brink of ecological disaster as, with increasingly efficient technologies and exponential human population growth, no rock, river, tree or creature is safe; like ravenous vultures, we continue to circle in search of greater economic opportunities.

It is increasingly clear to me that in unprecedented and uncertain times such as these, our old ways of thinking and knowing will not turn the tide. The old story of human arrogance over and against nature and the myth of unlimited economic growth, have severed us from our larger body and larger story and cannot be sustained. In a sense, the buzz-phrase ‘sustainable development’ is oxymoronic. If there is anything different today it’s that there is a clear knowledge of the ecological damage we are doing to the earth. Fixing and addressing specific issues is a start, but if the ecological crisis is a result of a crisis in human consciousness, thinking and being, then things will only marginally get better, if at all; we still have not reconciled and opened ourselves to the wider realities and systems of the earth. Because we have a distorted relationship within the web of life, our approach to the eco-crisis appears to be that of addressing symptoms only; or at least to that of holding the line. The symptoms of a planet in distress; pollution, ozone depletion, climate change, disappearing forests and a myriad of other stressors on our oceans, forests and atmosphere, are signals of an illness. Like a patient dealing with cancer, maybe Gaia has had enough and, if humans continue to alter the environment in such adverse ways, she will cough and spit out the disease and encourage “our replacement with a more environmentally seemly species” (Lovelock, 1988, p. 239). By addressing symptoms only, we will never get at the root cause of the problem, like applying

salve to a rash without removing the source of the allergy. The old story, rooted in modernity where humans are the kings and queens of the castle, can only respond to symptoms in order to fix them; not that this is wrong, it's only that trauma always has a deeper cause.

Our planet, as an ill and hurting entity, is a signal for us to try a new treatment. For me, what needs to happen quickly is for humans to allow our consciousness to expand and emerge as an ecological consciousness or ecological self that I prefer to call 'earth consciousness.' Knowing and recognizing ourselves as interdependent beings interconnected within the larger reality of the living earth and universe must become our focus. Earth consciousness, in contrast to the industrial, individualistic, linear, analytic and consumerist ways of knowing and being, is a way to restore our organic, holistic, cyclical, intuitive and dynamic ways of knowing and being. Earth consciousness locates us within the wider community of the earth and within the larger universal context and story of the universe. In a sense, there is a non-duality among nature, the world, the universe and us; all is interdependent and interconnected. Dualism is the enemy of the earth.

Fly like an Eagle

As a child, and certainly still today, I was fascinated and amazed with birds. These beautiful winged creatures, brightly colored and talkative, I always imagined as shadows of the angels, able to occupy the space between Heaven and earth; like Pegasus, a bridge between mortals and the gods. Hollowed bones, beaks, claws and feathers all conspire to make these ancient

creatures the stuff of imagination; illusive, nervous and fleeting; they flit through my mind and carry me away. I always trusted birds.

As a boy growing up on Prince Edward Island, I thought I saw all manner of birds. The pages of my Audubon field guide, dog-eared and ripped, were stained from hundreds of licked finger and thumb turnings. I loved seeing robins puff out their red chests in the spring or the shy piping plovers *nervously dance at the water's edge at low tide*. Iridescent green-winged teals and early-rising crows; darting cliff sparrows and swift kestrels; crowned golden eye ducks, and even great horned-owls; starlings, chickadees, and wondrous hummingbirds; all provided me with loads of enjoyment and fantasy. Like Icarus, I envied them all, but unlike the foolish Greek dreamer, I had to contend with feet of cement glued to the clay and sod. Looking up into *the sky, or to a perch atop a crooked larch, I've tried many times to get a* sense of what it must be like to take flight with no particular place to go and no particular time to get there; it seems to me that it must be like the feeling of true freedom.

There is one bird that I never saw in my growing-up years but dreamed of it. Encounters with this great bird were rare and one only heard rumors of sightings every now and then. Perhaps the greatest symbol of the wild and of the sacredness of the earth and its creatures is the bald eagle. I can still vividly recall the first time I ever saw one in the wild. I was about twenty. Up until that time I had only seen them shackled to a post as chained captives in a wildlife park. I was visiting a friend at his cottage located about

twenty kilometers north of Antigonish, Nova Scotia, at a place called Crystal Cliffs, so named for the beautiful pink, grey and white gypsum edifices impregnated with gleaming quartz gems. When the sun was just at the right angle, usually in the morning, the cliffs would dance and twinkle in a truly dazzling array of color and light. It was at this country bungalow where I would often see scores of bald eagles, soaring just off the cliff edge in order to catch the land-breezes in the evenings, surveying the grassland for groundhogs, mice and moles. Feelings of awe and wonder do not adequately describe the power of those moments. Eagles were common there, but for me and those initial sightings, their majesty could not be matched.

Since that time I've encountered bald eagles on many occasions but one particular instance stands out in my memory. It was an unusually balmy Sunday morning in November of last year when, as I settled for another cup of coffee in my country home, I noticed a large bald eagle against the dawn sitting in the crook of an old poplar tree; the tree stands as part of a buffer zone that lines my property against the tidal creek behind. The sky seemed angry that morning as the raging winds pummeled and rolled the heavy and thick, grey and crimson clouds hurriedly past the eastern horizon; trees waved and whipped with each gust and the fallen leaves spun in circles as if caught in the violent vortex of a mini-twister. For his part, the eagle faced the wind and its beautiful pale head bobbed and nodded up and down as if on a spring. Occasionally he rested it on its great hunched shoulders. I went outside for a better look.

Despite the loud winds, it was unusually quiet that morning. No gulls dared show themselves, geese laid low in the fields, squirrels, normally brash and over enthusiastic, did not chirp and taunt from the tree branches, no jays screamed at the feeder; all residents paid their respects to the presence of the intimidating raptor. Although it was not that far away, I went to the car for my binoculars; I wanted to get a closer look. The eagle just sat there and cocked its head in an inquisitive manner; I know it saw me, its steely yellow sapphire eyes, sharp as lasers, scanned the yard and fixed on me; I could not escape its awesome gaze and I felt it tolerated my presence. I leaned against a fence, braced into a pole, my feet searching for steadier ground, fumbled to focus the glass, and finally framed his majesty in the lens. Our eyes locked and for a moment all else was emptied out, it was just he and I in the world. An Aboriginal friend of mine once told me that when encountering a bald eagle, offer tobacco and talk to it and petition its reason for visiting. I did this and, as I walked towards the tree sprinkling the sacred herb, I spoke of my privilege to be there and wondered aloud of its meaning. After a ten minute conversation or so, the eagle decided to leave me to my thoughts; it spread its gigantic wings and with one lunge, it soared away on unseen thermals and rose to the sky. I bid farewell and was left with a feeling of being chosen. It was eerie in a way yet contained something profound.

That was not the first time I had encounters with bald eagles on my property, nor was it the last. But somehow, the great bird spoke to me that day. Long regarded by Aboriginal peoples and their ancestors as being

closest to the Great Spirit, it has become a symbol of wisdom, vision and strength. Strangely true, I often see eagles when I am in need of encouragement or am worried about something; is that a sign of my interconnectedness? Shall I remain open to its message? The bald eagle near my home seems to frequent my place whenever I seem to need him and I see others at opportune times too. They are hopeful signs and speak to the still untamed wildness of the earth. (Excerpt from autoethnographic journal)

The Great Work of Our Time

History is governed by those overarching movements that give shape and meaning to life by relating the human venture to the larger destinies of the universe. Creating such a movement might be called the Great Work of a people. (Berry, 1999, p. 1)

As we move towards the future, Thomas Berry believes that we are in the terminal phase of the Cenozoic Era. The Cenozoic, dating back to the period just after the disappearance of the dinosaurs some sixty-five million years ago (Berry, 1999, p. 29), is characterized by the myth of progress (Swimme & Berry, 1992, p. 242) and is the era most affected by human activity. What replaces the Cenozoic Era is not immediately or completely clear, but one possibility posited by Berry is to move into what he calls the Ecozoic Era (pp. 241-261). The Ecozoic era, previously called the Ecological Age in his earlier work (Berry, 1988), is Berry's attempt to understand where we must go if we are to avoid irreversible ecological planetary distress such that would threaten the very survival of the human species as we know it. The word 'ecozoic' is based on two Greek words; oikos meaning 'house' and zoic meaning

‘life.’ Put together, ushering in the Ecozoic Era means participating in the ‘House of Life.’ To realize the promise of the Ecozoic, according to Berry, means that we will have to develop a “capacity for intimacy in the communion of subjects” (Swimme & Berry, 1992, p. 249) rather than regarding the universe as a collection of objects, wholly other than ourselves, valued only for their utilitarian functions. We must respond to the story of the universe by accepting, protecting and fostering our human-earth relationships (p. 247) and must also open ourselves to the intimate presence to, and integral understanding of, nature. In other words, we must adopt an earth consciousness whereby the Great Work of our time (Berry, 1999) is to bring about the Ecozoic Era.

We will be involved with the future of the planet more than ever before.

“While the human cannot make a blade of grass, there is liable not to be a blade of grass unless it is accepted, protected, and fostered by the human” (Swimme & Berry, 1992, p. 247). For who among us does not drink of the rain, eat of the soil, breathe in the air or absorb the warmth and energy of the sun? Ushering in the Ecozoic Era requires the emergence of a new set of beliefs and worldview; an earth consciousness, rooted in a relational, embodied, storied and compassionate existence, and founded on a sense of wonder and awe, would help humanity to find its proper home as creatures of the earth.

All My Relations

Central to the conception of an earth consciousness is the realization and importance of relational ways of knowing. For O’Sullivan (1999), our world “must be seen at its deepest level as a relational totality” (p. 225). In other words, there would

be no sense or even an idea of the person without the “presence of community” (p. 225). The word ‘community,’ from the Latin *communis*, meaning a unified body, is related to the word ‘communion,’ meaning to be one with, and has at its core an assumption of relationships. When Thomas Berry speaks of a “communion of subjects,’ he is referring to our capacity for not only inter and intra-personal relationships, but also to our capacity and need for forming relationships with other non-human beings and with the planet and universe. One cannot relate or form true relationships with objects. For Martin Buber (1958), the only way to experience the other is through the ‘I-Thou’ encounter, subject to subject. When it comes to other people and to the earth and all its creatures, we do not travel on a one-way street, “Relation is mutual. My Thou affects me, as I affect it” (p. 15). The great work of our time, and part of developing an earth consciousness, is to regard the other, be it other humans, the earth or the universe itself, as subjects alive with an unfolding creative energy. For David Orr (1992), it is about entering into conversations.

But true conversation can occur only if we acknowledge the existence and interests of the other. In conversation, we define ourselves, but in relation to another. The quality of conversation does not rest on the brilliance of one or other person. It is more like a dance in which artistry is mutual.” (p. 90)

I like the idea of being in conversation and of dancing with the earth. Conversation and dance are wonderful metaphors for our words and actions. Our words and actions have power. We can lift or degrade, caress or lash out, respect or defile, or affirm or deny. Rarely, if ever, are our conversations and dancing neutral. For Orr, our use of such words as manage, resources, engineer and produce, and I would add stewardship

and economic development connote a monologue (p. 91). For me, the recent flood of “eco-friendly” and “green” products, although a step in a positive direction, still have an under-pinning of a new kind of consumerism; an eco-consumerism. No matter what color the box, economic value and growth still emphasize the instrumental and utilitarian value of the earth. Developing an earth consciousness means entering into a relationship with the natural world around us and would emphasize mutual respect and a sense of reciprocity with the earth rather than that of excessive use. For this to happen we must learn to slow down from the frantic rat race, be still and listen for the language of the earth, the language etched and written into the very fibers of the landscape and truly hear the rhythms, cycles and stories of inter-relatedness within the wider story of the earth. We are a part of that story, and like a tapestry or mosaic, an incomplete picture is formed if there is a thread pulled or a tile missing. Listening requires patience and stillness; slowing down to smell the roses may indeed be an apt truism and not rushing through the landscape is a prerequisite for developing a relationship with the earth.

The Tree of Life

There is a tree that I love and admire; it stands alone in a farmer's field some ways off from a highway, like a toy tin soldier standing at attention. I drove past this tree twice a day for some years; morning and evening occasions which became important parts of my days. It's an elm tree I think, and stands at least three stories high with a crown nearly as wide as it is tall. I wasn't too sure why this tree was so special at first; I've seen hundreds if not thousands before which, on the surface, are like it. Over time, I found myself

looking forward to seeing its welcoming branches stretched out as if beckoning me to slow down and take notice. Passed by perhaps thousands of other people a day, muddled and framed by persistent noise, fumes and asphalt, I wonder how many others have noticed it. Has it become too familiar as to blend into the surrounding landscape? Can we not see the tree blinded by the forest? For me, it is a very important tree and a *metaphor for my life's* journey.

Maybe it's the balance of its shape, symmetrical and elegant, beautiful to look at and perfect to my eyes? Sometimes I think it may be in its location; alone along a well used fence line. It is especially striking when framed against the dusk; its silhouette interrupts the vibrant western sky of layered crimsons and yellow hues as it often provides a fitting foreground for a spectacular array of color and movement. It simply stands out. At other times, particularly on morning encounters, I can barely recognize its dark outline peeking through a curtain of soft fog, its grey skin blending into the rolling smoke and wispy mist. As a tree though, there is nothing particularly unique about it except, for all the time I've known it, it has been dead. And maybe that's the point.

My tree has nothing to hide, alone and naked, it still stands as a reminder of its once proud life. Embattled and broken, this giant warrior has resisted droughts and floods, blights and plagues, and has endured the coldest of winters and, for at least a hundred years, has seen as much change as one can imagine. Now it is a skeleton of pointed fingers, arms and elbows yet still

retains much of its once proud majesty. I have noticed that it seems to lean slightly more to the south-west with each passing year. I suppose it is growing weary of resisting the terrible north-easterlies of the winter and the mat of roots that once anchored it firmly to the foundation of the good earth no longer have the strength or ability to dive beneath the shallow tangle of thin *topsoil and, as a result, it's slowly loosing the battle to preserve its stately* posture. Yet it continues to stubbornly persist against the changeable seasons and spongy soil. I am surprised that it has not succumbed to the whirling angry teeth of a chainsaw and am pleased that the generations of farmers who have tilled the soil around it have allowed it to be.

Although seemingly barren, I know there are many stories pent-up in the tightly woven fibres of that beautiful old elm. To think that such a massive structure, its branches, deformed and thick with strength, grew from a tiny *seed to survive and benefit from years of nature's furry and favor to become* such an integral part of the landscape is truly a mystery. Once it would have provided shelter and respite for generations of birds and their nests. It still acts as a stop-over for weary flocks of starlings on dull, grey autumn days. When pointed and paper-like leaves were a part of its seasonal dress, cool shade from the searing midday sun could have been found. Maybe the initials of young lovers were carved into its belly or maybe the stings of strands of *barbed wire stapled to its side were felt. Its stories are part of the earth's* story; its place in the landscape has become a part of my mindscape.

I do not know why this tree died; it may have been from disease or from simply old age. I do know that it has given me much and speaks to me of cycles, balance, beauty, age, strength and mysterious elmsness and reminds me that, with sap no longer coursing through its fibres, and its roots no longer tied to the soil as surely as once was, it will return to the earth and sink into its embrace. Like the tree, I will return to the earth. When it comes to my journey on this earth, many of the beliefs and assumptions I had as my roots have been yanked from the ground and do not grip as they once did. This tree, my tree of life, needs new roots yet points to the universe and, like the Tree of Knowledge, presents me with a choice; either regard the earth, including the trees, in all its splendor as a communion of subjects capable of entering a relationship with, or view the earth as purely instrumental, a collection of *objects to be used*. “*The tree is no impression, no play of my imagination, no value depending on my mood; but it is bodied over and against me and has to do with me, as I with it*”(Buber, 1958, p. 8). To be sure, my journey with the ripe, old elm tree can be used as a metaphor not only for my personal journey, *but for our collective journey on the earth. We need the earth’s resources to survive; the trees and rocks must give up their gifts, but we also need to see ourselves as a part of the greater whole, not the apex of it.* (Excerpt from autoethnographic journal)

Embodied in the World

To be earth conscious means that we have to recover a storied sense of the land and place and come to know where we fit in the overall narrative. It also means

that we need a shift in identification whereby we become cognizant of and are able to embrace our sense of being embodied as children of the earth interconnected to all earth beings. For Val Plumwood (2008), one of the impediments against this notion has been that place education and theories of ecological consciousness have emphasized a “singular homeplace” (p. 1) characterized by a dematerialization of idealized places where the shadow sides of the global economic machinery are often disregarded. Grounded in ecofeminism, Plumwood connects with the critique of the concept of nature as a “category defined by a dualistic narrative of splits” (p. 3). For her, our fragmentation from nature is a result of the modern, and often contemporary, understanding and acceptance of dualisms: mind/body; reason/emotion; respect/use and others are inherent in the world view of many, particularly in the West.

The dissociation of the affective place (the place of and in mind, attachment and identification, political effectiveness, family history, ancestral place) from the economic place that is such a feature of the global market is yet another manifestation of the mind/body dualism that has shaped the western tradition. (2008, p. 3)

Dematerializing “is the process of becoming more and more out of touch with the material conditions (including ecological conditions) that support or enable our lives” (p. 3). The language of binaries, that stubborn stain on our modern boots, continues to emphasize our apartness from the natural world; to think that somehow human culture, language and thought could somehow exist independently from the natural world was Descartes’ error. Being embodied in the world means adopting an ecocentric stance whereby we widen our circles of consciousness as to be located

within the larger earth and universe context, that Hill (1998) refers to an “inclusive worldview” (p. 9). For Hill, a global consciousness or earth consciousness is “capable of developing a more inclusive worldview and forming allegiances beyond the local” and “is cognizant of the interdependence among humans and between humankind and the earth” (p. 9).

Dematerializing, while not denying the possibility for a spiritual, emotional and psychic connection to a local place and to the earth, emphasizes our material dependence on nature for our physical existence. To adopt an earth consciousness is to realize our embodiment in the world as interconnected with all there is. We need to be able to relate to the natural world as a part of, not apart from the earth. Dualisms, the language of binaries and anthropocentrism all manage to mask our dependence on the earth and threaten our own survival.

Joanna Macey (1990), one of the creators of the Earth Charter, argues that we need to extend our sense of self, both mind and body, to include or encompass non-human beings. Referring to John Seed, the Director of the Rainforest Information Center in Australia, she states that “Tree and whale are no longer removed, separate, disposable objects pertaining to a world ‘out there’ but intrinsic parts of his own vitality” (p. 37). She quotes Seed as saying, “I try to remember that it’s not me, John Seed, trying to protect the rainforest. Rather, I am part of the rainforest protecting myself, I am that part of the rainforest recently emerged into human thinking” (p. 37). For Seed and Macey, being embodied means that this “ecological sense of selfhood” (p. 37) transcends fragmentation and separateness and “generates a profound interconnectedness with all life” (p. 37). Earth consciousness then becomes in tune

with the larger whole and impinges on the way one lives. Compassion becomes integral to our nature. “And when it is so defined, it serves as trigger or gateway to a more encompassing sense of identity, inseparable from the web of life in which we are so intricately interconnected as cells in a larger body” (p. 38). The cavernous space between mindscape and landscape disappears.

Striving for earth consciousness and living as an embodied being in the world is not solely theoretical. To become embodied in the world is as simple as living each day as if the earth mattered. For me, there was no better role model than my Grandfather DesRoches.

My Grandfather’s Way

When I look back at my life, I realize that my existence on this earth has been graced and privileged, even from the very day I was born taking those first unfamiliar and violent bursts of air into my tiny deflated lungs. My arrival into this world was thoroughly anticipated, the first-born among three generations. At that time, besides my own parents, six of my great-grandparents and four grandparents awaited the news. A close extended family was a given and a first born son a gift.

My early childhood was a dizzying pace of competition for my time and attention *to the family and I’m told I was showered with gifts and acts of affection*. But, as I grew older, one person would become the compass from which the rest of my life would be directed, a gift I never realized he had given me until after his death. My grandfather DesRoches, Tilmon S., or Pépé to me, had a way of navigating through this life with humility, humor and grit; he

had a way of embracing the ordinary and was always firmly grounded in the present moment; the sacred and the profane melded into one. My grandfather seemed to be the same all the time I knew him, in ways I think he never grew up. *Maybe it was my younger self's impression of him, but he was always* dependable to me. His face was creased and wrinkled, each tilled line into his face told a story; the storybook of a life fully lived. Perhaps because of living through the Great Depression, lumberjacking in Northern Quebec, farming or lobster fishing, building dozens of houses or of simply raising a family through a terrible world war or through personal tragedy, his leather face spoke to me of his energetic joi-de-vive and its landscape remains etched into my memory. His hair was always a dirty white with a stubborn cowlick that constantly fell over his face and which he patiently brushed back atop of his head. I also remember his coffee colored eyes which, despite seeing decades of change and even the death of a toddler daughter, smiled with each passing moment and gazed upon all those whom he knew with love and humor. *Actually, the crow's-foot corners of his eyes betrayed the reality of his life which I've come to know as being deeply wounded.*

My P  p   had a child-like wonder and an innate curiosity concerning just about anything, especially the natural world where he seemed to have a real relationship with his surroundings. He would often go for long walks in the woods, breathe in the musty aroma of the rotting forest carpet, filling his lungs with the fresh vitality; I think he even talked to the trees. Often he would take me along, the first born prot  g   to the master. Here, under the dark

canopy of birch and spruce, maple and pines, he spoke of simple and profound truths, or just passed down his skill at reading the space and the land. *“Did you know that Old Man’s Beard always grows on the north side of trees” he’d say, caressing the blue-grey moss between his fingers, or, “Follow a stream to its source, there you will drink the best water you ever tasted;”* natural springs bubble with a cool special elixir of the gods; they were Pépé’s fountains of youth and he knew where they all were. We often stopped to slurp the glistening water from cupped hands together, giggling at the fact that it *didn’t flow from a tap; I always thought I was getting away with something.* Rabbit runs and fox holes were all part of his experience of the woods, but so were mayflowers and mosquitoes.

Elders leave special gifts to their youth. My grandfather taught me that my house was the land and that the sea and the sky were the foundation and roof. In some special way my place, my home, was here on the earth. His wisdom did not come from books nor from conferred degrees, but from the experience of being wholly alive and at home in the moment and in this place.

I still hold an image of him in an annual ritual he performed as he planted his garden. For my grandfather, gardening was an act of hope. I still see him, from the vantage point of a twelve year old, unsteadily bent down on one knee, his braces straining and stretched over his shoulders, his well chewed pipe stem peeking out from the corner of his breast pocket, as he reverently and deliberately plunged his great hands into the freshly tilled soft soil right up past his thick wrists, and would draw-up two huge mitts full of

rich loam to his face breathing in what he knew to be the source of life. "Look at that" he'd say to me, inciting me to appreciate how wonderful this gift was, even more precious to him than gold, frankincense and myrrh could ever be. As he allowed the warm and soft black earth, rich in peat and humus, to sift through his fingers and fall back to the earth, I would sometimes hear him sigh softly; savoring the musty loam which, it seems to me transported him back to some distant time or memory. His delight never ceased to amaze me. It was as if he understood, at some level, the profound truth that contained in his hands was the stuff of his birth and to it he would return. "In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19).

Afterwards, P  p   would always sit back, light his pipe, and survey his work in quiet contemplation. What he thought about during those moments, I do not know. *I wouldn't dare interrupt him, but I'd like to think that he sat contented with the mystery of life, tiny seeds to giant trees, and that he never asked too many questions. Cycles and seasons were the mainstay of his psychic occupation; the result of decades of planned nourishment and toil where the harvest was not an end in itself, but an anticipated part of the process of living and rebirth.*

Living on an island sometimes forces us to confront our primordial water-born origins. For me, living next to the sea is part of who I am; I could not imagine living away from it. Just as the water has shaped the jagged shoreline, so it has shaped me. I often find myself whiling away hour upon

hour walking on the seashore, gazing over the sea to the distant horizon, breathing in the salty air and listening to the incessant pulse of waves lapping the sand, feeling the shells and stones beneath my feet. Sometimes I will just pick through and contemplate a handful of worn sand and tiny shells or, perhaps on cooler days, am content with skipping flat stones over the surface when the sea is calm and is at rest. I particularly love the days when Poseidon is angry, lashing his trident upon the brine, tossing its spray from between the rocks and capping each wave with a crest of whipped foam. On those days, I can feel its power in the middle of my chest pounding its deep base resonance at my core like the heartbeat of the earth. On other more rare days, I can hear the call of Panthalassa, its voice echoing in every tide; the origins of all life and the keeper of ancient rhythms.

My P  p   loved the sea and he was drawn to it like a diver craves the surface. He always had an old boat, or at least a leaky punt, which enabled him to get out on the water as often as he could. Like the old mariner Santiago, he would spend days just bobbing on the water, enjoying the respite from his terrestrial obligations and dreaming of his connection to the water world. He loved to touch the water, either by dangling his feet in its summer warmth or by ignoring the stinging tentacles of the jellyfish and jumping right in. He could swim for what seemed like hours at a time. He taught me about oysters, bar clams, starfish and sand dollars; mackerel, smelts, flatfish and cod. The tides were his watch, the moon his weathervane, and the moments I spent with my P  p   *on the water were some of the most memorable I've ever*

had; lazily hanging over the gunwales, gazing at the passing sea bottom, no distractions, great stories of days gone by, and best of all, I had him to myself. It was always fun and I will always cherish those times.

My grandfather was not an extraordinary man but was someone who lived his life to the fullest with simplicity and delight everyday. He loved to share his enthusiasm with those he cared about. He was without pretension, what you saw was what you got, and he approached each day with excitement and humility. His life was a steady stream of experiences which connected him *to the natural world more than anyone else I've ever known. The world was* his playground and he loved every swing of the tide, every slide of the weather and every teetering tree. The shore was his sandbox, his sense of life his shovel and pail. I learned from him by being with him, a gift he probably never realized he gave me. Whether it was in the oyster bed, digging clams, sauntering in the woods or just being quiet in the presence of a beautiful morning or a colorful dusk; days with my P  p   were a series of lessons learned about my place in the universe and my connection to this island.

One day in September, 1989, after working on my new house in the morning, my grandfather went bowling, something he loved to do in his retirement with my grandmother and his friends. Shortly after getting into the car to go home, my P  p   died suddenly of an aneurism; he was eighty-one. He was the first of my grandparents to die and the last one I expected to die first. *He was never sick or frail; somehow his death didn't suit his life, or maybe it did,* he often appeared to be in a rush. That was the darkest day ever for me. I

remember being sent to feed his poultry, a collection of clucking hens, noisy ducks and indignant geese, and, in my anger, kicked the door of my car, broke *down and cried in his driveway. I can honestly say that I've never sobbed as* deeply in my adult life before or since then. I knew things would never be the same again; the world seemed so dark and lonely. But, as I sat in his favorite chair later that day, smelling the pungent pipe tobacco and half expecting him to show up for supper, I realized that I had lost not only my grandfather, but also my friend and my teacher. Since then, *I've come to realize that the gifts* he gave me when he was alive remain with me and his spirit lives on. Now, when I stroll down a beach hand in hand with my own son, or plant the promise of harvest in my own yard, I know *Pépé's spirit is still present in the* land, in the sunset or in the painted clouds, and *all I can do is say, "Thanks* Pépé". (Excerpt from autoethnographic journal)

CHAPTER FIVE:

EPILOGUE

Outside the Box

My journey so far in life has been one of great privilege. I am fortunate to have been influenced by many teachers who have acted as a compass for me to think in different ways. Like my father and grandfather, eagles and whales, and all other beings I have known while traversing this earth, human and other-than-human, the door has been opened a crack and I can see past the threshold. Standing on the outside of the cultural understanding of ourselves as expressed in the stories we have heard can be difficult; flirting with issues of self-identity and cultural-identity can often be a painful experience of loss. Questioning, deconstructing and disrupting the assumptions upon which our very understanding of ourselves vis-à-vis our place on the earth and in the universe means leaving the familiar comforts of what we may have known or believed. Being outside the box, as a metaphor for rejecting the status-quo, requires courage, depth and honesty. When it comes to our relationship with the earth, the truth about the stories we have been telling is that they are pervasive and have emphasized our perceived dominion over nature with our consumption and progress as a species taking precedence. Conquering nature has been a war-cry. Although greater awareness of our destructive ways in the West is growing, it is still difficult for us to generally accept that we are not “the glory and the crown of the Earth” (Swimme & Berry, 1992, p. 254). The twenty-first century may be a point in history where this attitude may finally catch up to us.

With every crisis there may be despair and a feeling of being overwhelmed, but there are also real opportunities for change and for hope. There are many who have broken the constraints and tethers of the old stories and have dared to dream of a new mythic vision which re-stories our place within the community of subjects in the universe and on the earth; I am slowly getting there. Perhaps the single greatest cause for hope is our capacity for wonder and awe at belonging to this wonderful blue-green ball barreling through space and that we can call home. For Swimme and Berry (1992), the “Earth seems to be a reality that is developing with the simple aim of celebrating the joy of existence” (p. 3). Marveling at a beautiful sunset, appreciating the majesty of mountains, drinking in the quiet calm of a pond, savoring the sweet scent of a fragrant wildflower, celebrating the twinkle of a star, and delighting in the life of every animal and plant all speak to the life-giving nature of the earth. Its story is our story and our story is the earth’s. We need to be open to what every sunset, mountain, pond, wildflower, star, plant and animal is telling us and be able to read and tell the stories of the universe and of the earth. Developing an earth consciousness opens up the possibilities for these stories to emerge; stories that speak of our interconnectedness to this place and our participation in its wider realities will give rise to being “present to the larger Earth community in a mutually enhancing manner” (p. 3), and will help us to discover that our role is “enabling the Earth and the universe entire to reflect on and to celebrate themselves, and the deep mysteries they bear within them, in a special mode of conscious self-awareness” (p. 1).

Educational Assumptions and Environmental Education

The need for educational reform has never been more urgent. Schools, however, are being drawn into an ideological tug-of-war where various and competing interests and lobby-groups are vying for education's attention, cooperation and, indeed, its very *raison d'être*. There is no doubt that education plays an important function in not only reflecting the mores and values of a given society or culture, but also in perpetuating those values or, alternately, challenging the presuppositions onto which the educational edifice is carved. Recently, in Canada as in other education jurisdictions around the globe, there has been an increasing emphasis on educational reform but with a view to increase standards and skills in order to fuel and bolster the economic engine. Words like accountability, measurements, standards, standardized tests, common assessments, knowledge economy and systemic reform all speak to the perceived need for a highly skilled workforce ready to advance the economic cause. In order for students to compete in the global economy, they must meet certain measurable standards making them viable contributors to economic progress. In itself, this responsibility of education is necessary; we are not, however, simply a *deus in machina*. That focus may cause us to miss the truths present in our world.

According to some writers (Bowers, 1993, 1995; O'Sullivan, 1999; Orr, 2004), educational reform, in a strictly economic context, will not address the single greatest threat to human and planetary survival, that of ecological degradation of a scale never seen before. The consequences of abusing the environment with waste, pollution, greenhouse gases and a reduction in biodiversity, and the negative

outcomes of our techno-consumer orientated society, have, in some ways, become a part of our mainstream consciousness and zeitgeist. But, many people who have recognized the looming environmental crisis limit their concerns and political activities to knee-jerk reactions against various ecological pressure points such as global warming, toxins in the air, soil or water; not that this is bad, but environmental issues are symptoms of a deeper problem. The ecological crisis is about the way we think and act; it is a crisis of the mind and soul, of our very consciousness. Our *vita activa* often leaves us unconscious about the path we should take. Most do not recognize that the connection between our western ideas and values, rooted in a not-so-distant history, has lead to the adoption of many myths and assumptions which remain as the bedrock and underpinning of our current society and education system and are responsible in part for the grand scale ecological destruction we have wreaked on the earth since the Industrial Revolution. According to C.A. Bowers:

In effect, the cultural message systems that sustain the images and values upon which the consumer-orientated society rests continue unchallenged to reinforce the taken for granted attitudes toward material progress and individual opportunity—even as the evidence mounts that the destruction of the environment now puts the entire technological/economic infrastructure at risk. (1995, p. 1)

Reconsidering the Purpose of Education

There appears to be a disconnect between the concern about the immediate impact environmental degradation has on our health, safety and economic well-being and consideration of key existential questions about who we are, how we think and

act, and our cultural constructs vis-à-vis the earth. “The deepest assumptions of the culture, in effect, often go unrecognized even in the face of the most radical political action” (Bowers, 1995, p. 2). The truth is much of what we do in education unconsciously honors safe conformity to accepted and prevailing standards. If the crisis in the environment is due to a crisis in our cultural beliefs, values and consciousness, then it is a crisis for education too. For David Orr (2004), we need to “reconsider the substance, process, and purpose of education” (p. 27) and rethink its mandate in terms of human and environmental survival and our relationship to the earth and its resources. He believes that all education, in one way or another, is environmental education (p. 12) yet, traditionally, education has been leaning towards an emphasis on “ abstraction rather than consciousness; neat answers instead of questions; and technical efficiency over conscience” (p. 8). The old paradigm of education, where people are ‘trained’ to fulfill the demands of the economy, is adding to the ecological crisis. Orr (2004) states:

More of the same kind of education will only compound our problems. This is not an argument for ignorance but rather a statement that the worth of education must now be measured against the standards of decency and human survival.... It is not education, but education of a certain kind, that will save us. (p. 8)

Education is a like a double-edged sword. On one edge it helps, by its very history and structure, to unconsciously entrench our deepest patterns which are largely based on the precepts of modernity, yet on the other blade, it may be our best bet for challenging and critiquing those same assumptions while, at the same time,

offering a critical understanding of the eco-crisis. The ecological challenge facing the earth community has its roots firmly grown into the soil of our society's core beliefs, values and world views which are directly or indirectly taught in our schools. Global warming, toxic wastes, the depletion of rainforests and species extinction can be seen as symptoms of our schizophrenic way of living where environmental issues are seen as a series of perhaps unconnected problems divorced from our cultural and educational biases; in other words, our understanding of the ecological problems has been culturally conditioned for us to accept. Hence, the ecological crisis will force us to confront educational reform as an examination and disruption of our core beliefs, myths and assumptions about the world and our place in it. It is about the stories we tell.

In order to undertake a radical reform of education, one which will respond to the many deep, global environmental challenges which currently face us and ominously lay ahead, a critical examination of the nature of education and the assumptions it rests upon needs to take place. This is foundational work as uprooting and disrupting the unconscious aspects of our society and, by extension, its education systems requires a stepping back and the understanding of historical perspectives. It is crucial since education cannot escape confronting the ecological discourse currently taking place. As David Orr (2004) states, "We have to challenge the hubris buried in the hidden curriculum that says that human dominion of nature is good; that the growth of the economy is natural; that all knowledge, regardless of its consequences, is equally valuable; and that material progress is our right" (p. 32).

The Four Rs

We have all heard of the Three Rs of environmentalism: reduce, reuse and recycle. Today, many jurisdictions in the West promote programs that aim at reducing our overall consumption of the earth's resources. The problem is that unless it is done to 100% efficiency, it will never be sustainable. Programs that manage waste and resources are necessary in today's world and have generally raised our ecological awareness, but in order to truly curb the ecological destruction we now face, we must adopt a whole new way of thinking. I suggest that adopting an earth consciousness means adopting a different set of the Rs: relationship, respect, reciprocity and reverence. One of the best places to turn in order to learn a different way of being in the world is towards traditional Aboriginal teachings.

According to Fyre Jean Graveline (1998), traditional Aboriginal pedagogical forms are always "earth-based" (p. 184). Central to this notion is "that we are all interconnected by a form of environmental/ecological consciousness" (p. 184). For centuries now, Aboriginal peoples have been subjected to a barrage of Eurocentric philosophies and ideas, often to the point of great suffering at the hands of official assimilation policies. Anthropocentrism is a typically Western ideal where, according to Thomas Berry (1990), "we have had a certain sense of ourselves as above all living forms, as lordly rulers of the continent" (p. 189). Traditional Aboriginal ways of knowing and being are in direct opposition to that paradigm. For Russell, Bell and Fawcett (2000), Aboriginal knowledge and world views rely on the premise, radically different from the western view, that humanity is a part of nature, not separated from "environmental processes." As such it stands in direct contrast to the deep cultural

roots in modern industrial society's profound alienation from the "more-than-human world" (p. 204). At the heart of developing an earth consciousness is this sense of being interconnected with all other beings on the earth. Perhaps education, rather than focusing primarily on the scientific understanding of the ecocrisis, should focus instead on developing in our students, especially at a young age, that sense of an earth consciousness that engenders in them a sense of relationship, respect, reciprocity, and reverence as rooted in a sense of wonder and awe.

Forming a relationship with the earth implies listening, communication, dialogue and a sense of the communion of subjects that makes up the earth. It means recognizing that we are at home on the earth. Far from just having a factual understanding of the biosphere, it also implies a deep emotional knowing. David Orr (1992) states it this way, "This is to say that even a thorough knowledge of the facts of life and of the threats to it will not save us in the absence of the feeling of kinship with life of the sort that cannot entirely be put into words" (p. 87). Perhaps we should heed the words of Edward O. Wilson (2002) and, rather than educating for biophobia (p. 141), we should be embracing biophilia, "defined as innate tendency to focus upon life and lifelike forms, and in some instances to affiliate with them emotionally" (p. 134). For Uhl (2004), "In the end, it is not new laws or more efficient solar cells that will play a leading role in solving humankind's environmental and social problems; it is our awakened and caring hearts" (p. xx).

Having respect for someone means recognizing their inherent value; respecting the earth means recognizing the inherent value of all things. Aboriginal peoples have a sense of the immanent and "share a belief in, knowledge of and respect

for unseen powers” (Graveline, 1998, p. 52, emphasis in text). Rooted in a sense of the sacred, the Aboriginal worldview acknowledges the inherent value of all things “because all things are beings” (p. 52). In the words of Starhawk (1987, as cited in Graveline, 1998), “We do not have to earn value. Immanent value cannot be rated or compared. No one, nothing, can have more of it than another. Nor can we lose it. For we are, ourselves, the living body of the sacred” (p. 52). To have earth consciousness means to respect the earth in all its diversity and cycles and to realize its inherent value beyond the instrumental. To devalue someone or something opens the door for abuse; to have respect is an invitation to care and have compassion.

Reciprocity is really about balance and is integral to the Traditional Aboriginal worldview. Graveline (1998) relates that, “The Elders teach us that in order to receive what we truly need...we must Giveaway what we have” (p. 85). Things are not always one-way and for Aboriginal peoples, giving is at least as important as receiving and for the teeter-totter to be in balance, there must be an equal amount on each side. As a recipe against oppression, power imbalance and subjugation, the attitude of reciprocity is important for the acquisition of an earth consciousness as it “is a critical aspect in developing community and in expanding our Circle of interconnectedness” (p. 178). Balance is the key, no matter how slowly one drains the water from a jug, it eventually empties.

Perhaps the single greatest tool for the development of an earth consciousness is a sense of awe and wonder and reverence. Reverencing is a response to the sacred; defiling the sacred has always been a taboo. This planet is a true miracle and to be a part of it a never ending source of delight, beauty, imagination and mystery. It is the

earth world that supports humanity and we are the sun, water, soil and air. The fact that we are here is a testament to the creative energy of the earth and of the universe. An earth consciousness realizes the profound ability that we have for love, compassion, hope, joy, wonder and awe and invites us to explore the full spectrum of what it means to be alive and to be in this place in time and space. Reverence implies that every action meant to embrace our relationship with the earth and with the universe needs to be our prayer. Michael Lerner (2000) states well.

Why not let awe and wonder be the first goals of education? Why not let our teachers be judged on how successful they are at generating students who can respond to the universe, each other and their own bodies with awe, wonder, and radical amazement at the miracles that are daily with us?....Why not declare the person who is most grateful and awe-filled as the person most likely to have the qualities of soul desired by the institutions, that eventually do the hiring and promotion at every level of society? (p. 243)

In the past and sadly still today, much of humanity has regarded the earth as a vast bottomless sink of resources for the taking. In recent decades, perhaps foreshadowed by the wisdom of Marshall McLuhan, we have seen a Global Village emerge and the earth has shrunk to a point where we can no longer regard it as an infinite source for our wants and needs. Now, as the media highlights oil spills, urban sprawl, habitat destruction, melting polar icecaps, deforestation, over-fishing and a whole host of ecological issues and disasters, we cannot ignore our profound affect on the planet as it suffers as a result of human activity.

The stories and myths of our separation from and dominion over the earth need to be challenged today as never before; we cannot continually pit ourselves and our society as over and above nature, as if it had to be conquered and as if we were apart from it. Humanity does have a role and is part of the equation; whatever distress affects the earth will eventually affect us as we have a biological nature and are dependant on the earth for our very existence. We are nature and nature is us. But, we are more than just biological creatures since we have the capacity for love, hope, empathy, compassion, celebration and reason, and do have the ability to enter into a respectful, reciprocal, and sacred relationship with our earth home. In reality, our very physical, psychic, creative and social natures are dependent on the earth and destroying it means destroying ourselves. In order to bring about a peace with and on the planet, we must restory the earth and the universe to discover our place in the wider realities and rise above the greed and violence that we are also quite capable of as humans. Earth consciousness means not only listening to stories, but also listening for the stories of the earth and living as if every bud, leaf and pod; rock, cloud and animal matter. The stories we tell matter and there is a need for the telling of new stories, of listening for new myths, of seeing with new eyes for a clearer mythic vision that gives witness to a deeper more respectful, reciprocal and reverential relationship with the earth and with the universe. Finding new stories to tell about the earth is the great work of our time, and it is hopeful work.

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