A Pedagogy for Ecology

BY ANN PELO

The year I turned 40, I found my way home. That year, in Utah’s red rock desert for the first time, I wept as I climbed across the slickrock, wound along canyon floors, balanced my way up and over canyon walls. This wildly unfamiliar place moved me more than I’d expected. I’d thought it would be beautiful and that the challenge of backpacking there would be energizing—but I hadn’t expected my heart to break open. My visit to Utah awakened me to a passionate love, born in my childhood, that I’d forgotten, or never consciously acknowledged: love for a spacious, uncluttered horizon, love for dirt, rock, and sage, for heat and dust and stars, for open sky. In the red rock desert, I felt a hunger for place that I hadn’t recognized until it began to be sated by the vast sky and expansive rock.

I grew up in arid eastern Washington, near Idaho, and spent my childhood outdoors, digging tunnels into the sage-scrub gully across from my house, running across the open fields to flush pheasants and quail from the tall grass, piling pine needles into nests and curling into them like an animal into a den. When I left home, I moved west, to the “wet side” of the state, and my sense of place was unsettled. I continued to spend long stretches of time outdoors, trekking through the rain-drenched mountains or along the wild and rugged coast, and felt glad to be there. But I didn’t let the place seep into me and become part of me; shoulders hunched against the wet, I held myself at some distance from the Pacific Northwest. In Utah, I remembered, with a child’s open-hearted joy, how it feels to give over to a place, to be swept into an intimate embrace with the earth. In Utah, I understood that place is part of our identity—that place shapes our identity. This is what I want for children: a sensual, emotional, and conscious connection to place; the sure, sweet knowledge of earth, air, sky. As a teacher, I want to foster in children an ecological identity, one that shapes them as surely as their cultural and social identities. I believe that this ecological identity, born in a particular place, opens children to a broader connection with the earth; love for a specific place makes possible love for other places. An ecological identity allows us to experience the earth as our home ground, and leaves us determined to live in honorable relationship with our planet.

We live in a culture that dismisses the significance of an ecological identity, a culture that encourages us to move around from place to place and that posits that we make home by the simple fact of habitation, rather than by intimate connection to the land, the sky, the air. Any place can become home, we’re told. Which means, really, that no place is home.

This is a dangerous view. It leads to a way of living on the earth that is exploitative and destructive. When no place is home, we don’t mind so much when roads are bulldozed into wilderness forests to make logging easy. When no place is home, a dammed river is regrettable, but not a devastating blow to the heart. When no place is home, eating food grown thousands of miles away is normal, and the cost to the planet of processing and shipping it is easy to ignore.

Finding a Place

Our work as teachers is to give children a sense of place—to invite children to braid their identities together with the place where they live by calling their attention to the air, the sky, the cracks in the sidewalk where the earth busts out of its cement cage. For me, teaching in a childcare program in Seattle located next to a canal that links Lake Union and Puget Sound, “place” means the smell of just-fallen cedar boughs and salty, piquant air, the sweet tartness of blackberries (and the scratch of blackberry thorns), the light grey of near-constant clouds, the rough-voiced call of seagulls and the rumble of boat engines. It is exhilarating to offer children this place as home ground.

Other places are less compelling as home ground. What does it mean to do this work of connecting children to...
place when the immediate environment numbs rather than delights the senses? What can be embraced in a school neighborhood dominated by concrete, cars, and convenience stores?

Children’s worlds are small, detailed places—the crack in the sidewalk receives their full attention, as does the earthworm flipping over and over on the pavement after rainfall. They have access to elements of the natural world that many adults don’t acknowledge. When we, like the children, tune ourselves more finely, we find the natural world waiting for us: cycles of light and dark, the feel and scent of the air, the particularities of the sky—these are elements of the natural world and can begin to anchor us in a place.

Rather than contribute to a sense of disconnection from place by writing off the environments around our most urban schools as unsalvageable or not worth knowing, teachers can instill in children an attitude of attention to what exists of the natural world in their neighborhoods. The sense of care for and connection to place, then, can become the foundation for a critical examination of how that place has been degraded. Rick Bass, in The Book of Taak, describes his experience of the interplay between love of place and willingness to see the human damage done to that place: “As it became my home, the wounds that were being inflicted upon it—the insults—became my own.”

Every child lives someplace. And that someplace begins to matter when children are invited to know where they are and to participate in the unfolding life of that place—coming to know the changes in the light and in the feel of the air, and participating in a community of people who speak of such things to each other.

Cultivating an Ecological Identity

Children know how to live intimately in place; they allow themselves to be imprinted by place. They give themselves over to the natural world, throwing endless rocks into a river, digging holes that go on forever, poking sticks into slivers of dirt in pavement, finding their way up the orneriest tree. They learn about place with their bodies and hearts. We can underscore that intuited, sensual, experiential knowledge by fostering a conscious knowledge of place in children.

Kathleen Dean Moore, director of the Spring Creek Project for Ideas, Nature, and the Written Word at Oregon State University, writes that, “To love—a person and a place—means at least this:

1. To want to be near it, physically.
2. To want to know everything about it—its story, its moods, what it looks like by moonlight.
3. To rejoice in the fact of it.
4. To fear its loss, and grieve for its injuries.
5. To protect it—fiercely, mindlessly, futilely, and maybe tragically, but to be helpless to do otherwise.
6. To be transformed in its presence—lifted, lighter on your feet, transparent, open to everything beautiful and new.
7. To want to be joined with it, taken in by it, lost in it.
8. To want the best for it.
9. Desperately.”

How do we cultivate this love of place in young children’s hearts and minds, moving beyond the tenets of recycling to intimate connection with their home ground? From my experiences as a childcare teacher, I’ve distilled a handful of principles.

- Walk the land.
- Learn the names.
- Embrace sensuality.
- Explore new perspectives.
- Learn the stories.
- Tell the stories.

My primary work is as a teacher in a full-day, year-round childcare program in an urban Seattle neighborhood that serves families privileged by race, class, and education. I’ve also worked closely with teachers and children in urban Head Start programs. The principles I suggest resonate in these widely varying contexts; all children deserve home ground.

Walk the Land

Contemporary U.S. culture is about novelty and fast-moving entertainment: a million television channels to surf, and news stories that flash bright and burn out fast. This disposition to move quickly and look superficially translates to a lack of authentic engagement with the earth: Get to as many national parks as we can in a two-week vacation, drive to a scenic view, take some photos, and drive to the next place. D. H. Lawrence critiques these shallow encounters: “The more we know superficially, the less we penetrate, vertically. It’s all very well skimming across the surface of the ocean and saying you know all about the sea. Underneath is everything we don’t know and are afraid of knowing.”

As teachers, we must be mindful of this cultural disposition to superficial knowledge. It’s easy to fall into the habit of aiming for novelty, offering children many brief encounters with places, too-short experiences that leave them familiar with the surface, but not the depths. Instead, we ought to invite children to look below the surface, to move slowly, to know a place deeply.

For many years, my emphasis in planning summer field trips was to get to as many city parks and beaches as I could. Each week, we’d head out to two or three different places, so that by the end of the summer we’d taken a grand tour of the city. I thought that, by visiting a range of places in Seattle, the children would come to know their city. We had a hoot on those trips, but each place was a first encounter, and offered novelty rather than intimacy. The children came away from those summers not so much with a sense of place as with confusion about how these various places fit together to make up their home ground. We’d skimmed the surface of Seattle, but didn’t know its depths.

Now, my emphasis has shifted. I plan regular visits to the same two or three places over the course of a year. Spending time at the same park and the same beach, we see it change over a year. I point out landmarks on the beach to help the children track the tide’s movement up and down the beach. At the park, the children and I choose a couple trees that we visit regularly; we take photos and sketch those trees to help us notice the nuances of their seasonal cycles. From the top of a big rock at the park, the children play with their shadows on the ground below, noticing how
shadow and light changes over the year. The children greet the rhododendron bushes like dear old friends, and know the best places to find beetles and slugs. My commitment to walking the land consciously with children has changed how I walk with them to the park in our neighborhood. I used to focus our walk on getting there efficiently and safely, and chose our route accordingly. Now, I've charted a longer route, one that takes us past a neighbor's yard full of rosemary and lavender and tall wild grasses. We take our time walking past this plot of earth, and I coach the children to point out what they notice about this very familiar place. I'd worried that the children would become bored, walking the same path every day, or would stop seeing the land, so I developed several rituals for our walk. We pause at the rosemary to monitor changes in its fragrance, its buds and foliage, and to watch for the arrival of spit bugs, whose foamy nests delight the children. We pause at the wild grass to compare its growth to the children's growth, an inexact but joyfully chaotic measurement.

**Learn the Names**

When we talk about the natural world, we often speak in generalities, using categorical names to describe what we see: “a bird,” “a butterfly,” “a tree.” We are unpracticed observers, clumsy in our seeing, quick to lump a wide range of individuals into broad, indistinct groups. These generalities are a barrier to intimacy: a bird is a bird is any bird, not this redwing blackbird, here on the dogwood branch, singing its unique song.

Most of us don’t have much of a repertoire of plant, insect, animal, tree, or bird names; I sure don't. For many years, I wasn't particularly interested in learning the names of the flora and fauna, and imagined that learning the names would be a chore, a tedious exercise in memorization. My experience in Utah taught me that learning the names is an exercise in love. There, I was in an entirely unfamiliar place, and had only the clumsiest of generic names for what I encountered: a bush, a rock, a lizard. As I began to fall in love with the red rock desert, I wanted to know everything about it, including the names it holds. I bought a field guide and began to learn the names—the identities—of the plants, the creatures, the types of rock. Each name was a step closer into relationship. The names helped me locate myself in the desert.

I carry a field guide to the Pacific Northwest with me now, when I’m out with the children in my group. We take it with us when we walk to the school playground around the corner, and when we go farther afield. We turn to it when we encounter a bug we don’t recognize or find an unfamiliar creature revealed by a low tide. And I’ve created lotto and matching games from the field guide, photocopying images of familiar trees, birds, marine creatures. We use the images for matching games and bingo games: Together, we’re learning the names of this place that is our shared home ground.

**Embrace Sensuality**

In a culture that values intellect more than intuition or emotion, typical environmental education too often emphasizes facts and information in lieu of experience. There are plenty of plastic animals, nature games, videos, and books for children that invite children to intellectualize—and commodify—the natural world. Teacher resource catalogues offer activity books and games that teach about endangered species, rain forest destruction, pollution, and recycling. These books and games keep the natural world at a distance; the rain forest is, for most of us, an abstracted, distant idea, not our intimate place.

To foster a love for place, we must engage our bodies and our hearts—as well as our minds—in a specific place. Intellectual and critical knowledge needs a foundation of sensual awareness, and, for very young children, sensual awareness is the starting place for other learning. How does the air feel on your skin? What birds do you hear on the playground?

A friend of mine taught in a Head Start program in a housing development which had been the scene of several shootings and which had more graffiti than green. She wrestled with how to stir children’s numbed senses awake in that harsh landscape where playing outdoors was dangerous. She decided to bring the sensual natural world into her classroom. She added cedar twigs to the sand table, and chestnuts, and stems of lavender. She included pine cones and sea shells in the collection of playdough toys. She supplemented her drama area with baskets of rocks and shells, and included tree limbs, driftwood, stumps, and big rocks in her block area. She played CDs of birds native to the Northwest. And in early fall each year, she welcomed the children to her program with feasts of ripe blackberries, making jam and cobbler with the children, telling them about her adventures picking the blackberries in a wild bramble in the alley behind her apartment building.

**Explore New Perspectives**

Living in a place over time can breed a sense of familiarity, and familiarity can easily slip into a belief that we’ve got the land figured out. We stop expecting to be surprised, to be jolted into new ways of seeing; we become detached from the vitality of a place.

Our challenge is to see with new eyes, to look at the familiar as though we’re seeing it for the first time. When we look closely and allow ourselves to be surprised by unexpected details and new insights, we develop an authenticity and humility in our experience of place, and wake up to its mysteries and delights.

Several years ago, one of the 4-year-old children in my group posed a simple
question: Why do the leaves change color? Her question startled me awake: I saw the transformation of color through her eyes, a phenomenon consciously witnessed only once or twice in her young life, and one full of mystery and magic. Her question deserved my full attention, not a recital of the muddled information that I remembered from my science classes in school, and not a quick glance at an encyclopedia. Madeline's question launched our group on an in-depth study of the lives of leaves that carried us through the seasons.

My co-teacher, Sandra, and I took the children on a walk through the neighborhood to study the trees. Moving from one tree to the next, we began to see a pattern, and shared our observation with the children: the leaves on the outermost branches began to change color before the leaves in the center of the tree. The children built on our observation, adding what they'd noticed: that the leaves first changed color on their outermost edges, while the center of the leaves remained green. I suggested that we gather leaves to bring back to our room, where we could study them up close and record what we observed, sketching the details that we saw and adding nuances of color with watercolor paint. As we sketched the lines of the leaves, children pointed out the resemblance between the skeletal lines of leaves—the “bones” of a leaf, the children called them—and the tendons and lines on our hands: “The lines of the leaf feel like human bones.” “The lines are like the lines on your hands.” Excited by the children's observation, I suggested that we sketch our hands, just as we'd sketched the leaves, knowing that our sketching would help us see ourselves in new ways, as cousins to leaves.

As we sketched, I asked the children to reflect on why the leaves change color in the autumn. “What is it about autumn that makes leaves change from green to red, orange, brown?” In our conversation, the children generated several theories about the relationship between autumn and the changes in leaves: “In the fall, it's cold. Leaves huddle together on the ground to get warm. The trees are cold because they don’t have any leaves to keep them warm.” “The color is a coat to keep the leaves warm, because it’s cold in the fall.”

From this analysis, one child made a leap that deepened our conversation: “Leaves get sad when they start to die.” From this decidedly unscientific conjecture, the children forged a potent connection to the leaves: “Like we give comfort to others when they’re sad, the plant needs comfort.” “I think a hug would help a leaf, and being with the leaf.” “Maybe you could stay with it. You just give it comfort before it dies.” “When it drops on the ground, that’s when it needs you.”

At Hilltop, we used an emergent pedagogy, developing curricula from the children's questions and pursuits. In our study of the lives of leaves, I experienced the value of this pedagogy, as the children and Sandra and I lingered with questions, theories and counter-theories, and with our not-knowing. Instead of falling back on environmental science lessons about chlorophyll and light, our emergent curriculum framework allowed us to explore Madeline's question in the spirit in which it was posed: a question about the meaning of change and the identity of leaves. Through our exploration, we became intimates of leaves, anchored in our place.

**Learn the Stories**

To foster an intimate relationship with place, we need to know the stories and histories that are linked to that place, just as we do in our intimate relationships with people. In our work with young children, our focus in gathering these stories is as much about the children's imaginings as it is about scientific facts. We can invite their conjectures to complement the facts, opening the door to heartfelt connections.

Visiting a Head Start program one afternoon, I watched Natalie catch ants on the asphalt slab that served as the program's playground. She hovered over a crack in the pavement, carefully picking up each ant that crawled from the crack and dropping it into a bucket. Curious about her intention, I asked what she was planning for the ants: “They're bugs and we hafta kill them.” I imagined contexts in her life in which this could be true: Had her family dealt with invasive insects at home? Had she experienced the pain of bee stings and itch of mosquito bites? I wanted respectfully to acknowledge these sorts of experiences, yet I didn't want them to become her only references for understanding and relating to the natural world. I said, “Sometimes, when bugs come into our houses, we have to kill them to keep ourselves healthy. And some bugs can bite us in painful ways. But sometimes, we don't have to worry so much about the bugs we find. I'm curious about these ants; where do you suppose they come from?”

Natalie was quick to imagine the ants' story. “The ants are in the hole talking. If they hear loud noises, they won't come out. We have to be very quiet! If they see us, they stay in because they're scared. When one ant wasn't looking, I got him! I'm faster than them—that's how I catch them.”

“What's in the hole that the ants come from?” I asked.

“Maybe their family,” Natalie mused. I offered her a clipboard and a pen, and invited her to draw her ideas about what was in the hole. She leaped at the invitation, and began to sketch, talking aloud as she worked: “They're a family. They talk to each other and bring food to their baby. In the house, there's food and a table and a bed and a seat.”

Natalie stopped drawing to look into her bucket: “There's 15 ants in the bucket! That's more than one family. That's a lot of families. They share one house in the hole. The ants come not fast because they're talking, saying their plan to come out to see what's outside. They want to find their family that's in the bucket. The ants in the bucket want to get out of the bucket and go to their family.”

Natalie abruptly dumped the bucket upside-down next to the crack in the pavement, and tapped it on its bottom. “Go home, ants! Go to your home. Go to your family.”

The invitation to imagine the ants' story helped Natalie look at her bucket from the inside as well as from above, and shifted her relationships with the ants. She moved from a defensive posture to that of being a protector. Particularly for children living in places where the natural world is degraded or dangerous, imagining the stories of a place can inspire new possibilities, can cast the children into an active role as people who care about and take action on behalf of a place.
Tell the Stories

We’re often encouraged to see the earth as landscape, which is scenery—something to look at, but not to participate in. But when we collapse the distance between the land and ourselves and allow ourselves to become part of the story of a place, we give ourselves over to intimacy. This can be our work with young children—weaving them into the story of the place where they live.

One way I’ve begun trying to link the children to the land is by using observable markers anchored in place to measure our lives. “You’ll start kindergarten in the fall, when the blackberries are ripe.” “Christmas comes in the darkest part of winter, when the sun sets while we’re still at school, and the sun doesn’t rise until we’re back at school the next morning.”

And I’ve been playing a game with the children that I learned from Richard Louv’s book, *Last Child in the Woods*, “The Sound of a Creature Not Stirring.” We listen for the sounds we don’t hear (a leaf changing color, an earthworm moving through the soil, blackberries ripening)—a way to focus our attention on the earth around us and to participate in what’s happening in it.

A Foundation for Action

Kathleen Dean Moore muses, “Loving isn’t just a state of being, it’s a way of acting in the world. Love isn’t a sort of bliss, it’s a kind of work . . . . Obligation grows from love. It is the natural shape of caring.” And then she finishes her list of what it means to love a place: “10. To love a person or a place is to take responsibility for its well-being.”

From love grows action. In my work with young children, I share stories of local environmental activists who have used their love of place to fuel their action. For example, I tell the story of a group of children and their families who launched a campaign to save the cedar tree at the school playground where we often play:

Children have loved the cedar tree at Coe School for a long time; children played at this tree even before you were born. One year, a mom was at a community meeting and learned that the city park department was planning to cut down the tree because it was damaging the asphalt on the playground with its big roots. She told the children in her daughter’s kindergarten class, and those children and their families decided that they had to work to protect the cedar tree and to help the park department find another way to fix the problem of broken asphalt. The children and their families wrote letters to the city workers, telling them about how much they loved the cedar tree, and sharing their ideas for taking good care of the tree and the pavement on the playground. They had a meeting with the city workers, who hadn’t known that the tree was important to the children. After the meeting, the city workers decided not to cut down the tree; they made a plan with the children and their families and the other kids at Coe School about how they could work together to fix the asphalt and take care of the tree.

I watch for opportunities for the children to add their own chapters to the story of activism on behalf of beloved places. I want them to see themselves as part of a community of people who are anchored by fierce and determined love to place and who take responsibility for its well-being.

I continue to explore my new home ground in the Northwest, seeking to open to it with a willingness to be changed by it. With the children, I flip through my field guide to find the name of an unfamiliar bush; I linger to watch a heron stalk fish; I make pilgrimages to the rivers where salmon spawn. Even as I give myself over to this place as my place, letting it shape who I am and how I live in the world, I resist the damp grey and crowded mountains; I still feel a tension between the land and sky of my childhood that my body knows intimately and loves deeply, and this cool and cloudy place. What seems to carry me through that tension—or to allow me to live with it—is my desire to live intimately in place, and to invite children to live here with me.

The poet Mary Oliver instructs us on how to open the natural world to children: “Teach the children. Show them daisies and the pale hepatica. Teach them the taste of sassafras and wintergreen. The lives of the blue sailors, mallow, sunbursts, the moccasin flowers. And the frisky ones—inkberry, lamb’s-quarters, blueberries. And the aromatic ones—rosemary, oregano. Give them peppermint to put in their pockets as they go to school. Give them the fields and the woods and the possibility of the world salvaged from the lords of profit. Stand them in the stream, head them upstream, rejoice as they learn to love this green space they live in, its sticks and leaves and then the silent, beautiful blossoms. Attention is the beginning of devotion.”

And devotion is the beginning of action.

References


5. Moore, ibid.