

# **We Are Not Separate From The Natural World: How Connected Learning Reminds Us of Our Interdependency**

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## **Overview**

We are indeed social and communicating beings: born and situated not only into a human group but also into a particular landscape and natural environment. As well, our connections go beyond many ‘people’ related groups to being deeply interconnected and part of the natural world. But I believe that many of us in the Western world have forgotten this connection. As a society we have separated ourselves from nature, mirrored in the emergence of the primacy of instrumental reason and a rational understanding of the world where we simply consider its contribution to our material sense of well-being (Taylor, 1991). Despite harbingers of an ever-growing environmental crisis for the past several decades, we continue to hold an anthropocentric view of our place in the world (Berman, 1981, Berry, 1988, Fox, 1991, O-Murchu, 1997). Expanding on some of the questions in the call for papers for the ESREA 2018 conference, I consider the following in my paper: When we encounter nature, by spending time at a spiritual retreat centre, what kind of learning emerges? What activities do retreatants engage in during a self-directed retreat and is a deeper connection sparked with the natural setting? If so, what does this engagement look like and is there a shift in one’s relationship with nature? How is that experience translated into daily engagement with the environment after leaving the spiritual retreat centre? Ultimately, how does such connected learning with the natural setting influence our lives and ultimately how do we live in deeper relationship with the natural world?

In my quest to engage these questions, I draw on a research study where I, using a life history methodology, engaged with people’s learning journeys as they intentionally connected or reconnected with nature whilst on silent retreat at a spiritual retreat centre. At the outset of this journey, I drew on discourses in spirituality and adult learning to ground this particular approach to environmental adult education. And just recently, noting significant resonances, I have also begun to draw on writings focused on Indigenous ways of knowing and being in the world, where “interconnectedness as well as concepts of transformation, holism, caring, and responsibility, rooted in experiences of nature, community, and land and communicated through storytelling, has been the domain and foundation of Indigenous education models for millennia” (McKeon, 2012, p. 131).

## **Theoretical Underpinnings**

Turning first to voices familiar to me, the theme of valuing interconnectedness as central to spirituality and adult learning has been a constant thread in the literature (Tisdell, 2003; English 2005 & 2012; Groen & Kawalilak, 2016). In reviewing the work of these authors and their understanding of interconnectedness, I see that they widen this spiritual

dimension beyond a human connectedness to also include our relationship with the universe and a transcendent being, however that is described by each of us. For example, in earlier research in adult learning (Fleming, & Courtenay, 2006; Groen, 2004; Lange, 2009) that explored what spirituality meant to the various participants in their respective studies, a common theme was their desire to intentionally seek this quality of interconnectedness with the universe and creation through time spent in nature while engaging in practices such as contemplation and meditation.

However, underlying this quest, is deeper thread in the research challenging us to reconsider and ultimately change how we see ourselves in this relationship. Scholars across varied disciplines (Coates, 2003; Hill & Johnston, 2003; Korten, 2006; Macy & Johnstone, 2012) suggest that we must engage more deeply in processes of learning to shift our current relationship with nature where we see ourselves as separate and apart from her, pointing us toward transformative learning. Such learning is often described as a means whereby we undergo a deep shift in how we see ourselves in the world around us. The robust description of transformative learning offered by Edmund O'Sullivan (2012) is particularly helpful, as it moves beyond a focus on individual change to invoke a deeper contextual shift that "alters our way of being in the world. Such a shift involves our understanding of ourselves and our self-locations; our relationships with other humans and *with the natural world* (italics mine); our understanding of relations of power" (O'Sullivan, 2002, p. 11). Other environmental education scholars (Clover and Folleen, 1998; Crowe, 2013; Lange, 2012; O'Sullivan, Morrell, & Connor, 2002; Sterling, 2010) also recognizing the need to this cultivate deep change in our connection with nature, have turned to a socio-emancipatory approach to transformative learning to create spaces of learning that not only encourage individual change (Mezirow, 1991, 2000), and also, also address societal structures of injustice in order to create "a more livable, just world" (Lange, 2009, p. 196).

While I have appreciated the multiple voices across various disciplines that have called for more profound and connected learning that brings us back into right relationship with nature, there are those among us who have never strayed from this worldview and way of being. Mckeon (2012) suggested that we look to the diversity of Indigenous cultures where we can benefit from their accumulated wisdom and research in order to move toward the deep and transformative learning required in order to re-activate our deep connection with the natural world. Indeed, Mckeon (2012) drawing on the wisdom of a Mi'kmag Elder Albert Marshall suggested that an Indigenous worldview is ultimately what we are seeking, as the gift of 'two eyed seeing' allows us to move beyond our western centric epistemology of placing the individual at the center, separate from the natural world toward the relational orientation of Indigenous knowledge and learning. Two-Eyed Seeing is about moving beyond borders to connectiveness, to accept the "interdependency of one with the other and with all of creation" (Marshall, Marshall, & Iwama, 2010, p. 174). Even though there is a caution in stereotyping and essentializing the broad range of indigenous cultures, there is consensus that there exists common worldviews and practices across different peoples (Mckeon, 2012). To elaborate Cajete (1994) who developed one of the first models of Indigenous education describes its critical components as follows: "recognition of interdependence; the use of linguistic metaphors, art, and myth; a focus on local knowledge and direct experience with nature; orientation to place; and the discovery of 'face, heart, and foundation' in the context of

key social and environmental relationships (p. 189)”. In turn, then with Indigenous understandings of our interconnectedness, we learn to care for self and others – including the land and all its inhabitants – as an extension of ourselves.

When we consider the intersections between a spirituality based environmental education orientation and Indigenous environmental education, both are grounded in the intent to elicit, within all of us, a deep and transformative change toward cultivating connectedness with nature. As well, we can see profound overlaps with their respective emphasis on storytelling, wholeness and holistic learning, and nature/land experience as essential learning processes in order to cultivate transformative learning. Drawing on intertwining discourses of spirituality and adult learning and Indigenous approaches of being and learning, I use this opportunity to explore what kind of connected and relational learning with nature emerges as people participate in a silent spiritual retreat.

### **Methodology**

A life history approach (Cole & Knowles, 2001, West, Alheit, Anderson & Merrill, 2007) was used to explore the experiences of retreatants; helpful in situating retreatant experiences at a retreat centre within an understanding of their broader life history, in relation to environmental awareness and action. I recruited retreatants who had the following criteria: they participated in at least three retreats at the Ignatian Centre for a minimum of three to four days and they felt that engaging spiritual retreats had deepened their connection with the nature. In total, I interviewed 4 voluntary retreatants from this particular centre, engaging each participant in the links between their spiritual story and environmental awareness and citizenship, prior to their retreat experiences; their reflections on their experiences at the retreat centre and finally, the impact of these retreat experiences on their spiritual journey, their understanding of their place in the natural world and examples (if any) of environmental citizenship in their daily life. Interviews (60 to 90 minutes duration) with each volunteer participant typically took place via tele-conference or Skype. After interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, participants had the opportunity to review their transcripts.

Data analysis of the life history interview transcripts extended throughout and beyond the collection of data. Initially, categories were developed based upon the identified topics (noted above) for the life history interviews, my research objectives and data that emerged from my field notes, while on-site at each centre. Moving beyond these initial categories, I then went deeper into the data to develop themes (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 15). For this particular paper, I offer portraits and an analysis of the experiences of two retreatants who participated in retreats at the Ignatian Jesuit Centre: Nona and Maria.

### **Findings**

#### **Participant Profiles**

##### *Nona*

Nona has spent decades going to retreats in different parts of Canada and the United States, starting when she was an undergraduate at York University. Teaming up with Catholic students from the University of Toronto, she participated in “one of these organized structured retreats they do for young people.” Eventually Nona even planned retreats with her newfound friends.

After graduating, she was unsure of what to do with her life; therefore, she decided to go on a retreat for women, "So I went on those weekends and at the same time I found myself; I've been trying to figure out where I wanted to go. "In the meantime, she was also "developing a relationship with God." Becoming a novice, Nona participated in retreats that varied in duration from one weekend to 30 days. Her preference now is silent retreats: "mostly I may take on silent eight-day retreats." However, other retreats had themes, such as the eco-spirituality retreats. In most recent years, Nona has gone to the Ignatian Center in Guelph, where she chooses retreats and spiritual directresses that are "largely Ignatian in style." However, she has moved away from being mainly centered in the Catholic Church. Eco-spirituality interests her and she has gone to some weekends organized by a group in Ontario that supports that approach.

### *Maria*

Maria's experiences with retreats began in the 1970's. She had the wonderful opportunity to know John English and Jim Profit, two key Jesuit Priest in the history of the Ignatian Center and its recent focus on ecological retreats. Maria's and her husband's first retreat with Ignatian spirituality brought scripture to life for her: "What was really different about the retreat too was the scripture wasn't just scripture from the past, it became the living word." She then decided to do her first eight-day silent retreat. During this first retreat, she slept a lot and "I didn't even want to go home. I had enjoyed the eight days so much." Surprisingly, she did not expect to experience that "it wasn't easy stopping the chatter" in her mind. Even today, after so many retreats, she must still work at silencing the chatter.

Since that time, Maria has gone on numerous different retreats at the Ignatian Center. She explained that from the beginning until now, every four or five months, she would feel like it was time to escape from the busyness of life and "just be silent", knowing that "somehow God can reach us or something because I don't think I was listening."

### **The Retreat Experience: Experiences of Connecting and Re-Connecting with Nature**

As just suggested, for Maria, a key motivation for going on retreat, especially as her children were younger, was the need to step back from her day-to-day life, be silent, reconnect, and listen. Even though she was busy and involved with others, she indicated that this didn't mean that she felt connected with them. "I felt I had even disconnected myself from people. I was me - you know how you're kind of out there always judging and all they're this - they're that, and I'm this." Both Nona and Maria, as they continued to engage in silent retreats, where there really very little structured programming, began to realize that through their need to walk the land - the fields, the old forest, the paths along the creek - that not they were only renewing their connection with people who were important to them, they were also re-establishing their connection with nature. Maria reminisced about the moment, while on retreat, that she began to pay attention to what her surroundings had to say to her.

Nature does talk to us. I can remember one time being there and the leader asked us to go out and just look at nature and let it speak to you. In my own heart, I was just grumbling like crazy - well nature doesn't speak to me and I don't want to do this and what are they talking about. Anyway, I stepped outside and in that field, because it was in the fall, was this sunflower. It was dry and drooping and I looked at it and I thought oh my God! That's how I'm feeling. So that was my first experience of really seeing how nature does speak.

Nona has also realized that she really appreciates the unstructured time of self-directed retreats and that ultimately, when everything is taken away, what is left is nature and what she wishes to communicate to her:

Every single retreat that I've been to whether it be an urban one or out in the country or out on the seaside or in the mountains or, anywhere once you are in silence - once you turn off your phone, turn off your computer, you close the door of your car - it's settled. Your days have to fall someplace and it almost naturally falls outdoors ... What are you going to do with 24 hours of your day? There's only so much time you could spend doing concentrated meditation. There's only so much time you're going to spend eating. The rest of the time you're going to be walking, sitting, maybe swimming if you're lucky, or cycling if you're lucky, but really there is nothing else like the broad, most basic things in life.

Nona also indicated that we are intuitively drawn to nature; that it is within us to connect, or renew our connection, with her wherever we are. "We live in an urban setting. People go and sit out in the gardens. ... It's like where are you going to go? You're naturally drawn to the earth. You're naturally drawn to where beauty resides." What the time in retreat centre does is call us back to pay attention, with intention, to the beauty of nature.

It's beautiful. If it's natural, it's created naturally, it's beautiful. It took years for the earth to be created like a flower bed; it's beautiful. Whether the plants really come up or not, they're just something. Like spider, we just need to sit and watch it. So, I think the act of going on retreats calls you forth back to the basics of creation

In addition, both Nona and Maria indicated that reconnecting with nature can almost be an embodied experience that moves beyond our rational cognitive way of knowing and being, where we open up to the possibility of learning in a different way. Maria elaborates: "I was expecting words I guess and trying to look at trees and say okay what are they going to say to me kind of thing? That's probably the biggest gift is being able to walk and walk and walk and I think in that stillness and nature around us I don't know, something just gets quieted down and something else then happens." And

### **After Retreat: Out in the World**

As Nona and Maria reflected on if and how they connected with natural world a little differently because of their experiences in nature while on retreat, there have been some shifts. For example, as Maria reflected on her times working in her garden before and then after renewing her connection with nature while on retreat she said:

I can't work out in the garden without thinking of Father Jim Profit because I really felt disconnected from the land myself [before I spent time at the Ignatian Centre on retreat]. Sure, I would go out in the garden and work but I was managing everything. Not really realizing that the land and me and the trees and everything else we're really all one and interconnected ... Otherwise we, I mean we won't exist because we're destroying it. While I see the balance, and God created everything perfectly, we've gotten off track so badly, abusing whether its land, trees, or people. ...

Maria and her husband have been doing fund-raising for the Ignatian Center, because they deeply believe in ecology and the church's role in helping people become more active in environmental issues. Pleased about Pope Francis' encyclical, she nevertheless commented that, "When I go to mass and the homilies to me aren't about how we live today and honestly just personally for myself, I really believe that it is the most important thing in our life is taking care of our creation."

For Nona, as much of her adult life has taken place within intentional community, she has been living out the spiritual value of interconnectedness for decades. Some of her focus has turned to supporting the work of the Ignatian Centre and other centres like it so they can continue to do their important work, most recently in the area of eco-spirituality. For example, she states that she appreciates the emerging focus of "a lot of retreat centres, as just part of spirituality that has taken a look at how do we use the world's resources. We know that the ecosystem has really overused the resources." In particular, she holds up the Ignatian Centre and the work of Jim Profit, noting their quest to live in congruence with the land. "Then at Guelph it's really special because they really try to live up to the fact they're an organic farm." If the life of the retreat is congruent with the good environmental practice, that has an impact."

### **Discussion**

For both Nona and Maria, time spent on retreat at the Ignatian, gradually became to be associated with a significant amount of devoted to walking and being on the land. While on a silent self-directed retreat, everything else is stripped away and what is left but to be outside – walking, sitting, and re-engaging our senses of listening, feeling, touching, smelling and tasting. In this space where there no distractions, including structured environmental education program, the land has a chance to speak to us. Indeed, this approach taps into an experiential domain of knowing where the retreatants "encounter a subject, person, place, or thing personally and directly. There are kinesthetic, cognitive and emotional connections we make when learning becomes personally experienced with multiple senses" (Goralnik, Millenbah, Nelson, & Thorp, 2012, p. 417). In addition, this

direct connection with the land, where nature teaches us directly, draws on integrative approach to environmental education, where the emphasis on land based education is significant both in environmental education research, as well as Indigenous ways of understanding of relationship with nature. According to McKeon (2012), “these similarities of ideas, having different histories and coming from distinct worldviews, are in some places imperfect and contradictory, though strong enough to show starting places for Two-Eyed Seeing” (p. 136). To elaborate, in both Indigenous ways of knowing the land and spirituality discourses of transforming our relationship with the land, both believe that it is only through having quality time directly in nature can we ever hope to instill feelings of being interconnected with nature. “Through this connection to and love of the natural world, learners become open to learning and interested in seeking out knowledge about nature and sustainability” (McKeon, 2012, p. 136).

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