

**A Collection of Small Things:
An Exploration of Wholeness in
Educating and Leading**

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Abstract

What began as a quest to become a better educational leader (more efficient, organized, decisive) in order to support wholism in the K–12 education system, slowly morphed into a practice of being a more awake and whole human. A hermeneutic question offered by Moules et al. (2015) was the impetus for me to stop searching outside of myself and begin listening within. They described a hermeneutic exploration as one of self-understanding that “involves seeing what is possible in a situation *for me*, what concrete possibilities are available for action, given who I am, given where I am, and given what I am encountering” (p. 26) in particular situations. I came to recognize leading is offered in response to needs arising in particular contexts and is dependent on who I am, how I am, and where I am. Leading is a deeply personal and relational way of being.

By engaging with Indigenous teachings of wholism and land, contemplative practices such as meditation and time within natural places, and year-long Compassionate Systems Leadership Master Practitioner Training, my understanding of the habitual, comfortable, and rewarded busyness I had been practising transformed.

Within the context of working with children, educators, and families, I began writing short vignettes based on stop moments (Applebaum, 1995; Fels, 2012), initially as a way of capturing what might later become useful in my scholarship. Instead, these writings became my site of inquiry (in-query) and learning. Each vignette contained a description of a stop moment, a related quote, and photograph. Over time, this life writing became an emergent methodology for slowing, noticing, seeing, and understanding. I unfurled within these practices, finding voice through life writing and developing capacity to see through an arts-informed and arts-based practice of photography. I searched for nature scenes to complement my writing and in so doing, land became the impetus for writing. Natural kin and kinship became my teachers.

Leading is not indicated by title or role; it is everyone’s responsibility. In order to become response-able we must undertake the process of becoming whole humans, attuned to the interconnected ecosystems of being in which we dwell.

Keywords: wholism, place-based learning, educational leadership, life writing, contemplative practices, arts-based and arts-informed inquiry

Dedication

To all my relations—human kin and natural kin—who continue to teach and inspire me.

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I am grateful for the insightful questions of Dr. Vicki Kelly and Dr. Michael Ling, whose nudging led me deeper into my scholarship. Thank you also to Dr. Lynn Fels, who guided me to listen to the ‘tugs on the sleeve.’

I am blessed to have the support of my patient and generous husband, who encourages me to follow my dreams, no matter how long it takes.

I am thankful for my ancestors, both known and not-known, on whose shoulders I stand and whose lives dwell within me. Their stories are my story, reaching backwards and forwards in the continuum of time and energy and spirit.

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Natural photographs are woven into the fabric of my dissertation. They are essential to the teachings I received and the learning I share on these pages. All photographs were taken by me, except for two photos of me (one was taken by an unknown photographer at a skating competition, listed above, and the other by my husband).

Typically all photographs shared in this dissertation would be titled and listed as figures. However, I have chosen not to name and list the natural photographs, which I believe would render them as objects, negating the natural beings represented in them and the teachings these mentors offered me. I invited them into the work for they have something to say. I quote them through photography instead of through a replication of their words. That does not negate the wisdom of their messages.

The photographs are not ornamental or decorative; they are instrumental and essential.

Text and photograph are entwined, reciprocally informing meaning as a whole.

List of Acronyms

BC	British Columbia
BCSSA	British Columbia Schools Superintendents Association
CSL	Compassionate Systems Leadership
COVID-19	2019 Coronavirus Disease
DRC	Discipline Review Committee
EA	Educational Assistant
ELF	Early Learning Framework
FPPL	First Peoples Principles of Learning
IGSS	Indigenous Graduate Students Symposium
MDI	Middle Years Development Index
SEL	Social and Emotional Learning
SFU	Simon Fraser University



An invitation ...

OPENINGS

Welcome, Reader. I am grateful you are here. You may have expectations of what will follow, and perhaps what follows is not what you expect. After all, discussions of leadership tend to invite expectations of decisiveness, confidence, infallibility. My exploration is more about noticing and questioning, with respect and humility. You may also expect to find a formula with defined steps to follow or replicate in order to lead in educational contexts. I understand that yearning for certainty because that is what I too originally sought. I came to understand that leading can only effectively be exercised in the moment, in relation and in response. It is a deeply personal and contextual practice.

The format of the following chapters unfolds in a fashion that mirrors my years-long exploration. I don't begin with an introduction that outlines the key points to be buttressed by strong arguments, followed by literature review, methodology, findings, and analysis chapters. Conversations with literature and explorations of and within methodology are enfolded within the storying of my journey. Findings, or teachings, are revealed as they revealed themselves to me, in context. I purposefully resist the expectation to define outcomes at the outset, which would perpetuate the illusion of certainty and render invisible the process of learning and becoming that was required. We forget that the process, not the destination, is the whole point: that's where the learning (and living and leading) happens. It is the process that I attempt to make visible to you.

It took considerable time to live into and discern my questions, and to be ready to engage with awaiting pages. I came to recognize, for example, the frustration of hovering fingers unable to dance on the keyboard was not only my starting point, but actual steps of an already unfolding journey. So I begin with the wobbly first steps because it would be dishonest to banish them to invisibility, pretending the awareness reached by the conclusion matched the beginning.

My introduction describes a softly emerging awareness and acceptance that my doctoral journey is just that—a journey. My dissertation is a description of a slice of lifelong learning and becoming, in service of educators and children.

Insights unfurled within the process of writing. I had to learn patience; I had to learn that insight comes with first learning to see. Seeing comes not only by opening my eyes, but also my heart, my body, and my mind. You see, a process. Understanding emerges and unfolds within the exploration. There is no destination, just a new cycle of growth.

Well, come Reader; I invite you to witness my unfurling, my unfolding, and my understanding of leading in educational spaces—leading as a relational practice, as a respectful, ethically relational living praxis.

Meandering

You must keep in mind that a path is only a path;and there is no affront to oneself or to others, in dropping it, if that is what your heart tells you to do. But your decision to keep on the path or to leave it must be free of fear or ambition. I warn you. Look at every path closely and deliberately. Try it as many times as you think necessary. ... Does this path have a heart? All the paths are the same: they lead nowhere. ... Does this path have a heart? If it does, the path is good: if it doesn't it is of no use. (Carlos Castaneda, 1968, pp. 74-75)

My fingers hover over the keyboard; my judging mind pounces on my inability to make the words flow. I berate myself for not being further along, for not having the language or the wisdom or the determination to complete. I long to curl up, hide, keep busy, move constantly avoiding perusing ignoring skimming. See how busy busy busy I am. No time. Excuses pile as I wrestle with my judging mind. Satisfied it isn't, can't be my fault. Just no time.

Running, hiding from the burden of depth. What if I only uncover unworthiness? All that work for ridicule or dismissal or indifference. I feel like a seeker in search of an oasis, just over there. But 'there' evaporates in my mistaken assumption my perpetual movement brings me closer.

Announcements appear. My peers defend. I am not writing. I hover, still. Uncertain.

Yet. A root of tenacity refuses to dissolve, pulling upward, fingers stretching.... My yearning keeps hold of me, the "choice/no choice" (Meyer, 2013a, p. 251) that my heart longs to send through my fingers to share with the page. Meyer (2013a) explained her 'choice/no choice' and it resonated with my inability to let go of my search for wholeness in my life, in my professional roles, and in education more broadly:

My clarity on the topic is now the focus of my life. It is also the effulgent coherence in all that I do, write, teach and design. No one gave this task to me. It became my koho'ia, the choice/no choice of my life. Maybe this is a vital idea for enduring patterns of knowing, that we take up the challenge because it is what we are called to do. (Meyer, 2013a, p. 251)

I waited patiently anxiously hopefully for an epiphany—in hindsight I wanted a palatable answer to leadership dilemmas and educational problems. I bought into the lazy solutions found in digestible soundbites in our frenzy to move faster and accomplish more. We have lost the art and humanity and humility of thinking slowly, listening

internally, responding thoughtfully. Of travelling consciously. And releasing the childlike need for certainty.

As I re-view my doctoral journey, a winding path emerges into view; no longer separate grains of sand, small rough-hewn pebbles, the occasional wobbly shoot poking gingerly through the earth. I see the pathway whole, no longer fragmented mistakes, learnings, teachings, and successes. A cohesive, sometimes twisting, sometimes scaling upwards and dropping precipitously off passageway crystallizes into view, emerging to where I stand now with fingers hovering. The *process* is my destination; there is no 'there' there. I am here, for now.

What follows are stories that led me to my current understanding and evolving awareness about self, relationships, wholeness, compassion, systems, and leading. Some stories are tiny, a nearly imperceptible grain of sand, but my hope is that laid together with others they will materialize into a cohesive path visible to your eye, and possibly even your heart, as they have become visible to both of mine with the gift of hindsight.

wanderer, the road is your
footsteps, nothing else;
wanderer, there is no path,
you lay down a path in walking.
in walking you lay down a path
and when turning around
you see the road you'll
never stop on again.
wanderer, path there is none,
only tracks on ocean foam.
(Machado, as cited in Fels, 1999, p. 20)

Noticing, Unfurling, Finding Voice

In Dr. Lynn Fels's graduate class in the fall of 2016, we wrote short 'e-postcards' that encapsulated a 'stop moment' (Applebaum, 1995; Fels, 2012), those tugs on the sleeve (Fels, 2012) that invite lingering, a moment of absorption (for a detailed description of e-postcards; see Fels, 2015). They were a noticing, an opening, an opportunity for knowing to emerge through lived experience. They were shared among classmates via email, which is why they were called e-postcards.

This short assignment required me to practice the art of slowing down long enough to become more self-aware of how I was imprinted by and impacting the world around me. Being assigned, they could be added to my to do list and therefore claimed legitimacy. The assignment arrived at a time when I was racing so quickly in my professional world that I was ignoring my personal relationships with family, friends, and my self. Dr. Vicki Kelly (personal communication, January 31, 2019) explained "all methodologies come from an existential crisis" and in this constant striving moving running, stopping and noticing and writing through e-postcards became a much-needed ongoing practice/praxis and emergent method for my in-query.

I use the word 'in-query' purposefully. I searched for methods before I 'started' what I perceived to be my future scholarship—something outside of my self so I could nail my answers authoritatively to the page. Instead, the e-postcards began a process of querying. The use of the word inquiry in the early 15th century indicated "a judicial examination of facts to determine truth" ("Inquiry," n.d., para. 1). Today, *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines an inquiry (noun) as "a request for information; a systematic investigation often of a matter of public interest; examination into facts or principles; research" ("Inquiry," n.d., para. 1-3). To query came from *quaerere*, "to seek, look for; strive, endeavor, strive to gain; ask, require, demand" ("Query," n.d., para. 2). Today's usage of query (verb) is to question something, particularly in order to resolve doubts or to check legitimacy or correctness. The process I have undertaken, visible in hindsight, was and is an ongoing, existential question born of the act of living into understanding self, wholeness, systems, leadership that began with a search for my self. It is a continual unending spiral of doubt, accuracy, understanding, renewal. An internal process exercised externally in community with others within particular contexts. I resist the word 'inquiry' which suggests a more systematic and defined approach into specific

questions. Mine was a yearning and stretching and hiding and emerging process of discovery and a constant questioning of what is possible for me in this context, at this time, with these living beings. An internal querying as a process, hence my use of the term 'in-query.'

Each e-postcard included a brief description of a stop moment, a relevant quote, and a photograph. In hindsight this format created a guide that invited me to notice and focus my attention, relate my life experiences to theory, and expand my awareness and understanding of the experience by connecting to an art form. The method was not simply a way to report my learning; it became the path for learning to emerge. The photographs themselves, over time, guided and expanded my ability to notice, making visible what was previously blurred.

The practice of the e-postcard guided me to take my first steps, and keep walking as I began to lay down a path through movement that only became visible to me in hindsight. With the writing of stories that mattered to me, my own voice quietly unfurled. It was a re-membering for my self, without pressure of judgment or censorship.

Eventually, the writing and photographs shared through the e-postcards became places of longer dwelling and writing. I re-visited and re-viewed these stop moments over time, lingering within the moments represented as their teachings slowly transformed me.

A traveller shares a postcard with a loved one as an expression of a profound experience on a journey. The receiver of the postcard might keep it as a memento but the writer sometimes forgets after sending it. While the experience belongs to the sender, the artifact belongs to the receiver. Unlike the traveller who might forget about writing a postcard after mailing it, my e-postcards (and 'postcards' when I no longer emailed them to peers) became enduring sites of querying and learning, reflecting and dwelling. While I refer to the postcard practice throughout my writing (stopping and noticing, photographing, linking to theory, and life writing), I titled each one 'A Dwelling' to reflect the transformed process from a short capturing to an expanded teaching, echoing the time and reflection and growing that emerged from each stop moment.

At first the stop moments seemed disconnected, just a single noticing. Eventually, my stories, and my learning, wove together in a non-linear fashion through time and circumstance. Patterns and related themes began to emerge in the stories I wrote. They

naturally coalesced into chapters as I made meaning from what I was encountering, experiencing, and writing. I lived into the teachings by noticing and being attuned to what mattered to me, in a particular situation or time. What I noticed gradually changed as my lens grew wider through engagement with Indigenous teachings, contemplative practices (including time with nature, meditative practices, and journaling), and my engagement with Compassionate Systems Leadership.¹

My voice unfurled softly, slowly, incrementally. You may detect a change in lilt and tone through stories that unfolded over time. I moved through voicelessness to tentative whispers, from stubborn assertion to emergent recognition and developing understanding. This growing of voice and cadence is not a straightforward process and the stories themselves are not laid before you in linearity. As I gathered wholeness about and within me from a starting point of detachment and disconnection, the stories themselves gradually became focal points of interconnection. What began to call for my noticing were the points of connection—I no longer see parts without wholes. I no longer see wholes by dismissing parts. An ocean is not perceived by water drops; a beach not noticed by grains of sand. It is in the coalescing of fragments that we learn to see whole. It is in the coalescing of my stories that I learned to recognize a journey.

¹ See “Bridging” section for an explanation of Compassionate Systems Leadership.



An unfurling of a bud like the unfolding of self, in right time.

In a speech, Margaret Kovach (2021) shared that “if a story is seeking our attention, we must listen to it because it has something to say to us.” Manulani Meyer (2001) speaks of the art of paying attention, shaped by culture and achieved through practice. The ongoing practice of learning to first notice, then listen, then articulate my own stories allowed me to listen to the teachings within them. Coming to understand that my own lived experience contains wisdom was a slowly emergent process. Schooled in the colonial mindset that knowledge is gained from the written words of others, I was resistant to my own knowing and always searched for resonance with and recognition and validation in others’ words.

When I read Dr. Fels’s (1999) dissertation in March 2021, I was stopped by a passage about a scholar giving a speech, weighted down with notes. This passage had something to teach me about my own voice and over-reliance on the words of others. I wrote the following:

Interestingly, my document won't let me paste Lynn's words. It gifts me with a message to stop documenting the words of others, and instead allow my own to emerge. Their words can spark my own forward movement. But my movement matters now, as I write. Not their push, although that may be the birthplace of my thinking, understanding, or awakening.

I still feel compelled to describe Lynn's words, the description that propelled my own dawning. She describes a person who arrives to share his scholarly work and evokes the image of a bird feathered with flapping notes stuck to every possible orifice. Weighted down, searching for flight. She also describes a fellow student, furiously scribbling notes. As others share their scholarly hopes she, in the cocoon of hair curtaining her face, head bent over paper, is stopped by the spelling of a new word. While other students float on dreams of possibility, she is tethered by spelling conventions, trying desperately to catch their dreams and anchor them to her page.

Words as droplets of moisture. Instead of nailing Lynn's drops of water to my page (an impossible exercise of chasing), I catch the evaporation of moisture and form my own droplets, merging into a renewed understanding. I cared enough about the display of condensation to meld into my own cloud for reformation when enough accumulation occurred. A cycle of learning like the water cycle—perhaps what I write becoming condensation for another's movement within a flow of understanding.

Prompted by the downpour of images that flood my mind, a visual forms of my own frantic notetaking, earthbound by the tethers of others' words, unable to form my own and take flight.

I am overly noted. Weighted down by the fragmented, disembodied words of others, scrambling desperately to capture and retain what is offered. But they lose the tendons that bind them to context, to life breath. They become shallow intermittent breaths instead of the melody of sung messages. What if something is there that I might need later? What if I forget, and the possibility of becoming is lost forever? Each word uttered by a mentor or teacher or colleague is a lifeline of possible becoming; I struggle to catch hold. And they become, instead of flights of possibility, the weighted chains of oiled feathers. Unable to flap into flight—they are not mine to move.

2020.07.27 – A Dwelling: Honour

Not long ago, a colleague suggested, rather irritably, that I say ‘honour’ too much. I didn’t realize it, but I do often talk about honouring people, honouring stories, honouring experiences. This word flows from my tongue for a reason; I keep bringing it to the surface like a plea for recognition.

I want to learn to honour myself, my own stories, my own experiences.



Mark Nepo (2016) says,

“I share my story and the stories of others as examples, not instructions. For everyone has to uncover the lessons of their own journey. The honor means to keep what is true in view. And so, we live and honor the one life we’re given by keeping what we learn in view—about ourselves, each other, and life.

We can begin by honoring the truth of our experience and learning from those who’ve loved us.... And what are you learning in the slow blossom of time?”
(p. xv)

Laurel Richardson (1994) describes writing as “a way of finding out about yourself and your topic.... [It] is not just a mopping-up activity at the end of a research project. Writing is also a way of ‘knowing’—a method of discovery and analysis” (p. 516). I fully intended to write as a mopping up exercise, to explain my epiphany about leadership and context and self-awareness and wellness and spirit, my understanding and embodiment of wholeness. I began writing postcards before my epiphany, mostly as a means of remembering in case any single experience was important, needed, useful for the mopping up one day. Instead, the postcards were my site of learning, whole in themselves.

Arthur Zajonc (Palmer & Zajonc, 2010) shares Rilke’s advice,

Do not search now for the answers, which could not be given to you because you would not be able to live them. It is a matter of living everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, one distant day live right into the answer. (p. 105)

I would not say I’ve lived into *the* answer, but I have come to recognize *my* possibilities and contributions, interconnections and unfolding wholeness. It has taken time and commitment and perseverance. Dr. Kelly (personal communication, 2015) advised our cohort of graduate students that we need to ‘cook’ for awhile, to become a vessel that can hold what we learn. Zajonc (2010) similarly explains that “living our way into the answers means to so change ourselves that we are capable of beholding and inhabiting a different world” (p. 105).

In the spirit of a pilgrimage, described by Jim Perkinson (2006), I

needed to invest trust and even a willingness to have nothing remarkable at all happen. I needed to be content with the serendipity of events, even if it meant I stayed huddled in rain for the next three days [or huddled in confusion for a few years]. I would still learn something valuable in the process. (p. 46)

And so I wrote my stop moments, allowing my experiences to unfurl as I walked and worked and wondered. And noticed.

*“But deciding what matters, finding [a]... path with heart,
requires sustained attention.”
(Chambers, 2004, p. 7)*

They were not wasted, these years I spent thinking, and noticing, questioning, and reflecting. “It’s all material for writing,” I heard in a long-forgotten podcast. I worried about not ‘doing scholarship,’ but now recognize I was living into the scholarship of my experience visible now in the path behind me; places I will never step again, but have propelled me to here. Moments gone yet simultaneously enfolded into my being.

2020.07.28 – A Dwelling: Recognizing Scholarship

Mark Nepo (2016) describes his father's method of wood working. He always had several projects on the go and would move between each one, working them simultaneously, each informing the other. Mark realized that's how he approaches his own writing.

*I explore several books at once, pursuing one, then moving to another, letting my interest and their vitality cross-pollinate. I gather images and stories and metaphors, keeping them in folders, as I weave and work on many levels at the same time.
(p. xiv)*



I chastise myself for not reading books from cover to cover, for not summarizing them when finished to freeze them in memory or at least in notes. I write when the interest strikes me and when my willingness to expend effort isn't overtaken by my desire for distraction. It's bits and pieces; hints at pathways and destinations. But when I re-read a passage forgotten from immediate memory, I see connections, pebbles on a path not visible in the moment I wrote. Written nuggets that simultaneously inspire me to write, deepening my understanding as the words emerge. Perhaps I, too, work on many levels at the same time, cross-pollinating by revisiting and allowing the levels to merge in the awakening of my consciousness.

Why do I feel the need to articulate the destination before I walk the path? Short-changing myself of the elation of discovery in the interests of completion—another to-do checked off the list.

Walking and Questioning

It is no measure of health to be well-adjusted to a profoundly sick society. (Krishnamurti, 1954, as cited in Meyer, 2013a, p. 253)

Conflict creates friction, and friction creates movement, and movement creates change.... Conflict is the messenger and the motivator that inspires us to move; that informs us that it's time to evolve our view, thinking, or actions. (Mitchell, 2018, p. 77)

In my first doctoral class Dr. Vicki Kelly challenged us to identify *the rub* that led us to the doctoral learning space—the abrasive irritant that drew us to explore a doctoral degree in the first place. I felt her guidance away from an external ‘thing’ to fix or create, and nudged instead towards an internal yearning to awaken. That yearning peeked/peaked into my awareness through the chafing frustrations I began to experience in my professional role at the time and what I observed in education more broadly. I was disillusioned by the unquestioned economic driver of education, the focus on academic achievement (assuming achievement represents learning or well-being), the discounting of social, emotional, and spiritual learning and well-being of children *and the adults supporting them*, and the confusion I felt by the hierarchical and siloed system surrounding me. I was expected to make decisions I felt unequipped for because of lack of access to information, yet blocked from decision-making in areas in which I yearned to contribute.

When discussing the importance of educating the whole child, I referred to mind, body, and spirit and that prompted a shocked (and shocking) rebuke to never use the word spirit in public education. That education and development of human potential could be siloed into the head and left disembodied from the whole discouraged me. When I and a colleague wanted to pursue social and emotional well-being for educators, I was told teacher well-being was the union’s responsibility. That we could separate the importance of educating and supporting the whole child from the adults providing this education, confused me. The rejection of my ideas was not what bothered me; it was the rejection of *those* ideas that began to chafe. In hindsight, my own siloed sense of self lay at the heart of my frustration. Being in that position helped to clarify my values and beliefs. I grew in the tension that pulled/pushed/twisted, and made my beliefs emerge more

clearly with each rub. That rub led me to search, an attempt to alleviate the scratching irritant of confining possibilities.

My application to the doctoral program, barely visible in the recesses of my memory, hinted at identity, self-awareness, and mindfulness but lay masked in a description of the importance of formative assessment, growth mindset, and educating the whole child (defined safely as the academic, physical, social, and emotional aspects of children). I was too shy and awkward at the time to talk about leadership, and too unaware to realize I longed for my own wholeness—an integration of mind, body, and spirit inseparable from the roles I traversed.

As I embarked on a doctoral process to uncover, learn, unlearn, relearn from and within my paths in educating and leading, I slowly came to recognize that the context(s) and systems I inhabit envelop every question and hazy answer that emerges. Certainty is an illusion; ‘it depends,’ ‘if,’ ‘sometimes,’ ‘when’ eventually emerged as guideposts instead of equivocations. I expected to write about organization, time management, measurement, decision-making—those worn-out indicators signalling the presence of a good leader. I searched for answers, thinking *something* was there to be discovered; a problem fixed or a puzzle solved.

In the second semester of my graduate studies, I wrote a paper about leadership. I searched through literature to learn how to be a better leader—more decisive, efficient, organized. And better able to keep up. I searched for the key that would allow me to be better so I could fulfill the often-unspoken expectations on me as a leader, and ‘fix’ education. However, the research I read led me further from where I longed to be. The researchers tried to distill the one or two skills or qualities someone needs so they can be transformative, innovative, effective—assuming those words mark the destination we all aspire to reach.

For example, Begley (2006) suggests leaders need to be more reflective and authentic; Looman (2003) calls for leaders “who have the capacity to transform our culture just as technology has transformed our lifestyle” (p. 215); Sorum-Brown (2006) explains that transformative leaders engage in “honest, regular personal reflection” (p. 6) and points out that in order to transform an organizational culture (presented as a self-evident aim of leadership) one needs to understand the mindsets that create cultural structures and

patterns of thinking and behavior. Molina and Klinker (2012) urge leaders to be aware of their values and personal code of ethics. Take these steps, be this way, do these things, they said. That's how you transform.

I see clearly now my search for *what* would not lead to the *who* I was yearning to be, and thus the leader I dreamed of becoming—in service of an educational system that supports the development of healthy and whole humans living in a good way with/in this world. My search was, and continues to be, a long and sometimes painful path of learning, unlearning, questioning, noticing, retrying, learning, unlearning, questioning, noticing, retrying.... In essence, leading is a journey of living. Each life, a unique tapestry woven contextually, unfolds in right time, not efficient time. Each act of leading is also woven contextually, a moment of response, unfolding in right place and time and relation. I had hoped to follow a recipe that would lead to an intended outcome; instead, I learned there was no escaping my self and the threads I was weaving. I could contort myself to fit into and perpetuate a system I was slowly coming to recognize as broken, or I could change the threads I contributed. It was a slow, unravelling process of learning to see and perceive, of unlearning obedience to rules and expectations, of relating to self and others. And of recognizing that context is the container for what I can contribute.

I felt I couldn't begin my dissertation until I identified the one methodology that would frame my search. I read about methodologies that piqued my interest but none that fully encapsulated and resonated with my quest for wholeness and for leading. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) explain that "no single method can grasp all the subtle variations in ongoing human experience" (p. 21).

Valerie Janesick (1998) described her surprise when graduate students want to find a methodology, looking for rules and steps to follow, without first identifying the question that will frame their research. It is the question itself that allows us to select the most appropriate methodology; it is the question that frames the study. I did what she warned against. I searched first for rules instead of becoming open to questions, assuming I would find safety in certainty. I habitually reached for rules while simultaneously struggling against adopting them; this habit mirroring my search for certainty in leading while chafing against solutions offered by 'experts.'

Janesick (1998) explains that qualitative studies begin with a question that unfolds within a specific context in relation to specific people's lives. In contrast, quantitative studies often pursue information from large groups of people whom the researcher may never come into contact with. Qualitative studies are personal and relational. I knew I did not want to survey a bunch of people to find out what they were doing in their leadership practice and how that would lead to wholism in education. I wanted to search for ways I can uniquely contribute to wholism in education. I knew I would conduct a qualitative study but I wasn't sure which qualitative container I would inhabit.

I didn't realize I had already started walking the path of my scholarship through life writing within my e-postcard practice. I had begun to find scholarly mentors through the quotes I included, their work guiding me and helping me to see and frame my own learning. The act of photography, a practice of learning to notice, perceive, and attune to the natural world, eventually led me to an embodied understanding of place. Through the emergent practice of writing, theorizing, and photographing I began to crystalize my question and methodology. It was a reflexive, iterative process and not the linear one of identifying a question, then choosing a methodology, then embarking on the research and analyzing the data collected. Life writing became the research; reading about methodology allowed me to distill my question. Being clear about my question helped me to begin to design my methodology.

Krista Tippett (2022) warns against the types of questions we are trained to ask. They become a frame for what can emerge from their exploration. I was concerned about asking a question that was too limiting, that would define leading and wholeness in ways that closed possibility instead of opening it; that would diminish curiosity instead of nurture possibility.

It's important to get conscious and aware of the fact that the questions we've been trained to ask, to trade in, the questions we reflexively ask in Western culture are not suited to the fact that we have a world to remake. We are very fluent in ... blunt, materialistic, capitalistic questions—what, how soon, how much. What I hope we can learn to do is add questions of moral imagination to that mix. Questions like why, and to what human effect, and how much is enough.... If you are faithful to living a question, that question will be faithful back to you. (Tippett, 2022, para. 9)

When I read Moules et al. (2015) and their description of hermeneutic questioning and engagement, I began to see possibilities. In the foreword to their book, John Caputo

explained that hermeneutics is not an explanation of how to engage in practice but, rather, if it “is a theory at all, it is a theory ... [or] a ‘seeing’ ... of what we can’t see coming, a foreseeing of the unforeseeability of what is coming in the singular situation” (p. xi). The authors offer that hermeneutic engagement is a questioning of the things we take for granted and “the quest for understanding in hermeneutics is also a quest for *self-understanding*” (p. 25). Self-understanding “involves seeing what is possible in a situation *for me*, what concrete possibilities are available for action, given who I am, given where I am, and given what I am encountering in the particular situation” (p. 26). This offering became the central focus of my research. The question of what is possible for me in the particular contexts and situations and beings I encounter is a question that opens possibility and ongoing exploration.

Moules et al. (2015) opened possibility for me by offering a stance I could embrace—not a set of rules, but a way of engaging. Because of the frame of this open-ended hermeneutic questioning I began to slowly let go of the need for definitive answers and frames and rules. Instead I attuned to various teachers and the teachings inherent in particular stop moments. I learned from scholars, Elders, children, peers, family, ancestors, and natural kin. All were my teachers, when I was able to attune to their offerings. I became more attuned by engaging in specific practices: life writing, theorizing, and photographing in the format of postcards consistent with the original assignment in Dr. Fels’ graduate class, as well as contemplative practices including meditation and time spent on land. Those practices became my method.

Janesick (1998) uses the term *methodolatry*, “to describe a preoccupation with selecting and defending methods to the exclusion of the actual substance of the story being told” (p. 48). It is the story, and interpretation of it, that matters in qualitative studies. It is the stories, and my understandings of their teachings, that matter to living and leading and what I am able to offer. However, I understand the need to situate my work within the existing work of scholars. In doing so, I do not want to lose sight of the process I embarked upon for it is the process that led to my learning and transformation.

Through practice, I designed my methodology and method. I engaged with life writing and photography from a hermeneutic stance of questioning and meaning-making and interpreting within the living context of educating and leading in the K-12 education system. Life writing was not a means of representing my learning, but a site for my

learning to unfold. I came to recognize the practice of photography as aligning with arts-based and arts-informed inquiry (see Mello, 2007) but more importantly this practice allowed me to re-cognize nature and natural beings as kin. The contemplative practices I engaged in (meditation and time in nature) allowed me to attune to and be present to the teachings offered by human and natural kin.

It is impossible to gain a fixed objective understanding of the world. Life and leading are interpretive acts. Interpretation is a creative act (Smith, 2014) but it is “never simply to spin one interpretation after another in an endless play of possibilities” (Smith, 2014, p. 177). Interpretation requires an attentiveness and imagination.

...understanding the truth of a strange or difficult situation requires an act of imagination to see possible meanings rather than just expecting meaning to reveal itself, by itself, and then simply to be reported by a researcher. Again, echoing Kant, the truth of something cannot be known fully in itself; it requires a creative leap of understanding, which can then be folded back dialogically into the formation of new comprehension. (Smith, 2014, p. 182)

My imagination and interpretation are informed by my ability to see and perceive, as well as my lived experiences, and where I am located within the circle of time, place, and people. My ancestors, my relations, my place, my time—a circle of life reaching backwards and forwards—converging now to create my imaginative capacity, here, within the connections of the hermeneutic circle (Moules, 2015; Zimmerman, 2015). The same is true for us all, including you, kind Reader. Your lived experiences, where you are located, your ancestors and relations, all inform your ability to see and perceive, to interpret and make meaning from what I share here.

My process of stopping and noticing eventually led me to question that which I had previously accepted. I had taken for granted the existing systems and power structures I inhabited, as though they were naturally occurring phenomena. I entered a path of conscious interpretation aligned with hermeneutic engagement, beginning to release the need for methodological rules to tell me what to do, and the need for certain solutions to situations I faced within my roles of leadership. David Smith (2014) explains, “Hermeneutics always stands in tension, often conflict, with the desire to secure and fix meaning once and for all” (p. 177). The stop moments created space for me to ponder the importance of individual, small moments that called for re-cognition and ongoing questioning and interpreting the experiences I was encountering and noticing and

dwelling within. I was not experiencing (as I assumed I was) 'leadership' dilemmas easily fixable if I could only unearth finite answers. I was experiencing dilemmas present in the process of living and leading, in particular contexts, with particular people, in relation with my particular being. Each happening an opening for renewed interpretation and understanding and response.

From the practice of life writing through postcards, my hermeneutic questioning led to a path of noticing, remembering, interpreting, and re-cognizing. This writing practice helped me to unearth understanding of my lived experiences (Moules et al., 2015, p. 16), both personally and professionally within the living context of education.

Laurel Richardson (1994) describes writing as a method of inquiry, a "method of discovery" (p. 517). In my personal life I wrote to understand but in my scholarly work I previously wrote what I had already learned. Richardson opened a space for my writing to become one of my sites of in-query and learning. She explained that we have been "trained to conceptualize writing as 'writing up' the research, rather than as a method of discovery" (p. 517). The writing I engaged in was both a reporting of stop moments and a method of in-query into the meaning and teachings inherent within them. Richardson (1994) explains that

...writing practices can improve traditional texts because writers relate more deeply and complexly to their materials. The writer understands the material in different ways. The deepened understanding of a Self deepens the text. (p. 524)

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) describe the research of others' stories and how important it is to "listen closely to teachers and other learners and to the stories of their lives in and out of classrooms" (p. 12) when conducting narrative inquiry. I learned, instead, to listen closely to the stories of *my* life in and out of classrooms and other educational spaces (such as boardrooms, forests, and beaches).

Through life writing (writing about and from my life experiences) I came to more deeply know my self and what was/is possible for me in given situations, within the particularities of context and relations. Writing became a method of discovery. Chambers et al. (2012) describe life writing "as a way of knowing and being" (p. xx).

Life writing became a practice, as described by David Smith in the foreword to Chambers et al. (2012), a way of slowing down, "to concentrate and focus (become less

distracted), to remember, and to be still enough to allow for a certain purification of soul so that what might be written might also escape the tentacled entrapments of pure self-interest” (p. xii). The stop moments do not reveal stories about me, but of me-in-relation—with human and natural kin, with ideas, with place. Chambers et al. (2012) offer the hopeful notion that “by attending to what *is*, we can learn together what *might be*” (p. xxviii). This necessarily requires tending to our own stories for they are part of the woven fabric of what is and what might be.

The second practice I embarked on was photography, initially as a requirement to complete the e-postcard assignment. I began taking photos of natural beings within land I inhabit. I walked into an emerging methodology of arts-informed/arts-based narrative inquiry/in-query (as described by Mello, 2007), rather than intentionally choosing an arts-focused methodology to begin walking.

At first the photographs I took were simply an add-on to complete the e-postcard assignment. I chose pictures that I googled or photographs I had already taken to fit the story I told. That practice gently morphed into my search for visual meaning to enhance the value of the text I shared with others—nature as metaphor, an *arts-informed* narrative inquiry, as described by Mello (2007). *Arts-informed* narrative inquiry utilizes an art form in text presentation. The art form informs the “analysis and the meaning made of the field text already existing” (Mello, 2007, p. 214). Eventually my search for sites to photograph led to longer dwelling within nature and those dwellings allowed space for teachings from natural kin that I eventually shared as a visual form and then wrote text to describe my learning. Photography became the catalyst, or base, of the narrative (*arts-based* narrative inquiry). In this case, the art form is not to share or inform the research, it is the starting point—the site of learning. I moved between these two forms of arts inquiry throughout my in-query; photographs sometimes adding meaning to what I wrote, and other times the catalyst for writing and learning to occur. I came to re-cognize the natural scenes I was photographing as beings living in interconnected, communicating, living communities. I came to re-cognize and understand them as kin.

Melissa Cahnmann-Taylor (2008) explains that

... arts offer ways to stretch a researcher's capacities for creativity and knowing, creating a healthy synthesis of approaches to collect, analyze,

and represent data in ways that paint a full picture of a heterogeneous movement to improve education. (p. 4)

Photographing natural beings stretched me to move beyond seeing, perceiving, and understanding nature in relation to my ideas and to my written expression of them, towards a relation with nature and a receiving of teachings from natural kin. Photographs of nature were not simply a representation of something to augment or illustrate my text; they became a representation of a full body experience of being in and with nature, of being as nature. The text became an attempt to render that experience visible to you, Reader.

I believe my photographs become art because of the beings within them, not because of expertise I hold as an artist photographer. I took photographs with my iPhone; I am not a trained photographer. The performance of my photography is not the art, it is the energetic and entwined life force of the natural kin the photograph represents that is the art. I did not create it—I saw it. And it is my perception and realization and representation I share with you, attentive Reader. I share it as an invitation that you, too, may engage with the natural world and have it change you. That you, too, may relate to and learn from natural kin and that those teachings change how you engage in the act of educating and leading. That is the art I attempt to render. I don't need a specialized degree to share that with you, or to include it in my scholarship for a "high stakes" dissertation as suggested by Piirto (2002, cited in Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008). I need to be able to see and be willing to share. That is "all."

Cahnmann-Taylor (2008) describes Eisner's view that "each research methodology is a way of seeing the world – and every way of seeing is a way of not seeing (Eisner, 2002)" (p. 4). Arts-based and arts-informed inquiry and life writing became a reciprocal way of seeing the world and understanding the beings there. Stop moments brought pause and reflection, of seeing; writing crystalized my awareness and piqued my interest; photography invited me to deepen my senses in the experience of the natural world, leading me to relate to natural kin. And hermeneutic engagement allowed me to remain curious and open to the teachers and teachings that presented themselves to me (and that I was able and ready to receive at that time).

The photographs I began taking for the postcards helped me to perceive and recognize and expand my awareness, which in turn influenced how I see and live and therefore the

stories I embody, at this time, in this context. Parts influence the whole; the whole informs the parts—the hermeneutic circle (see Moules, et al., 2015 and Zimmerman, 2015) of understanding emerging slowly, through written word and visual images within lived experiences. Despite my desire to learn, write, wrap up, and check off my to do list, a learning journey stubbornly demands time; it cannot be reduced to “mere information exchange and cannot be mastered by mere technique. [Understanding requires] the personal integration of details into a meaningful whole—[it] requires interpretation” (Zimmerman, 2015, p. 10). Interpretation does not occur outside of the one interpreting; it is necessarily a personal and relational endeavour—in relation to other beings, ideas, events, time, context. Smith (2014) explains,

Whatever meets me as new arrives on my consciousness, which has already been formed by my past. My mind and being are never *tabulae rasae*, but instead are the very means by which anything new can be registered as such at all. (p. 184)

The question of what has been and might be possible for me evolves as my worldview and understanding expands through ongoing learning. What possibilities become available when approaching my leadership praxis through the openings offered through other worldviews and practices such as Indigenous teachings on wholism and place, contemplative practices, and Compassionate Systems Leadership? What possibilities arise when I learn to hold wholism (wholeness) at the centre of my decision-making and systems creation and transformation in education? What possibilities for human development emerge when I enter educational spaces with my own wholeness and centre the wholeness of those with whom I work or am in relation? For when we enter an educational space with fragmentation, the outcome cannot be wholeness.

“Hermeneutics is not a theory of knowledge but the art of life and death, and it ranges over the length and breadth and depth of life” (Moules et al., 2015, p. xiii). The hermeneutic circle mirrors the life cycle blending the entwined nature of parts and wholes. “Our being in the world and our relation to things are united into a meaningful whole through our will and desire to realize our future possibilities.... [Our lives] framed naturally as the meaningful whole between birth and death” (Zimmerman, 2015, p. 37). The journey outlined in these pages represents a slice of lifelong learning, unfinished, encompassing reflection on experiences in my years as a teacher and administrator

(1994-20), district principal (2013–2019), and my praxis as an assistant superintendent (2019–2024), as well as lifelong (to this point of my life) learning experiences.

My use of the word praxis is, in part, influenced by Ted Aoki (2005) who does not see theory and practice as separate, but as “twin moments of the same reality” (p. 120). He refers to Aristotle for whom “praxis was a holistic activity of the total person—head, heart, and lifestyle, all as one—given to an ethical life within a political context” (Aoki, 2005, p. 116). My leadership praxis is a reflective merging of theory and practice, blending purpose and intention (why), with recognition (what), and personal practice (who and how). For me, theory is not only informed by scholars, it has been, unknowingly at first, informed by the wisdom of nature and kin relations I am only now coming to recognize as central to the wisdom of life and living well. My praxis of living and leading is thus informed by relations, and theory development not only through the published words of scholars, but also the sung melodies of birds and frogs and wind and ocean and trees.

The titles of district principal and assistant superintendent indicate positional authority, but in these writings I am exploring leading—a stance everyone in an ecosystem has the ability to choose or discard regardless of title, or rank, or pay. An ecosystem is a “system of organisms occupying a habitat, together with those aspects of the physical environment with which they interact” (L. Brown, 1993, p. 781). I refer to classrooms or schools or other places where living beings dwell as ecosystems; lives interacting with each other to form a collective living and evolving organism.

Meaningful change does not happen because someone with positional authority decrees it; meaningful change emerges within a collective field of wisdom, curiosity, optimism, and personal development. Every being in an ecosystem influences every other being.

Because of the inseparable interconnectedness of all life, it is not self-indulgent to conduct research that focuses on self. Our individual storied lives are an integral part of the whole, and personal transformation is the starting place of systemic transformation (see Senge et al., 2004). However, Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) point out that “a claim to be studying oneself does not bring with it an excuse from rigor” (p. 15). Thus, issues of validity and generalizability need to be addressed.

The quantitative standard of generalizability is not applicable to my in-query. Janesick (1994) explains that “the prevailing myths about aggregating numbers and, more tragically, aggregating individuals into sets of numbers have moved us away from our understanding of lived experience” (p. 47). Lived experience is central to the hermeneutic questioning of what is possible for me, and what is possible for me is not what is necessarily possible for someone else. What is possible for me in a particular situation, is not what is possible for me (or others) in different contexts and situations. As John Caputo (in the foreword to Moules et al., 2015) notes,

In hermeneutics ... it is not a matter of applying universals to cases but instead of applying cases to universals.... The suggestion is that the individual represents a ‘fall’ from the truth and reality of the universal, a decline in mere particularity. But this is to invert reality. For the individual is what is real. The individual is the first truth, the true being, while universals are abstractions.... Singularities are not a fall or a defect, but an excess, far too rich ever to be adequately explicated or translated into universals. (p. x).

My own experience of leading became the site of my in-query, not to provide a recipe for all others to follow (a generalizable path), but to offer a path of exploration others might resonate with and choose to embark on for themselves. Perhaps you, kind Reader, may glean drops of insight that coalesce with your own learnings to assist you in your journey of leading.

Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) illuminate the difficulty of representing self-study research as autobiographical writing. They point out that while autobiographical writing is useful to the writer as a form of personal and professional development, it must go beyond the personal in order to be considered research. They specifically refer to self-study research for educators but their guidelines are useful in ensuring my life writing moves beyond a personal reflection to research. They suggest autobiographical representations of findings should follow these guidelines:

Guideline 1: Autobiographical self-studies should ring true and enable connection.

Guideline 2: Self-studies should promote insight and interpretation.

Guideline 3: Autobiographical self-study research must engage history forthrightly and the author must take an honest stand.

Guideline 4: Biographical and autobiographical self-studies in teacher education are about the problems and issues that make someone an educator.

Guideline 5: Authentic voice is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the scholarly standing of a biographical self-study.

Guideline 6: The autobiographical self-study researcher has an ineluctable obligation to seek to improve the learning situation not only for the self but for the other.

Guideline 7: Powerful autobiographical self-studies portray character development and include dramatic action: Something genuine is at stake in the story.

Guideline 8: Quality autobiographical self-studies attend carefully to persons in context or setting.

Guideline 9: Quality autobiographical self-studies offer fresh perspectives on established truths. (pp. 16-18)

My life writing was in response to stop moments that arose within the context of working and learning in the K-12 educational setting, not in response to personal reflections about random incidents in my life. For that reason I anticipate they will ring true or at least be recognizable to the reader since the concerns I raise are common in our education system. Each stop moment offered me new ways of seeing, perceiving, and relating—insights emerged from the dwellings. They required lingering on my part, and perhaps on your part, to perceive. I am authentically present within the life writing vignettes and the stop moments that precipitated them. I embarked on this journey to seek wholeness in both my self and in the education system for the benefit of learners and educators. My process of writing is not a passive reflection of what did or should happen; it is an active process of emergence and creation, offering in many cases a questioning of established and accepted truths.

Triangulation of data and validity are additional ways to measure the value of research. However, there are other ways of understanding the value of research and data collected. Manulani Meyer (2013a) speaks of coherence and Shawn Wilson (2008) describes relational accountability in an Indigenous research framework, explaining that rather than goals of validity (that rely on triangulation of data), we can aim for authenticity and credibility (that rely on relationality with and among data and people). He explains that “as a researcher you are answering to *all your relations* when you are doing research” (p. 177). In an Indigenous methodology the researcher questions how

they are fulfilling their role within the relationship. While I am not specifically following an Indigenous methodology, reliability and credibility within relations requires a higher standard of relationality that I aspire to meet. Manulani Meyer (2013b) explains that “it is the quality of our relationships that will help us evolve” (p. 99). Instead of a three-pointed triangulation of data to ensure validity, I offer a relational circle to make visible the wholeness of my in-query. My life experiences shared through self-location, my life writing, photographs, existing literature and various teachers, and my leadership praxis form the relational circle for my in-query.

I do not offer an objective view of educating or leading; I dwell within the stories I share and they dwell within me. I am inextricably bound to the experiences shared throughout my dissertation. Being relationally accountable requires me to be true to my understanding of the stories and their teachings as I interpreted those teachings. Ultimately I ask: How can I enter my re-search and in-query with love? Chief Robert Joseph, during his keynote address at the Indigenous Graduate Students Symposium (IGSS) in 2017 asked us to remember that love is central to our research, and “when emotions and research converge, we hear the truth just a little bit more.”

Wilson (2008) asks how you can share information given to you by an Elder without naming them: “If you are leaving out their name, how can people know that you have the authority to present this information?” (p. 115). Throughout my journey I encountered many wise people who shared a teaching with me that had a profound impact on my understanding (not all were Elders and not all were Indigenous). If the sharing was done publicly (as in a conference or workshop) they are named (if I knew their name at the time). If a teaching was shared privately, where possible I asked permission to share the teaching and whether they want to be identified (and if so, how)². I did not include identifiers unless that was their wish, and the identifiers are consistent with their chosen form.

What I have learned through observing, reading, listening and opening to Indigenous teachings, engaging in contemplative practices (time spent on the land, meditation), and participating in Compassionate Systems Leadership training, does not mean I am an

² One person moved after my interaction with her. I was not able to share my writing with her because I could not obtain contact information. I still share the vignette that describes, from my point of view, the profound impact our interaction had on me, but I do not include any identifiers.

expert in these areas, nor do any of them prescribe a formula for me to follow in leading praxis. I engage in but I don't speak from any of these practices or teachings; I speak through my interpretation and integration and noticings—what I uniquely learn(ed), and how those practices and teachings propelled me to here, and my own becoming in this context at this moment in time.

2019.07.20 – A Dwelling: Data as Human Rights and the Danger of Misrepresentation

*I watched a very disturbing documentary on Netflix called *The Social Dilemma*. It describes how we are manipulated by digital data and claims that data rights are really a new form of human rights.*

But it also reminded me about data gathered in research, even research being undertaken without any malicious intent. How do we ‘take’ data and use it for our own ends—to create a better, more compelling story, to bolster our hypotheses, to impress academia. Or, more benignly perhaps, but no less detrimental—to mask our own misunderstanding.

I went to the Musée du Quai Branly when I was in Paris in July and spent a couple of hours listening to the audio guide tell me about ancient civilizations from Africa, Asia and the Americas. I absorbed the knowledge the narrators imparted, unquestioningly. It all seemed plausible. And then I came to a Haida totem pole and longhouse display. It looked familiar and they talked about the meaning behind the carvings. It, too, sounded plausible and not dissimilar to what I’ve heard before. And then the narrator said,



“The creation of poles like these almost disappeared during the 19th century due to the economic and social collapse of native populations. However, since the 1920s, those populations are experiencing a resurgence and totem poles are still being made today.”

I felt manipulated, and gut punched. I listened to it five or six times because I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I went to the front desk and struggled to tell them in English why it was inaccurate. The young receptionist tried to feign interest in the English rantings of a tourist.

I explained there wasn't an economic cause for the near loss of totem poles —Indigenous People were forbidden by the government from practising their culture! She smiled, nodded, and tried to move me along by telling me she would tell her boss.

How much of what I heard and observed during my visit was false? How frequently am I manipulated by misinformation provided by people I trust to have expertise?

And how will I ensure I don't mispresent the 'data' I collect for research? Handle it lightly, carefully. Stories are data; stories are identity, reality, heart. Hold them with love.

2025.01.14 – A Dwelling: Reflecting on Methodology and Worldview

...A research paradigm is a set of beliefs about the world and about gaining knowledge that go together to guide your actions as to how you're going to go about doing your research. (Wilson, 2001 p. 175).

I wish to add a reflection about the writing of this section of my dissertation. I experienced a profound frustration in writing it—a resistance to authoritatively naming and describing methodology, that is traditionally required in a doctoral dissertation. I have struggled with the reason for my struggle. After all, I had no problem naming and describing my methodology and itemizing my methods for my Masters thesis (2009). In fact, that was one of the easier chapters to write. Yet despite sitting at my keyboard to make revisions for hours and days, I still feel dissatisfaction with the fuzziness of this section. I realize now, in re-viewing my work, why the explication of methodology was nebulous. I re-read Shawn Wilson (2001) and clarity suddenly downloaded in my mind and heart. Everything I said in the above section was true (how I came to my question and my hermeneutic engagement, how photography came to be central to my in-query, and how life writing crystalized the kind of question I resonated with and committed to), but I didn't recognize the foundation beneath all of that was changing over the course of my doctoral journey.

I explained my search for a question that would open possibility for wholeness, that would open space for curiosity and ongoing exploration. But I missed seeing how a search for that kind of question represented a shift of stance within a changing worldview for me. I now recognize my hesitancy with designing methodology and methods was not only because I had not claimed a question that I felt opened possibility for wholeness, it was because the very foundation upon which knowledge is built and gained and understood was beginning to crumble beneath my feet; I struggled to stand on land that was no longer there. A sea change I only recognize now, in hindsight. While editing this chapter I was still sitting in the liminal space of a shifting worldview. I started my research by trying to identify a methodology without choosing a question the same way I tried to explain methodology without acknowledging my changing ontology and epistemology and axiology. Their change was and is an ongoing process throughout my in-query. My hermeneutic engagement allowed me the space to explore within a shifting landscape but those shifts made it difficult to define the land I am beginning to learn to stand on.

I realize that I began walking with a different gait. I stood firm and walked confidently in my Masters research, using a qualitative design with interviews, coding of transcripts, member checking, et cetera. For my dissertation, I was confident in the walking of my in-query, but my gait was changing and I didn't fully recognize how that affected my approach. It made it hard to explain the how and why behind my methodology because the ground I stood on and how I walked was shifting throughout my in-query. I believe those shifts are visible in my Dwellings but I didn't

comprehend the depth of a change in worldview—my ontology, epistemology, and axiology—on my methodology.

I was deeply moved and shaped by Indigenous teachings I received from Elders, teachers, and colleagues (as described through stories shared in Dwellings throughout my dissertation) and scholars (Davidson, 2018; Kelly, 2010, 2012, 2021; Kimmerer, 2013, 2021; Meyer, 2001, 2008, 2013; Mitchell, 2018; Wagamese, 2016, 2019, 2021; Yunkaporta, 2020, to name but a few). My readings of Indigenous methodologies (Kovach, 2009; Meyer, 2008; Wilson, 2001, 2008 for example) also influenced me, but I had not been intentional about using an Indigenous methodology in my research.

I tentatively dipped my toe into aspects of Indigenous methodology when I discussed relationality and coherence instead of triangulation and validity. What makes research meaningful rests on assumptions about the nature of reality (ontology) and knowledge (epistemology) and values (axiology). And that is why it is so important to recognize what worldview was emerging in my consciousness; how I was letting go of one and tentatively embodying aspects of another.

Wilson (2001) explains that

[Indigenous] ontology, epistemology, axiology, and our methodology are fundamentally different. ...Indigenous research needs to reflect Indigenous contexts and world views: that is, they must come from an Indigenous paradigm rather than an Indigenous perspective” (p. 176).

I did not name Indigenous methodology because I did not embark on an Indigenous in-query. My worldview was shifting throughout the research; I could not frame a methodology from an Indigenous paradigm that I did not understand. It isn't until now that I recognize my ontology, epistemology, and axiology are shifting in ways that more closely align with the teachings I received. From where I stand now, I no longer fully fit with where I started my research. The understandings that are foundational to my research design have begun to shift, which is why I felt unsteady explaining them.

Wilson (2001) points out that dominant paradigms include an ontological belief that knowledge is acquired and owned by individuals. The researcher searches for knowledge and it is something they have gained and now own. In contrast, an Indigenous paradigm “comes from the fundamental belief that knowledge is relational” (p. 176) and is shared with all of creation. I started by searching for a methodology that would lead to finite answers that I could acquire. I could wrap up my research and share what I learned with others and I thought that would be relational. I searched while I simultaneously chafed against the very rules of certainty I habitually pursued.

I have come to understand that being in relation is not simply sharing information, or being kind and getting along with other people, or making

decisions that make others happy. Being in relation is an embodied, energetic exchange that comes from presence, from deep listening, from honest sharing; a relational space of knowledge creation. I experienced relational knowledge creation by being present with natural kin and those experiences changed my understanding of reality and knowledge. And yet, I still exist in a liminal space with feet in two worldviews. These teachings are new to me, taking tentative root but not fully formed.

Axiology, or a set of morals or a set of ethics, in an Indigenous paradigm speaks of usefulness and doing something beneficial in the world (Wilson, 2001). What is considered useful or beneficial is different in different worldviews. What is considered useful shifted from being what is approved of by others to what is transforming me. How am I changed by the learning and how am I changing in relation with others? Wagamese (2019) speaks of the small circles we must attend to first; those circles ripple first from our selves. I valued approval; I now value coherence (Meyer, 2013a).

My worldview—my ontology, my epistemology, and my axiology—changed considerably from the first graduate class to now, as I prepare to submit my dissertation. Wilson (2001) says that “Indigenous people need to do Indigenous research because we have the lifelong learning and relationship that goes into it” (p. 179). I do not; I found resonance with a worldview foreign to the one I entered into from birth and experiences and relations. But I do want to recognize and honour the shifting of land beneath my feet as I travel the liminal space between worldviews. My feet are not firmly planted on the new shore (and may never be), but they are also no longer solely rooted in paradigms I inherited and began this in-query holding. I want to learn to live well in this space between, not pitting one against the other but recognizing the land and landscape shifts within me as I learn to stand and walk and relate in new ways. I learn to develop the capacity to lead, shaped and transformed by the changing landscape I am coming to inhabit.



Contextualizing

“Seeing what is possible in a situation *for me*, what concrete possibilities are available for action, given who I am, given where I am, and given what I am encountering in the particular situation” (Moules et al., 2015, p. 26, emphasis added) is inextricably tied to context.

Context shapes everything, and what serves in one place and time is not necessarily transferrable to another. What does it mean to be in *this* place, at *this* time? What can grow here? What is needed here now? How can *I* uniquely contribute? We often talk about scaling up as though anything can be transplanted anywhere. Dr. Peter Senge (Compassionate Systems Master Practitioner Training, personal communication, January 25, 2022) suggested we need to pay attention to what can grow in different circumstances. Context matters. What can grow here may reveal a different answer in another place, with other people.

Current global and local realities highlight the urgency of re-imagining educational purposes and systems and leading change and living our lives in a new way. Our children are being led into a world faced with environmental destruction, a widening gap between those living in poverty and those with unimaginable wealth, increasing social and political divisions between people, and rising addiction to social media that shapes our behaviour and limits our focus. A pandemic, climate change, Truth and Reconciliation and the discovery of bodies at residential school sites, and a massive teacher shortage all contribute to a shifting landscape that shapes the work I do, and who and how I wish to be. Since beginning my dissertation, Russia invaded Ukraine and Israel is at war with Hamas and Hezbollah, with the people of Palestine and Lebanon caught in the middle. People speak about a third world war. These happenings do not occur outside educational experience; they shape it, restrict it, colour it, flavour it. Education systems are both influenced by and influence our world.

Contexts in the last 5 years have shifted immeasurably; my feet struggle to find solid ground beneath me. My practices and understandings have adapted, shifted, sometimes stretching reluctantly to the limits of my capacity. What served 5 years ago in a different role in another district, no longer supports me, or my community, or the systems I long to create or transform.

In March 2020, we went into lockdown because of the 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19). Teaching moved online and my district was not a technology rich environment, which created a huge shift for most teachers and for many families it was an impossible burden. We realized how many families lacked access to the Internet, highlighting the disparity and inequity within our community that we had previously glimpsed peripherally. We began lending laptops and helping families become connected and we set up a system to provide food for families who needed it. And we endeavoured to build a system for learning where all familiarity had evaporated.

We thought we just needed to get to June. Heads down, shoulders up, we plowed ahead, never imagining 2 years later we would still be navigating COVID protocols, protests against vaccines and complaints not enough people are vaccinated, protests against mask wearing, and protests in favour of stricter mask wearing. And then we entered another phase of reduced restrictions—something we all hoped for, a supposed end to the pandemic. Instead of making me feel better, it caused more anxiety. We learned safety protocols and fear kept us safe, but fear is a dangerous tap to open; it is not easily turned off. We are interconnected with all living beings, yet the life breath of another can cause my own sickness or even death. We subtly shrank away from each other; we eyed others suspiciously. We kept our distance among a species that requires touch, at least energetically. We missed or misinterpreted the smiles hidden behind masks. An elementary principal shared with me that a young student who entered school during the height of the pandemic declared, “I’ve never seen you smile before!” after she removed her mask. The child had been in the school for over a year. We completed tasks during the pandemic but the damage done to connection has left its mark.

In addition to the pandemic, the effects of climate change have become more pronounced in my corner of the world. In June 2021, the official temperature reached 46 degrees—unheard of where I live. Our schools are not built for heat and we had to close for three days for safety. The unknown effects of the heat weighed heavily. Where would it end, would this become the new normal? Forest fires are not unusual in British Columbia, but they were uncontrollable that summer. An entire town burned to the ground.

Fast forward to November of that year and we experienced a different form of extreme weather. Heavy rainfall and rapidly melting snowpacks burst through protective barriers

causing wide-scale flooding. Homes and farms lay in ruins, roads became impassable, and although our town was largely spared, many employees who live in neighbouring areas lost their homes or could not get to work because of road closures. We were effectively cut off from the interior of the province because highways washed out, which caused supply chain issues. We cancelled non-essential travel (including fieldtrips) and limited visits to schools because of gasoline shortages. Then Christmas arrived with temperatures well below freezing—again more extreme than usual. Again we closed schools for three days. And now I am hearing of students who are afraid to come to school when it is too windy, or too rainy. Climate anxiety.

At the same time, our province is experiencing a severe shortage of teachers and a growing shortage of education assistants. While we grapple with increased absences due to the pandemic, teachers and administrators and district staff stretch to ensure classrooms have coverage. Students become anxious because of the uncertainty. And absences increase while those covering for others become more burned out.

Our town is the site of a former residential school. This 'school' for Indigenous children remained operating until 1984. I turned 19 years old that year and lived only an hour away. I didn't know it existed and would not even hear of a residential school until I was 28 and in my teacher education training. We attended an hour-long presentation about residential schools and our instructors never raised the topic again during the year-long program. In spring 2021, the bodies of 215 children were found in unmarked graves at the site of a residential school in Kamloops (Dickson & Watson, 2021), about a 3-hour drive from my current home. Imagine a school with a graveyard. Imagine bodies buried there, unmarked; lives uncelebrated; accountability denied. The Stó:lō people, whose lands I now live on, began a ground penetrating radar search of the area surrounding the residential school. They revealed the initial results of their search (which is not yet complete) and have found what appears to be unmarked graves at the site of the former residential school site in our town.

All of these challenges are of our own making. We wring our hands about climate change while we race to buy air conditioners to numb the effects of heat domes and wonder how 'someone' could let this happen. A shortage of teachers is not a natural phenomenon—it is, at least partly, a reflection of a system that does not care for and nurture those who we hope are nurturing and caring for our children. Children buried in

unmarked graves was not a surprise for Indigenous families whose children disappeared; it was a surprise to so many of us who have remained ignorant of much of the history of residential schools and our historical relationship with Indigenous People in the place we now call Canada.

And yet, many positive contextual changes also shape me and influence my life and my work. This town has become my home; I am at home here. The views, the land, the people, the circumstances are reshaping how I understand my world. My new role in a district new to me is also expanding my view, and my understandings, and my possibilities. Contemplative practices open my awareness and focus my attention. Compassionate Systems Master Practitioner training (led by Dr. Peter Senge and Dr. Mette Boell) connects me with global colleagues seeking to live and work differently, more connected to their hearts, minds, bodies, and spirits, more conscious of our interconnections with others and the planet, and more aware of the systems we inhabit and create. The gift of Indigenous teachings shapes my understanding of place and awareness of the rhythms of nature. The teachings strengthen and refine my understanding of wholeness and the sacredness of all life.

There are also changes introduced by the Ministry of Education and Childcare that are beginning to align with the teachings I am absorbing. They have revised guiding documents such as the *Early Learning Framework* (Government of British Columbia, 2019) which envisions “learning and being as a holistic process that happens as children and adults come together in relationship with each other, ideas, materials, places, and histories” (p. 7). The redesigned British Columbia (BC) curriculum is intended to align with Indigenous worldviews that highlight the wholistic nature of learning. Social and emotional learning (SEL) is becoming more prevalent in many schools.

We are shaped by our context—the land, the people, the customs, cultures, norms that surround us. They shape our being like flowing water re-forms the rocks it enfolds. It is a recursive impact: the rocks redirect water; water shapes the rock, which redirects the water in another route as the shape changes or as the rock is moved by the force of the water. Sometimes the changes are infinitesimal so we don't at first see the impact until we stand back and realize the bend in the river is here instead of where it turned before. How did that happen, we ask, not really expecting an answer. It just is. The river flows

forward, answering an unseen pull. And thus are we—shaped by and shaping all that we encounter.

“Yet, work as we do to carve and shape, we are carved and shaped as we go. No one can escape the way that experience forms us” (Nepo, 2016, p. xiv).



I, too, am part of the context I experience. Had I not met this person, or that. Had I not opened this email or that. Had I pressed send, or not pressed send. Had I engaged later or sooner or not at all. My life, and the lives of those around me, would be different. I lament I didn't learn these things sooner. But one different step would mean I would not be sitting in the warmth of the sun, looking out the window at the farm valley, the mountains, the river. Hearing the dog barking down the mountain, the traffic moving on the highway below me. Knowing my husband is downstairs, working diligently in his office—so close to completing and tasting the freedom of retirement. One change—a little to the left or right. Those people who have hurt me, the times I was an outsider—that too is part of the interconnection. The lack of connection, the strong connection, the fleeting connection, are all part of the intertwined dance of life. Push forward, step back, embrace, turn away. The energy flows in currents between us.

In a TED Talk, Mel Robbins (2018) explained there is a 1:400,000,000,000,000 chance of each of us being born in this place, at this time. The awesomeness of chances and opportunities and people and relationships and possibilities taken that led to me being born here, and now, has stayed with me since hearing it. And then the serendipitous openings that led me to be with these people doing this work at this time, gives me courage to wake up, stand up, speak up. I will no longer hide or be silent or allow someone else to limit me with their container of expectations.

This is the bend we have collectively reached. Who are we asked to be in this moment? What is needed? How will we respond? How will we, like the rock in the river, be redirected and how will we reshape the course of the river? Our thoughtful responses and our collective leadership is needed more urgently than ever, despite the plethora of distractions available to numb our awareness and excuse the acts we inflict on others—and on our selves.

As an undergraduate completing a degree in English Literature I consumed many writings, poems and books long forgotten in the relentless push forward. But one quote from Timothy Findlay's (1977) "The Wars" has stayed with me all these years:

These are like statements: "*pay attention!*" People can only be found in what they do. (p. 11)

I am fearful of things slipping away, part of consciousness and then gone. Ephemeral whispers of thought mixing with the atmosphere, out of sight, out of mind. Out of consciousness. *Pay attention. This moment will never come again.*

The thing is not to make excuses for the way you behaved – not to take refuge in tragedy – but to clarify who you are through your response to when you lived. If you can't do that, then you haven't made your contribution to the future. Think of any great man or woman. How can you separate them from the years in which they lived? You can't. Their greatness lies in the response to that moment. (Findlay, 1977, pp. 103–104)

How am I responding to this place and time I live? I was born in this time and place for a reason. Not in Ethiopia or Rome or Prince Edward Island. Here. Now. Pay attention to the things / notice, for they are not for others to see, feel, taste, experience in quite the same way. There is a reason / notice it, a reason *it* draws *me*.

Humans have a responsibility to their own time not as if they could seem to stand outside it.... Humans have a responsibility to find themselves where they are, in their own proper time and place, in the history to which they belong and to which they must inevitably contribute either their response or their evasions, either truth and act, or mere slogan and gesture. (Thomas Merton, as cited in Wheatley, 2010, p. 17)

Sherri Mitchell (2018) shares that we are here in a certain place and time on purpose. She explains,

We entered this world with the express purpose of facilitating the changes that are manifesting during this time, and we brought with us the gifts needed to accomplish that task. None of us are out of time or out of place, though many of us remain out of step with our true path. Our unique imprint is essential to the larger pattern that is unfolding. (Mitchell, 2018, p. xx)

Leadership is the openness to exploring and understanding our unique paths and the willingness to travel them in response to and in service of the contextual patterns that unfold in our time. What will we individually and collectively create and contribute in this time? What possibilities of creation exist for me at this time, in this place?

NAVIGATING

Trying to navigate someone else's path can be tricky, especially if we expect to see familiar signposts that may not actually exist. I offer this short chapter as a substitute for the traditional signs in a dissertation that mark the journey. I do not lay out my assertions in the introduction, then proceed to prove each point and restate them in the conclusion. Bookends marking the beginning and end of the journey.

My meandering and searching and wondering became my path. The stories I noticed and the quotes that resonated became signposts as the path emerged behind me and new possible directions opened in front of me. The writing that follows mirrors my circuitous journey of learning and unlearning and relearning. The process is where life unfolds, and it is not a linear, well-defined path. There is simply no destination, just continual movement, adjustment, growth, and unfurling.

The myth of destination and completion creates a striving energy that can cause me to miss many of the possibilities emerging around me. The stories I recount in these pages reveal moments of slowing down, seeing, relating, wondering, questioning that gradually coalesced into new understandings, where the cycle begins again. My dissertation is not laid out in the traditional format of Introduction, Literature Review, Method, Findings, Conclusion. I didn't follow that process of learning, so I don't follow that process of writing now. The writing and photography are my sites of learning, meandering and noticing are my method. The path visible in hindsight. I keep walking, learning to trust in the unfolding.

I noticed my self, others, and the systems we inhabit and that inhabit us. My writing loosely follows this path of exploring self, connecting with others and relating, and finally creating and leading within an educational system.

Bridging – Notes on Terms

A bridge is a structure connecting this place I stand with another place I travel towards. It delineates the journey in an efficient way. Without it, we would traverse many improvised routes that may or may not allow us to continue our path or allow others to find us. This short section acts as a bridge to assist your journey, Reader, into my in-query path.

A few terms are central to my in-query and in order to bridge an understanding of them I lay them out here, pebbles offered to assist in your own path navigation through this dissertation.

Compassionate Systems Leadership

Throughout my dissertation I refer to Compassionate Systems Master Practitioner training I participated in from June 2021–July 2022. The work of Compassionate Systems is led by Dr. Peter Senge and Dr. Mette Boell from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Centre for Systems Awareness. I attended an introductory course in July 2020, and after completion of the year-long Master Practitioner training in July 2022, I enrolled in another offering, “Holding Space” to learn facilitation and contemplative guidance (October 2022–February 2023). I continue to attend global calls and participate in meetings among a network of BC graduates of the Master Practitioner training.

Compassionate Systems Leadership recognizes the profound interconnectedness of life. Our self, our relations with others, humanity, and the natural world are all entangled systems of relations. Re-cognizing and re-learning our inherent connectedness and caring within each level will profoundly change the possibilities for our future (see Center for Systems Awareness, n.d.).

Compassionate Systems includes three core leadership capacities, represented by a metaphor of a three-legged stool. Each capacity is equally necessary and interdependent. If one leg of the stool is missing or one leg is longer or shorter than the others, the stool will not be stable. All three need to be developed:

- **Personal Mastery:**
 - Anchored in a creative orientation, personal mastery involves having a vision and deep sense of purpose. Being able to hold creative tension in the process of realizing your vision is important in personal mastery;

- Requires self-awareness, including emotional awareness;
- Includes the ability to make intentional choices independent of outside pressures;
- Personal mastery is supported through contemplative practices.
- Relational Capacity:
 - Requires us to be aware of our mental models so we can enter relationships with respect and openness;
 - Involves developing our capacity to connect with others and nurture generative social fields;
 - Relational capacity is also supported through contemplative practices, as a way of increasing awareness of how we show up to relational spaces.
- Systems Awareness:
 - Involves systems thinking and systems awareness. Systems are dynamic and interdependent. We both influence and are influenced by the systems we live within;
 - Systems thinking involves objectively understanding how a system functions and embracing the complexity of situations instead of searching for simple fixes to complex questions;
 - Systems sensing involves increased awareness of the system(s) we work and live in and recognizing how we are relating to the context we are in. By cultivating our innate capacity for systems sensing and developing our ability to 'hold the space' we are better able to develop and sustain healthy systems (see Center for System Awareness, n.d.-b).

Many discussions of leadership or systems focus on control and influence, which requires us to lead *over* someone else. Compassion is the animating energy in the Compassionate Systems framework and assists us in leading from *within*, both personally and collectively.

Compassion is different from empathy. Within the Compassionate Systems framework, empathy is defined as “the innate capacity to sense and feel the emotions of others” (Center for System Awareness, n.d.-a, Lexicon section, Empathy and Compassion subsection, para. 1). We can become burned out by empathy fatigue if we become caught in someone else’s emotions. Cultivating our own emotional awareness and holding our own emotional space allows us to cultivate compassion. In a compassionate stance, instead of taking on someone’s emotions we feel alongside without internalization. The second difference between empathy and compassion is the intention of taking action on behalf of another:

For example, in many traditions like Buddhism, compassion is most often understood as the intention of alleviating suffering, of supporting the other (be that human or animal or other living being) to have joy and happiness in their existence. In the Taoist tradition for example, compassion comes

with a deep sense of joy and wishing a life of joy for others, and in the Christian tradition compassion is expressed as being in service for others. (Center for System Awareness, n.d.-a, Lexicon section, Empathy and Compassion subsection, para. 2)

One of the many teachings that now frames my understanding is the interconnected nature of each of the core leadership capacities with compassion as a central energy of each.

The BC Ministry of Education and Child Care (the Ministry) has included Compassionate Systems Leadership as the first of three core pillars of well-being in the K-12 *Mental Health in Schools Strategy* (Government of British Columbia, Ministry of Education. 2020). The other two pillars are “Capacity Building” for social emotional learning, mental health literacy, and trauma-informed practice, and “Mental Health in the Classroom,” which embeds Indigenous knowledge and perspectives and the Core Competencies. The Ministry recognizes that in order to support student well-being, we need a system-wide approach to support adult well-being. They frame the areas of adult well-being as internal work, relationship work, and system work.

The division of the leadership capacities into three areas (self, relations, systems) are in some ways an artificial division—my self impacts how I show up in relational spaces, how I show up impacts how I perform within, sustain, create, and transform systems. Systems in turn limit or expand how I can show up for myself and others. My relations with others help to sustain my personal well-being and my growth, and how we are able to collectively shape and respond to systems. They are truly interdependent.

The stories I share in the following chapters are loosely shaped around these three areas of leadership: self, relations, systems. Although a story may be placed in one section, it could easily inhabit any of the other sections. The stories represent my own learning, being, becoming within a cycle of growth encompassing all aspects of leadership (self, relations, systems). The stories are shared from my perspective, my self being integral to all three aspects of leading.

Some quotes from Compassionate Systems Master Practitioner training are included throughout my dissertation. In particular, the most profound understandings I gained

were in relation to the contemplative practices. Hanilee Aggotsdatter³ led most of that work and I refer to her teachings and often mention something Hanilee said, or a meditation she led.

Holism, Wholism, Wholeness

My in-query centres wholeness (the interconnectedness of body, mind, heart, and spirit) as a desirable path through and outcome of our K–12 system. The Ministry revised the *Early Learning Framework* (Government of British Columbia, 2019) to envision “learning and being as a holistic process that happens as children and adults come together in relationship with each other, ideas, materials, places, and histories” (p. 7) and the redesigned BC curriculum is intended to align with Indigenous worldviews that centre the wholistic nature of learning.

Holism is a word that is beginning to be used more often in public education, but it is often used without reference to a shared meaning. Karen O’Brien (2021) describes holism as “the philosophical idea of an interconnectedness that can only be explained with reference to the whole, rather than to its parts” (p. 15).

J. P. Miller (2019) differentiates holism from wholism:

People often ask about the root meaning of ‘holistic.’ The word ‘holistic’ comes from the Greek word *holon* and refers to a universe made up of integrated wholes that cannot simply be reduced to the sum of its parts. Holistic is sometimes spelled “wholistic.” I do not use the words interchangeably, but suggest that “holistic” implies spirituality, or a sense of the sacred, while “wholistic” is more material and biological with an emphasis on physical and social interconnections. I believe Dewey argued for wholism, while Gandhi and Steiner were holistic in their perspectives. (p. 8)

I appreciate Miller’s (2019) explicit reference to spirit as well as material and biological, but I do not see them as separate. Rather, together spiritual, material, and biological comprise the whole. The dichotomies or distinctions we draw between mind and body or

³ Hanilee Aggotsdatter led contemplative practices in the Compassionate Systems Leadership Master Practitioner program, as well as being the main instructor of the “Holding Space” program I participated in from October–February 2023.

humans and nature or spiritual and material are limiting and reflect only a partial understanding of the whole. We are all one. We are whole.

My own search for wholeness began because of the disconnected way I was living my life. I was searching for integration of body, mind, heart, and spirit instead of living as though I was a head being carried from meeting to meeting by a pair of legs. I was ignoring my own need for rest and connection with others in a misguided quest to get things done and fulfill expectations (either internally or externally imposed), ignoring the needs of my body and my spirit.

I am reaching for both holism and wholism that Miller (2019) describes—both the sacred/spiritual and the material/biological. Throughout my writing I refer to wholeness or to wholism and use the terms interchangeably. I recognize that within the BC education system, the spelling ‘holism’ is used. I do not see the two spellings as indicative of something separate; wholeness encompasses both.

And now I begin with my self. It is the only beginning for all of us.

RECOGNIZING (RE-COGNIZING) SELF

The goal of education is not mastery of subject matter but mastery of one's person. Subject matter is simply the tool. (Orr, 2004, p. 13)

Self-awareness and self-love matter. Who we are, is how we lead. (B. Brown, 2020, 31:14)

We speak of leadership as though it is an identifiable entity separate from the person exercising it; in reality it is a deeply personal expression of values, a vulnerable offering of self. Who I am, how I am, and where I am matter as much to my capacity to lead as what I do because what I am able to do in any situation or context is inextricably tied to who I am, how I am, and where I am. We all lead from who we are, just as Parker Palmer (1998) describes that we teach from who we are. And we can all lead from where we are; leadership is not dependent on title.

I am referring to leadership, not management, which I see as tasks of directing, scheduling, budgeting, et cetera. I speak at length about leadership in the chapter, "Leading." For purposes of this section, I mention leadership to highlight the importance of self-awareness, self-exploration, and self-knowledge.

Compassionate Systems Leadership notably begins with personal mastery, which refers to who we are, how we are able to show up, and what we seek to create. A sense of meaning, purpose, and personal alignment are essential for living an integrated life and living an integrated life allows our unique capacity to lead to emerge. Like the rock is slowly reshaped by the water that caresses it, and the flow of water is redirected by the rock in its path, who we are shapes our actions and our actions redirect who we become and thus how we lead.

W. Brian Arthur (as cited in Senge et al., 2004) explained, "Every profound innovation is based on an inward-bound journey, on going to a deeper place where knowing comes to the surface" (p. 13) because "the only change that will make a difference is the transformation of the human heart" (p. 67).

How do I come to know my self? Dr. Vicki Kelly (2012) shares, "The spiritual or cultural [or ecological] heritages that we emerge from actively shape what becomes our unique worldview or cultural perspective" (p. 25). I am inextricably bound to my history, to my

relations, to my experiences, and to my understanding of place. My ecology forms/informs/reforms my being.

As a researcher, I am indelibly linked to the stories, observations, and meaning-making I share in these pages. They are not objective renderings of reality that occurred independently of my self; they are the subjective understandings I have come to as a result of living within the stories—being both impacted by them and impacting them by my presence within them. I interpreted teachings I received and observations I made based on how I was able to accept them at this time into my mind, heart, body, and spirit. They arrived within me in an ecosystem already formed/forming, in-formed/in-forming, re-formed/re-forming.

I have been honest and faithful in the descriptions of my understandings but they are not the same understandings someone else might reach. Locating myself in relation to this research assists readers in understanding where I am from, how my understandings develop, and why these stories matter to me, at this time. What I did not expect was the clarity self-locating would bring to my own understanding of my self and my unique lens through which I recognize, interpret, and share with the world, and my potential capacity to lead.

Margaret Kovach (2013) explains an Indigenous approach to research, “begins with our own story, our vulnerability” (p. 492). It certainly feels vulnerable to share my story, having been taught, either implicitly or explicitly, that my story is not important; it is the published words of others that matter. While I am not engaging in Indigenous research, self-location is a respectful place to begin, both for the reader and for my self. My story is impacted by and impacts all I encounter. An encounter is shaped by the way I am able to show up to it.

I begin with self-location—an uncovering of the experiences, stories, relations, and place that shape my being. The stories that follow my self-location section reveal the impact of living and showing up in fragmented ways, and what possibilities can unfurl through living and showing up in wholeness.

Self-Locating

Roots – Ancestry

In our bodies, we carry the blood of our ancestors and the seeds of the future generations. We are the living conduit to all life. When we contemplate the vastness of the interwoven network that we are tied to, our individual threads of life seem far less fragile. We are strengthened by who we come from and inspired by those who will follow. (Mitchell, 2018, p. 11)

I am strengthened by my ancestors, those who walked before me and on whose shoulders I now stand. Their blood runs in my veins, birthed by generations of connections, love, care, abuse, neglect, hurts. It colours my relationships with everyone and everything in ways that are both nourishing and harmful, invisible and obvious. My story, like yours, is connected to history, both past and yet to become. Margaret Wheatley (2010) explains that as we face the challenges of today, “it might help to recall the centuries of solid shoulders we stand on” (p. 9).

I am second-generation Canadian on my dad’s side, the granddaughter of Croatian settlers. Grandma and Papa were farmers who built a chicken and strawberry farm in Surrey, BC. I am third-generation Canadian on my mom’s side, the great granddaughter of Irish and Scottish settlers, so I am told—mercantile owners who established their business in High River, Alberta, or maybe Lyon’s Head, Ontario, depending on the storyteller.

When asked to describe myself, I have always said I’m hardworking and responsible. I thought that was a safe non-personal characterization of my work ethic; I didn’t realize it also described my deeply personal ancestry.

My mom stayed at home when I was young and was always proud of working hard. She volunteered with Brownies, the Kinsman, and the Parent–Teacher Association at our elementary school. She painted the outside of the house, mowed the lawn, kept the house clean, took care of her ill mother, and raised three children. I arrived home after school to accounts of what she accomplished each day. My dad was a small business owner and worked six to seven days a week. He wasn’t a boss who sat in his office; he often returned home with grease under his fingernails from the cars he fixed. During the recession in the 1980s he nearly lost his business and was fortunate to sell it. Those were very lean times and my mom began to work outside the home as a homecare

worker. My dad started a landscaping business and operated a used car lot for a time. It never occurred to either of them that someone else owed them something; it is up to you to work hard to take care of yourself and your family. Part of a 'pull yourself up by your bootstraps' legacy passed through generations. Watching my parents taught me the beauty of hard work. I didn't realize, until writing this, that my parents learned the same work ethic from their parents, who learned it from their parents. I am coming to learn that strengths can often be curses. Hard work can also crush.

My paternal grandfather, at the age of 19, left his tiny village in then Yugoslavia (now Croatia). His wife and three-month old daughter stayed behind on the farm with his father and brothers while he travelled to Canada to explore new possibilities for his young family. He had never travelled before. He didn't speak English and had little formal education. He didn't have family or friends waiting for him. He leaped, and eventually created a path for other family members, changing the trajectory of many lives with his journey. He worked his way from Halifax, across the prairies, to Vancouver Island, finally settling in Surrey where he built a farm. It took 10 years of working and saving before he could bring my grandmother and aunt to Canada (family lore is that he sent money earlier but his father and brothers kept it). I imagine his courage in setting out for a new home, building something from nothing. I imagine grandma's courage and perseverance staying on papa's family's farm, cooking and cleaning for his brothers and father, raising her daughter on her own. My grandparents must have been strangers when she arrived; how much had disparate experiences shaped each of them in the intervening years? My dad was born within a year of her arrival in Canada and they remained married until they passed away in their 80s and 90s.

I am from adventure, determination, and hard work

I am from loyalty and patience and duty

*I am from fields of strawberries, rows of vegetables,
stuffy chicken coops, and an escaping dairy cow.*

I am a granddaughter of possibility.

I am the great granddaughter of business owners, settlers from Scotland. My maternal great grandfather owned a mercantile until he died at 48, leaving behind a wife and six children. At that time, his holdings passed to his brother, not his wife. She was forced to leave when his brother moved in. Left homeless, she lived with her grown daughters,

rotating between their homes until she finally settled in with her son, who cared for her until her death.

Her youngest daughter, Norma Beryl McMaster, married my maternal grandfather, Archibald Hudson—a stranger to me, except through story. His ancestors arrived in Newfoundland from Ireland. He liked to fish, had one drink of whiskey each year at Christmas, was a carpenter and a barber. He had a beautiful singing voice. He was physically abusive to my mother's stepbrother, who left home to join the army and was never seen by my mother again. He was also abusive to my nana, who finally left him when my mom was a young woman. Nana moved in with my mom and after the separation, my mom only saw her father once, which is why I only know him through story.

After gifting my mom with a DNA test in 2018, we discovered unknown cousins. My mother's stepbrother had a daughter and son, who in turn had children, some of whom we have now met. The first time I met my cousins I felt a spark of recognition and connection. Unfortunately, we did not meet their father, who had passed years before the DNA test.

Memories of my maternal grandmother include time spent in hospitals and nursing homes. She had a stroke that left her in a coma for more than a month and breast cancer when she was too weak to undergo treatment. She passed away in her 70s; young to me now, ancient when I was a child. Visiting my nana with my mom taught me the beauty of responsibility and commitment.

*I am from loyal women of hidden strength
A dance of dependence and force, fear and courage
Compliance and determination.
I am the offspring of perseverance.*

I am the middle child of three—perpetually in-between, dweller of liminal spaces. The straddler of both sides, the fence-sitter amidst polarization, recent guest to stand-taking. I became masterful at seeing multiple sides of any issue, and perpetually uncomfortable in conflict. A seeker of balance.

*I am from,
Walking on eggshells
Causing cracks of disharmony
What should I choose
To make you happy
And keep me safe?*

Trunk – Culture

We are thrown into this hermeneutic circle by birth, and the cultural traditions in which our outlook is formed provide us with a certain pre-understanding about the things we encounter in the world. Language, concepts, and cultural traditions shape our perception of life. (Zimmerman, 2015, p. 37)

Manulani Meyer (2008) claims our senses are shaped by our culture:

This fundamental idea that our senses are culturally shaped seems almost obvious, but it must be understood deeply if you are to proceed into what many may not understand. What this entails for your research is that you will need to slow down what it means to see something, hear something, or experience something. (p. 220)

To suggest my senses and understandings are culturally shaped was anything but obvious for me. To my young mind, Canada was not cultural; culture came through other—a multicultural landscape to which I didn't really belong. Culture represented difference and growing up I longed to fit in, not stand out. I loved our large Croatian family dinners, playing with cousins, eating kolbasa and sauerkraut, fresh vegetables, roasted meat, and grandma's apple 'povatitsa,' but I would never have considered bringing a friend to witness the different food and language. Difference pulled me from the bland safety of what I perceived to be normal.

While I loved playing with cousins and the boisterous coming together of relatives who reflected my father's features and interests and humour, these gatherings were also fraught. My non-Croatian mother never felt accepted into the family, and she did not accept their non-English communication. Their indecipherable language and thick accents branded me as outsider, a peripheral participant, many aspects of that cultural heritage inaccessible to me.

As I write this passage, I'm watching the heavy rain relentlessly patter on the pavement, building up into a layer of water on the road, the drains unable to release it. The water, not absorbed into the hardened shell of asphalt simply accumulates until it finds an outlet to drain into. The culture of my upbringing, despite being ignored or unknown by me, was a relentless patter that seeped into tiny cracks I didn't realize were there. It didn't disappear; it seeped and pooled and created edges. Patiently waiting for absorption.

If "the spiritual or cultural heritages that we emerge from actively shape what becomes our unique worldview or cultural perspective" (Kelly, 2012, p. 25), what does it mean when the teachings are hidden or inaccessible or ignored? What teachings are available when all my ancestors were compelled by circumstance to leave the land they knew?

The Irish blood that runs in my veins is a mystery. I have no idea if my ancestors were Catholic or Protestant, on which side of the famous divide. I don't know why my grandfather's ancestors left Ireland or why my grandmother's ancestors left Scotland or why they chose Canada. Irish and Scottish traditions were not visible in my upbringing and I didn't learn of this heritage until I was an adult. And yet. A memory of a long-ago school assignment to research a country and my insistent desire to choose Ireland. For no reason, out of the blue, or so it seemed.

Jeannine Carriere (Kovach, 2013) suggests there are no coincidences. Perhaps the disconnection from my own cultural tethers and teachers was at the heart of *the rub* that led me to search for wholeness in my lived experiences and leadership praxis. There are no coincidences. Perhaps I thirsted for ancient teachings I couldn't access, teachings that could tether me to wholeness. Perhaps a lack of tether to culture allowed new teachings to find hold, opening my heart to Indigenous teachings and contemplative practices with ancient origins. No coincidences, no mistakes. Each closed door allowing space for another to open, when needed.

I recently came across a photo of me, my siblings, and my cousins gathered in my grandparents' living room. We look tethered together through visible similarities. High cheekbones, the curve of our jaws, the hold of our shoulders. The similarities in the shape of my face and stature of body hinting at connection, while my blond hair and fair skinned complexion suggest difference next to the darker hues of my siblings and

cousins. My eyes appear to my elder self as questioning, shy. Portals of curiosity and uncertainty, the awkwardness of not fully fitting in.

I am From...

*Large Croatian family dinners,
Boisterous gatherings, intergenerational feasts.*

*I am from gendered expectations,
Predetermined unquestioned storylines*

*Women cooking,
Sweating, rushing, chatting*

*Men relaxing,
Card-playing, drinking, talking*

*Children playing,
Running, laughing, obeying.*

*I am from defined roles,
Chafing expectations,
Yearning to fit, craving to stretch.*

Branches – Childhood

*I am from early morning skating practices
Figure eights, precision blade placement, balance
Sit spins and laybacks
Tentative jumps, reluctant competitions*

*I am from Barbie house design in the garage
Days of building on the ping pong table
Found item furniture, parents' cigarette box dressers
Engrossed in creation, bored with enactment*

*I am from day-long adventures with neighbourhood girls
Backyard sprinkler racing, roaming free
Within boundaried streets
Imagination, giggles, home before dark*

*I am from Nancy Drew mysteries, Little Women, and Boxcar Children,
Adventure imaginings, invented worlds
In cocoons of quiet
Dreams of female independence*

*I am from loving school,
Learning performing, pleasing admired teachers
Role playing teaching
Lessons for imaginary students*

I am a child of creation, imagination, learning, performing,

Becoming.

Forest – Place

A tree that has grown directly up toward the sun will be straight and fine grained, while those that have wandered a bit to find the light show twists

and turns in the grain.... Trees are affected by their sapling days as much as people are by their childhoods. (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 143)

I grew up in Surrey, before the sprawling growth and density, prior to four-lane highways and sprouting high-rises. I played in hay fields and escaped into imaginary worlds in the bushes and forests that bordered those fields. I felt cocooned among the solidity of unmoving trunks and shaded softness of dark earth. And had no clue any of that mattered.

In our first graduate class, Dr. Kelly asked us to write “I am From” poems and one section was to focus on the particulars of the place we feel at home. I struggled to see the point of the exercise. I was from Surrey, a place people made jokes about, a place that didn’t seem exciting or important. And I had many other things I thought I should be doing—work tasks left incomplete while I wrote a poem that seemed trivial.

It wasn’t until she explained to me that she was from northern Ontario, from granite, and that was how she moved, that a light came on. The trees I found safety among, the hours I spent playing among the stillness and quiet, actually shaped who I became and how I lived my life.

Dr. Kelly (2010) explains,

I was placed on this earth in a particular place. My being entered a particular ecology and it was in this location that my sense and sensibilities were schooled. I came open to all the impress of the world ready to attend to her, to bend and blend with her. She in turn guided not only what I bumped into but shaped how I encountered it. The pedagogical relationship of the senses to a particular environment creates the finely tuned instrument, the organism for perceiving and ultimately for knowing in that place. (p. 85)



I am from...

*Open farm fields
enclosed by trees*

*Exploration
bordered by silence
and stillness*

*Hidden worlds in cool
shadows of branches
and trunks*

I am from...

*Roots embedded, still
and grounded*

*Networks of familial
connection and
responsibility*

*Restless branches reaching,
striving for sunlight*

*No sudden moves,
just*

*Steady seeking,
changing,*

*Rings of growth,
encircled experience*

I am from...

*Comfort in stillness,
quiet*

*Precise movements,
controlled*

Skating, pilates, yoga

*Stranger to skiing,
racing, flying*

Trunk still, like

A tree.

I don't know trees like a scientist would. I cannot name all the trees in the forest or even my own backyard, although I am coming to know the shapes of their leaves or the texture of their bark that signals a certain species. It is the feeling of safety, stillness, and solidity that envelops me and feeds my spirit when I walk or sit among them that has shaped my movement through life.

I live like a tree. Calm, still, solid, incremental steady growth. I move with the stiffness of trees, bend under pressure but remain grounded, continually growing in rings of development, strive and search like the roots reaching for moisture and branches stretching towards sunlight. Striving and reaching without leaping; grounded in place. When I am at peace, I am still, like a tree.

That is where I feel at home; it is where I recognize my self.

A tree doesn't thrive alone. Peter Wohlleben (2015) describes the nourishing network of naturally grown forests. The roots reach for each other, become entwined and interdependent, creating symbiotic networks of support. A tree that is planted alone does not live or thrive as long. I, too, do not thrive in an environment that forces me from my nature, the natural way of being that allows me to thrive. I cannot offer my unique gifts in an environment that is siloed, competitive, or shallow. I thrive in connection, collaboration, and depth of meaning-making.

I have been drawn to the rainforests of Ucluelet on the West Coast of Vancouver Island since we began spending time there in 2009. At first the pathways were beautiful places to exercise. I always felt restored after being among the trees and assumed it was the exercise. After writing my poem and recognizing the parallels between my movement through life and the growth of a tree, I began seeing the individuality of tree beings within the forest. I noticed the varied shapes of twisted, windblown trunks, the solidity of large cedar and spruce, the multigenerational supportive networks. I took hundreds of photos over the years, recognizing metaphors among the trunks that reflected the sometimes twisting and painful reshaping, at other times nourishing and sustaining, personal, professional, and doctoral journey I was travelling.



My photos of trees and the intellectual connection I reached through their shapes as metaphors for my experience incrementally gave way to a sensing of energy and rhythm, a re-connection and re-cognition of my connection to place.

Over time, the call of the rainforests expanded to the beaches, and from the land to the ocean and the sky. This broadening awareness and connection happened/is happening slowly as I learn to adjust my pace to the rhythm within me and the rhythm of place surrounding me.

A tree is not an isolated being within the forest any more than a forest is an isolated ecology existing separate from its surroundings. Choose any thread of energy in the forest and follow its journey—it doesn't end at the border of trees. Roots connect and entwine with each other and draw sustenance from the groundwater of rivers that eventually burst into the ocean. Salmon that leave the ocean swim up those rivers to leave their eggs and birth new life. Elder salmon leave their bodies to nourish forest dwellers of all forms. And so, the dance of life that appears bordered is actually an interconnected tapestry, each thread an integral and necessary part of the whole.

I am coming to recognize my affinity for trees means I can also find home with surrounding waterways, even if tentatively.

2022.07.03 – A Dwelling: Place, Where I Inhabit Becomes Who I Am

Where one is has everything to do with who one is.... When mind, spirit and land ... are understood to be as they have always been, as coevolutionary. (Sheridan & Longboat, 2006, as cited in Kelly, 2021, p. 148)



I notice an expanding pull toward vistas of water, yet still through the protection of trees. My body still viscerally resists the thrumming rhythmic movement of the ocean. As I write this reflection, I am sitting in the lounge of a fishing lodge while my husband and his siblings and their spouses are on the water, fishing for hours at a time. After two hours and two motion sickness pills I return to the solidity of still rock, or literally turn myself inside out.

I used to think I was just one of those people who get seasick. But perhaps my seasickness is caused by my discomfort with unpredictable motion rather than my discomfort a result of being seasick. The water moving my body in ways I cannot stiffen against just as I stiffen against unpredictability in my life. The roots of trees, the stability of trunks are an anchor to safety through solidity. The bark a crusted layer of protection. I still reach and strive, as branches stretch to reach sunlight, but within the confines of tethers to solid earth and safety.

On water I am unbuffered, untethered. I have never lived my life that way. I have taken risks, I have been vulnerable, but always with feet on solid ground.

And yet. I am beginning to recognize possibility for myself in the flow of water as well as the rootedness of trees. A relationship that parallels the interdependent bond of land and water.

I am water.

*A shapeshifter, flowing around your impermeable walls,
Over, around, between,
Unbound by your container
Moving, tenaciously creating my path.*

I am water, a current of possibility.

The separation of one aspect of Earth from the other is as artificial as the separation of mind, body, heart, and spirit.

My ancestors are not of this place I dwell; they perched on unfamiliar land and called it home. I come home to myself by first learning to dwell in this place. Amba Sepie's (2021) words begin to reverberate with recognition:

Our own connection [with Mother Earth] must be made anew, so that we care for Earth because we *know* she is our Origin, not just in some intellectual sense but in the deeply felt sense of understanding we are kin.... Such knowledge does not come to the wanderer without effort. If it does not come from generations of blood and sweat in one place, then it has to be cultivated and woven into place where we stand—where we birth *now*. (p. 26)

Place has imprinted me; it shapes me as the currents of energy flow around and within me. My re-cognition of my self within place is a slow embodiment; each new awareness simultaneously a felt remembrance.

Photosynthesis – Spirit

As I re-view my life to situate my self, I recognize I was a seeker of spirit from a young age, certain there was more than what I could see, touch, taste, smell, or hear.

When I was young my family did not attend church. My dad was a lapsed Catholic and altar boy and my mom did not have any specific religious affiliation. I became curious about the churches my friends attended and asked my parents if I could go too. When I was eight or nine, I started attending Sunday School at a Baptist church with our neighbours. I applied my hard work ethic and star pupil aspirations to my new studies. I don't recall learning anything but I did memorize a lot of Bible passages to recite. It wasn't long before I stopped going.

Another friend attended a Catholic church in the gym of our local junior high and the year after my disappointing Baptist quest, I asked to join her. My mom was also interested and she and I and my younger brother (and occasionally my older sister) started attending every Sunday. My dad stayed away, disillusioned from his childhood experiences, although he never elaborated. I attended catechism, and was eventually confirmed into Catholicism.

At first, I was drawn to the calming ritual of tradition and the possibility of something more that existed beyond my reach. For a time in my childhood I was even intrigued with the idea of becoming a nun. Yet years of homilies that didn't reach me or teach me anything made me realize I had not found what I yearned for. While I still felt the pull to more than just a physical reality, organized religion was not the key to unlocking it for me.

I was also always curious about (and a little afraid of) the energy I felt from other people. I *felt* it when someone was angry; I *felt* it when they were upset or sad. I remember consciously trying to resist the energy of some people, even when I was young.

I think my sense of something beyond what was physically accessible by my five senses was tied to the energetic quality I experienced from others, and from being in nature. I knew there was more because I *felt* it. Yet no one talked about it so I learned to dismiss it; the beginning of learning to separate mind, body, spirit. My mind listened to what others were *not* saying, so I learned to stop listening to my body.

Manulani Aluli Meyer (2001) explains that Descartes, with his famous statement, "I think, therefore I am," paved the way for an empirical worldview, a move away from spiritual beliefs and connection:

[Science] became the “god” for western culture.... [Descartes] developed a system of looking at the world, a way of developing objectivity and distance.... The five senses became the only way Europeans and Americans [and Canadians] experienced and could make sense of their world. (p. 189)

Meyer (2001) asserts,

If you are going to have to say the words *spirit* and *knowledge*, you’re being repetitious.... Spirituality is not about religion, of course. It is the fundamental sense of how we relate to the world, how we see the world, how it relates back to us. It is a spiritual context. (p. 193)

James Dumont (2006, as cited in Ross, 2014) describes a traditional Anishinaabe Creation story, which explains, in part, that

our relationship to one another is also, first of all, from spirit to spirit. Our role as human beings is to preserve that relationship, to maintain the spiritual order and structure of the world.... Indigenous psychology and Indigenous culture can only be fully and properly understood from within this belief: that spirit is the central and primary energy, cause, and motivator of life. (p. 32)

In the foreword to Sheri Mitchell’s (2018) book, *Sacred Instructions: Indigenous Wisdom for Living Spirit Based Change*, Larry Dossey speaks of “spiritual factors – [which include] a sense of meaning, purpose, and direction and a sense of connectedness with something that transcends the individual self and ego, however named” (p. x) and these spiritual factors are fundamental to our health (or illness). John P. Miller (2019) defines spirituality as “a sense of the awe and reverence for life that arises from our relatedness to something both wonderful and mysterious” (p. 6).

As someone who came of age in a world of science and reason, the word *spirituality* has a nebulous quality, a solid and agreed upon definition just beyond my reach. Each of the definitions offered above point toward it, but they all have a ‘yes, and...’ quality for me. I believe ‘spirit’ points to the animating energy that weaves us together both individually and collectively, guiding towards—or maybe revealing—meaning, purpose, and knowing. Our physical selves appear separate from one another, but our spiritual selves reveal an interconnectedness within and among all beings on the planet, all of nature.

Lyle, Latremouille, and Jardine (2021) speak of being “physically and spiritually attuned to the world around us” (p. 3) and being spiritually attuned refers to belonging in nature. Spirit is not a human concept; spirit infuses all of nature.

Gregory Cajete (1994) explains,

Spirituality evolves from exploring and coming to know and experience the nature of the living energy moving in each of us, through us, and around us. The ultimate goal of Indigenous education was to be fully knowledgeable about one's innate spirituality. This was considered completeness in its most profound form. (p. 42)

This passage, read after I originally wrote the above section, feels authentic. The energy flowing within and around us, connects us all, every being.

Connection unsevered by time and space. Connections I both inhabit and am inhabited by. Mind, body, heart, spirit.

September 4, 2019

The young man from the Kwantlen Nation tells the crowd gathered for the opening of the new outdoor school to look at all the work someone had to do to bring us all together in this moment.

As he speaks, I recognize that on one level many people worked hard to organize the event, but on another level, there were synchronicities and people coming together over spans of time, relationships created, dissolved, or nurtured over generations for that moment to happen with all of us together. For me personally there were so many doors opening at the right time, people bridging my questions and frustrations, opportunities unfolding, whispers, nudges—pebbles laying a path I see only behind me. I felt the energy in my heart, a full knowing of rightness, of being in the right place at this time.

*Suddenly, all my ancestors are behind me. Be still, they say.
Watch and listen. You are the result of the love of thousands.
(Chickasaw poet Linda Hogan, as cited in Mitchell, 2018, p. 11)*

Yunkaporta (2020) explains the impossibility of chasing one viewpoint for all, and I came to recognize my self-location only holds within my view. I exist within an extended familial ecosystem and we all have our vantage points, and our extensions of universes that converge through each of the relations we experience. We all hold universes of possibility. My perch of daughter, granddaughter, sister, cousin does not afford me an all-knowing truth of an entire family. I access only from within the view I can see. Every system, including familial systems, are “in a constant state of movement and adaptation” (Yunkaporta, 2020, p. 43).

The symbiotic process of writing my story—reaching into and through my mind, heart, spirit, and body—has revealed my self to me. A subjective understanding is all I can render. My understanding of the teachings from my childhood is of course only what I can glean from within my experience; it is not a ‘truth’ that holds for the others in my life as they experienced my presence in their lives differently than I experienced theirs in mine.

Locations are never isolated. They are always in relation to a larger whole. A city is west of the mountains, or east of the ocean; it doesn’t emerge in isolation from, but in relation to. Self-locating highlighted who and how I am related, connected, shaped, and nurtured by all my relations. I am simultaneously locating my self as a self-aware entity and an entwined being within relations to ancestors, family, nature, experiences, and ideas.

I embarked on my self-location reluctantly, unsure how my story affected my re-search, uncertain how my story would be received, and care-full of those who inhabit my story. The cultural, familial, spiritual, and ecological fragmentation I experienced affected every aspect of my life, despite my lack of awareness of it. Within that fragmentation lay the patterns of a search for wholeness born from my personal story, revealed through life writing.

My personal history is a flow within current reality; I learn within the context of where I was birthed and have travelled since.

The past is not “out there” presenting us with objects to examine. Rather, history is like a stream in which we move and participate in every act of understanding. The very reason that we can understand anything at all from the past is because we already stand in the stream of time that connects past and present. (Zimmerman, 2015, p. 41)

The stream of past and present is unbreakable, even if unnoticed. Interpretation of present is richer when seen in the flow of time, context, culture, family; the hermeneutic circle.

“What else is our scholarship but our way of making meaning... I have nothing to offer except the meaning I made in the process” (Dr. Kelly, personal communication, November 18, 2022). How can I make meaning through the act of my scholarship and through spiritually animating my praxis as an educator and leader, without first and continually making meaning of my life? My roles are not separate from my self. Nor can

my story exist separately from those who inhabit it with me, the context it unfolds within, and the place it exists. Inextricable interconnection, inter-weaving, inter-being. Life itself is a web of meaning makings (Dr. Kelly, personal communication, November 18, 2022). I believe that web of meaning-making mirrors the interconnected web of life-making within nature. All is connected, nothing wasted. The connections that forge the web of meaning-making also forge life.

Dr. Kelly (personal communication, November 18, 2022) spoke of the fabric within us that we weave with our life energy; we wear the fabric we weave. Prior to writing of my self in this self-reflexive self-location process, my story was a fragmented collection of loose threads. Now, with awareness, I wear the fabric initially woven with shyness, uncertainty, gradual acceptance, and finally love. The fabric moves with me, comforts me, protects me, and also reveals me. I am here, unhidden, the threads of my life woven to create the garment of the life story and the scholarship I inhabit and share with you.

Exploring self, recognizing self, relating with self—and ultimately sharing self.

Seeing and Perceiving

The most valuable teaching within the process of writing the postcards was to slow down and notice. I cannot gain understanding without developing awareness. And awareness begins, I believe, with perception. My ability to clearly see and more fully perceive the world I inhabit has not developed in a linear process. Many of the sights and textures and interconnectedness that were visible as a child disappeared as I grew, became productive, and busy, and (I believed) worthy.

I experienced a reduction of eyesight and an eventual re-sharpening of that sense, with assistance from eyeglasses. I also developed a reduction of perception over time—that which I receive and interpret and accept and understand becoming filtered with the gauzy haze of habitual blindness through busyness. My life rushing past as flitting images from the back seat of a speeding car. My undetected cultural filters added another layer bending my perceptions.

My developing practices of slowing, noticing, perceiving, and feeling slowly came to enlarge, or possibly reclaim, my worldview. Another sharpening of sight emerged with the assistance of life writing, Indigenous teachings, and contemplative practices. The following exploration of stories that stopped me reveals a gradual widening of sight, and that which I perceive and sense and receive—and ultimately, can offer the web of life.

2021.10.09 – A Dwelling: Forest Immersion



My body isn't moving as quickly as it used to. I linger more, of necessity. My breathing noticeably laboured, the insistent knocking of my heart against the walls of my chest demanding recognition, a call to stop.

Today I stopped, breathed, looked, saw, breathed. Smelled the moist forest air, felt the bark of cedar against the flesh of my hand, palms delicately touching, communicating... feeling... noticing.... No longer fighting my body's messages, but settling into the rhythm it called me to.

My usual rushing pace, pushing past the shortness of breath or pounding heart, registers beauty at the periphery, the trees a blur of lush green; the occasional noticing of patterns or interesting shapes. Today the teeming life of the forest emerged, my senses alert as my body slowed. Smells, textures, movement, colours, energy exchanges became available to me as my heartbeat slowed, breathing relaxed, skin rested on bark.

"What it means to be colonized is to be dislocated from living in a traditional Earth-oriented way" (Sepie, 2021, p. 25).

My sense of time, my sense of self, my sense of place—all have been dislocated from natural rhythms, a learned fragmentation developed since childhood. I was educated out

of an interconnected way of living in relation and into adulthood my quest for productivity reinforced fragmentation through habitual busyness. My senses dulled from the cacophony of human-built distractions separating me from my surroundings, my relations, and my self. However, I am coming to recognize patterns beyond the current distractedness of modern life. Through my self-location writing, I see my disconnections mirror the disconnections from place and family within my ancestors' stories. Their lives dwelling in my cell tissue.

Time immersed in the forest, responsive to the heartbeat of my body, my senses slowly attune to the textures and smells and sights surrounding me. Re-cognition through deepening sense perception.

The eyes are a two-way portal, what is visible to me a reflection of the lenses available to me.

I have been schooled in my vision; my eyes reflecting the stories I internalized, the experiences I participated in, the understandings I have come to believe. My eyes also reflect the stories of my ancestors, stories I know and those I do not. Their stories entwine and influence my vision and expression, unconscious filters colouring my perception.

The pupils respond reflexively to stimuli—expanding to let sight in when it is safe to do so; contracting when threatened by stimuli too strong. The perception of 'safe' stimuli is honed by experience and it requires time and familiarity to adjust to new light.⁴

As I began walking (literally through the forest or on the beach, and figuratively on my doctoral journey), I began to recognize the steps I take, the direction I choose, the speed of my walk—all depend entirely on where I start and how I engage with the teachings available on my journey. At times I step aside, rush past, and ignore, devouring steps on my path. I am learning to dwell longer, re-viewing from different perspectives, pondering what I see in connection with the context surrounding it. And savour instead of devour.

⁴ As I re-read this paragraph I am struck by the similarity with students (pupils). They too respond reflexively to stimuli, expanding to let learning in when it is safe to do so and contracting when threatened by stimuli too strong. Learning that is too far beyond can be threatening and they retreat from teaching. What is perceived as safe is honed by their experiences and requires time and familiarity with teachers and others in the learning community to adjust to new learning.



Rushing past these beings of nature meant I only saw peripherally, missing salient features of who these beings are. I was unable to see beauty or sense the vibrant lushness of what I was taught are weeds. The possibilities of eyesight require dwelling, lingering, expansion, yet I am schooled in quickness, separation, categorization.

Natural kin have become my teachers, re-schooling my ability to see and to sense and to be. My awareness needed re-schooling before I could see what had always been visible had I the depth perception to perceive and receive it.

I wear glasses in order to see distance and my loss of vision was such a gradual process that I tricked my brain into believing it was normal to not be able to read a sign until I was closer. I began to assume it was normal that the face in the distance was hazy. When I finally donned my first pair of glasses I was stunned by the clarifying widening of my world. No longer confined to a normalized thirty foot enclosure, distant sights once again reintegrated into my perception and re-cognition.

The gradual deadening of a sense (both figurative and literal) appeared inevitable. It became an acceptable truth of what is visible or invisible to the human eye until I was jolted with the assistance of glasses, correctly fitted to the experience of my eyes and the shape of my head. It took some adjustment. The implement felt heavy on the bridge of my nose, and the arms of the glasses pinched behind my ear. But the glasses drew my awareness to the limitations *of my* vision where previously I assumed I experienced the limitations *of vision*. I glimpsed possibility despite the discomfort I endured in the process of relearning to see. There is no unseeing what is now visible.

I shudder to think how I appeared to others in my fuzzy perceptions. I realize I must have stared rudely, when I didn't realize I could be perceived through my lack of perception of the other. I couldn't clearly see the facial features of another person who was distanced from me, but they could see me. Gawking unaware. I could see a person, but I couldn't make out nuance or detail. I couldn't see human expression unless they were within my bubble.

Thus it is in learning to see an expanded vista of truth. I was comfortable in what I perceived, for a time. My limited view kept me safe, cocooned in soft fog, free from discomfort of recognition. My lenses are now changing, views expanding. I cannot unsee what I have learned to perceive, appreciate, and comprehend.

2018.11.28 – A Dwelling: Sight

I'm sitting in the theatre next to the helping teacher. It is her first festival, the first day she is running it alone and she has already introduced a new tone. She is sitting calmly in the audience, enjoying the performances. She just hugged one of the teachers who finished conducting and I feel tears come to my eyes. I turn to her, look her in the eyes, and say "thank you"—she understands what I'm saying and tears come to her eyes too.

We wait for the next performance to begin, the students on stage sitting erect, poised on the precipice of creation. There is a hush in the audience. The conductor watches the adjudicators to signal when they are ready. The helping teacher leans over and whispers the instruments are so beautiful—they look like art.

I look up and see brass sparkling in the glow of the lights, twinkling as the students move nervously. The clarinets, with their complicated detail twinkle with ornamental delicacy. A student in the front half turns, smiles and waves to someone in the audience. As these images swirl together I absorb the subtle movements of the entire group of students and I'm struck, awe-struck, that the children are art-full creations. Together they are a choreographed mural. Subtly moving, a balance of shimmering energy. Each unique—this one with short dark hair, that one with hair piled high, the other with long straight blond hair. They are different shapes, colours, contours, energies. They hold different instruments, some technically the same but when held by an individual they take on a different hue. It feels, for a moment, like I am in the middle of their bubble of energy; we are one.

The performance isn't the art, the people are. We are all works of art, unfolding, becoming.

This helping teacher—the organizer of this performance—embodies the pedagogy of an ensemble. Her pedagogy reflective of her world view and stance. She is not a conductor—standing apart and directing. She is an ensemble member, symbiotic in her dance with the children and teachers. Their energies entwine, each contributing to the unfolding I am blessed to witness.

I have observed many of these festivals in my role as district principal with responsibility for fine arts. This was the first time I saw beyond the obvious and truly saw and felt the connective, collective energy beneath the surface. The way this helping teacher led the festival from within—leading from within herself, leading from within the combined energy of the whole of the collective—allowed me to view from within, no longer observing as an outsider but experiencing and seeing from the vantage among.

I didn't realize sight was a subjective sense. One I can re-learn, re-member, re-cognize.



The dance of light on water, or on instruments, calls for a slowing down, a noticing. Raindrops, too, are artful creations if we can perceive them, a re-learning and re-cognizing of sight. On which sites/sights do I dwell? Which do I allow to blur?

What I notice, how I see, what I learn all rely on what is possible for me to perceive. The unlearning of habitual perception and the reorientation of sight—mindsight, heartsight, embodied sight, hindsight, I/eyesight—is more than a perception of light upon object, it is a sensing of energy, a re-cognition of what is always there, whether I notice, see, and learn or not. Eyesight refers to the intake of stimuli through my eyeballs. However, it is not an objective sense; I can only see that which I can notice and comprehend. I refer to I-sight as the shaping of that ability. The way I see and sense my inner landscape, the I, is central to how the sense of eyesight can be attuned to the stimuli around me and informs my perception. The loss of my eyesight over time paralleled my loss of “I-sight” over time, as I became habituated to the busyness and perceived expectations and cultural vision I was immersed in. The fragmented way I lived my life paralleled the fragmented shards of sight I perceived.

Filters grown from culture, expectations, busyness, habit, fear, limit perception and sensing. I am coming to understand Meyer’s (2008) teaching that our senses are culturally shaped. They can be reshaped though. Expansion emerges from attunement with a rhythm natural to me, sensing of energy within and beyond me, seeing beyond what is immediate and easily accessible.

What possibilities unfurl when sight and in-sight are no longer tied to what is immediately accessible, when I linger longer and notice the lush buds of possibility, tiny and imperceptible amidst rushing and blur?

Insight is defined as “knowledge *of* or skill *in* (a particular subject or area)” or “a mental looking *to* or *upon* something” (L. Brown, 1993, p. 1379). Its origin refers to “‘sight into’ (something else),” and “penetrating understanding into character or hidden nature” (“Insightful,” n.d., para. 2). I use *in-sight* to draw attention specifically to the sight we direct inward, as opposed to intuitive understanding of another person or thing. In-sight is seeing, perceiving, understanding my self.

In rushing, the particularities of lifeforms are rendered invisible—blurred into the background of what is easily accessible. How do I relate to my self and others when the barrier of blurriness is removed? Sight and in-sight coalesce into understanding.





Look closely—life teems within the whole.

2022.04.23 – A Dwelling: The View Over My Shoulder



*“My life becomes more when I learn where to look. There are teachings everywhere and the ones I choose to find through the power of strong choice flesh my life out, make it fuller, let me soar”
(Wagamese, 2021, p. 53).*

I walked in the farmlands close to my house this morning and I was struck by the things we notice, and the myriad sights and opportunities we miss when we focus on one view at a time.

As I walked along, something made me stop and turn around. I noticed a goose perched on a log in the slough and ripples of something that jumped out of the water. And then I happened to look up over my left shoulder and saw two large bald eagles. They soared gracefully and smoothly in circular patterns—around and around and around. I didn't see them flap their wings once; they just seemed to ride the updraft of the wind and soar along it, effortlessly and beautifully.

I would have completely missed this dance if I hadn't looked over my shoulder.

How much do I miss because of what I choose to focus on? How much am I unaware of?

Their soaring reminds me of when I get into a flow in relation with someone else and it feels effortless, generative, connected. The synchronicity when you fall into a rhythm with someone else is so powerful. In contrast, effortful

flapping can be destructive. I feel like so many of our communities are out of sync right now, flapping against each other, doing each other harm with anger, frustration, and distrust. We hurl accusations and veiled threats, expecting solutions to emerge.

A parent accuses a teacher of being mean, without curiosity about what happened; a student hits another out of frustration, without any compassion or empathy for another point of view; a teacher complains about a principal because they don't understand why a decision was made. Flapping, accusing, destroying connective threads.

And yet...

A student puts himself between two boys fighting and urges them to stop. Someone yells at him to get out of the way or he'll get hurt and he responds, "I don't care, they need to stop!" A teacher with tears rolling down her cheeks tells the staff how much she loves them; they are her family. A parent thanks me for the discipline process that made his son feel seen. Soaring, connecting, joining energy.

Two simultaneous views. What do I focus on? What do I energize with my awareness? How do I see and perceive students, and the educators and families caring for them? How do each of them (students, educators, families) see and perceive each other?

Multi-Layered Sight

One of the gifts of this doctoral journey is the transformation of my sight, expanding my worldview. I now notice the many forms of sight that unconsciously flow within my journey: the path that is only visible in hindsight, the honing of my perception through eyesight and I-sight, helping me to gain in-sight. We see outwardly of course, and we are perceived by an external gaze, but we can also learn to see inwardly, to gain in-sight.

We don't just perceive with our eyeballs. We perceive through our cultural understandings, bringing certain sights/sites into focus and leaving others inaccessible. I wasn't aware how my cultural and ancestral teachings influenced my eyesight/I-sight and the possibility of developing in-sight, except through hindsight.

Albert Marshall (as cited in Bartlett et al., 2012) speaks of "two-eyed seeing" (p. 331), which honours scientific teachings from both Western and Indigenous worldviews. Two-eyed seeing weaves the best of both worldviews, strengthening interconnectedness despite colonial fragmentation. It invites us to readjust our views by recognizing the world offers more than one sight/site for learning and living well. If we are truly interconnected, why would it make sense to negate the best possibilities in another's worldview? Doing so perpetuates fracturing and harm and negates the existence of a legitimate other. Two-eyed seeing invites us to open our eyes/I's to view the world through connectedness.

The Indigenous teachings I have been privileged to receive offer me the first steps in learning to question and re-cognize other lenses of perception, particularly through a place-based lens. I am coming to see natural beings and re-cognize them as kin, where they were previously indiscernible to me, blurred into scenery.

Sight is a multi-layered sensory and perceptual experience that is unfolding for me over time. Outward perception influences inward perception, which influences and expands what I perceive outwardly. My cultural upbringing shapes what I see and expands with other cultural teachings I open up to, which in turn shapes what I am able to perceive. Sight for me is becoming a multi-layered perceptual and sensory skill, not just received physically and culturally but also energetically.

Insight, hindsight, outer sight, two-eyed seeing, all coming together in a full-bodied perceptual sense of sight.

Connecting and Receiving

Spirit and Energy

In re-viewing my writings from the last few years, I notice how often Indigenous Elders and authors spoke of energy and spirit, a message I clearly needed and continue to need to hear many times.

“Slow down! It is showing on your faces. Slow down. Children are such pure spirit. What energy are you bringing to the classroom? Slow down!”

(Elder Fred John, Xaxli'p First Nation, Kindergarten Teachers Session, personal communication, October 12, 2016)

“Hold the sacred spark of flame alive in each young child. Every parent relies on us to see and nurture their child's flame.... Don't let your spirits get lazy. You will get sick.”

(Elder Eugene Harry, Cowichan Tribe Member, Weaving Love and Joy into the Journey of Truth and Reconciliation, personal communication, February 21, 2020)

“What emotions do you want children to feel in your presence?”

(Monique Gray Smith, Cree, Lakota, and Scottish ancestry, Keynote address for Weaving Love and Joy into the Journey of Truth and Reconciliation, personal communication, February 21, 2020)

I wrote often about energy and spirit, without ever intending to. I thought I was writing postcards about time management, organization, important tasks. Yet entwined threads of energy and spirit and emotions and heart became visible as I wove the stories together. Through these stories I learned that leading well, and living well, are not dependent on the markers of success I have been sold. Task completion, decisiveness, control, and efficiency do not signify a life lived well and are not the hallmarks of leadership I thought they were. Not only do they not make me a better person or a better leader, they can sometimes preclude me from both. Who I am, how I am, and where I am influence how I am able to enter spaces of possible connection, and even leadership.

2021.11.20 – A Dwelling: Energetic Exchanges

The degree to which we can bring our energies into the great flowing circle of energy everywhere is the precise degree to which we eliminate separation and create harmony. (Wagamese, 2019, p. 78)



*The tension was palpable as they walked in the room, carrying large shields of defensiveness and resentment in with them. I felt it creep into my chest, my breathing becoming more shallow, my mind beginning to race with what I **should** say, what they **might** say, what the outcome **should** be. Speculation runs amok.*

As they settled in their chairs, I consciously took deeper breaths, focusing on relaxing each part of my body. And then picturing love reaching from my heart to theirs. I imagined enveloping the room with care and love. And I silently repeated, “I send you love, I send you love.”

I felt the tension begin to dissipate—maybe it was only my own tension that was evaporating and that’s okay. Stress is contagious (Oberle & Schoenert-Reichl, 2016) so why wouldn’t calm also be?

After briefly discussing the behaviour that led to this meeting, I asked the student what she likes to do, what her dreams are for the future. She looked

surprised and offered short answers, looking down at the table. I asked what her gifts are and she folded in on herself. I waited, then explained it's so important we recognize our gifts. It's not bragging; it's being self-aware. We all have gifts to offer. She shrugged, looked down, squirmed in her chair. "I don't know." Silence. I wait. The vice principal, who has (thankfully) allowed space without filling it with recriminations softly said he has noticed she is very articulate. He expressed how much he appreciates her willingness to engage in conversation. Immediately her mom says how great she is with animals. She volunteers at a local animal shelter and loves it and the animals love her. I tell her I don't know her well, but I have seen she has a strong sense of fairness and commitment to what matters to her.

She looks at us in turn, her body still slumped but her eyes questioning, searching for our honesty. I ask her again, what are your gifts? She rolls her eyes but with a smile this time, and repeats what we've said. We all smile and I ask her again. I explain what she believes is really important; it's important she say the words. Eventually she sits up straighter and speaks clearly. I could tell when she talked about being good with animals, that was the one she actually believed. Her voice was louder, the words didn't end with a question mark. She owned that gift. It's a start.

I suggest that I see someone who perhaps lacks confidence and is doing things to impress people that have not earned the privilege of her friendship or her trust. Her mom cries, "Yes! That's exactly right." Mom's body softens. Her daughter is not 'bad,' and she is not judged as a mother.

Our conversation continues and the student's voice is calm, her body is no longer curled in on itself with defensiveness and self-protection. Both her and her mom thank us and leave with different energy.

Afterwards, the Vice Principal told me that was his first discipline review meeting and he was grateful to witness how it unfolded. He realized it's important to leave space for the child to think and respond; he felt like stepping into the silences at times but decided to just watch what happened as I sat in silence waiting. Eventually she shared.

Discipline meetings are part of the system, but I can shift them, even a little. Instead of control and consequence they can be about love and compassion. Still with boundaries and accountability, but within a space of care. Leaving space for growing. Even discipline meetings can become generative spaces.

Part of my responsibility as assistant superintendent is something called District Discipline Review Committee meetings which can be as daunting and official as they sound. Students who have been suspended for serious incidents (usually involving safety) must attend one of these meetings with their parents or guardians. I chair the meeting, and there is a rather intimidating panel including a Director of Instruction, two or three principals from other schools, and the school principal or vice principal who referred the student. I was confused by what was expected of me in these settings. I felt the pressure to be in charge, but I felt the pull to respond to the beating heart in front of me—the spirit of the child who had lost their path. Behaviour is a form of communication. How can we create space to be curious and engage in dialogue with children to hear what they are communicating? What practices nourish engagement and connection? Which sever it?

Each of us holds energy; it's what animates us and moves us. I consciously tried to shift the energy I shared in the behaviour meeting described above. Instead of engaging in defensiveness, justification, control, I relaxed my body and imagined love flowing from my heart to theirs. No one knew I was doing that, but the energy in the room definitely shifted.

Where does our energy field end? Having felt the energy of an angry stare from another, I know energy doesn't end at our skin. Having experienced sitting next to a total stranger and feeling their stress pulse off them like a blinking neon sign, or, alternatively, sitting next to someone and feeling immediately calmer, I know energy reaches across space. Their energy reaches past their skin and is received through my own. Energy is not contained within our physical form. Our physical form is embedded in an energetic field.

Other beings also transmit energy. Dogs and cats are chosen as pets because of the way they make their owners feel. Horses are said to feel your energy and won't respond to you if your energy is negative. Many animals are used in human therapy—perhaps because their energy is calming, and that energy is contagious.

What about other living beings? I regularly walk in the forests of Ucluelet, surrounded by cedar, spruce, fir, hemlock, ferns, mosses, and so many other beings. Walking enveloped in the cool shade of their branches is calming and meditative, but it isn't just the pretty surrounding. If I am present with no earbuds or chatter or whirling thoughts, I

feel the energy of the trees and other living beings around me. In Japan, some people practise 'forest bathing' or Shinrin Yoku and studies have shown significant health benefits. Park et al. (2010) found those who participated in one day of forest bathing had lower cortisol, pulse rate, and blood pressure than counterparts who did not.

Are the benefits occurring because of the pretty scenery or the smells of the forest? Or is there an energy present that reaches us if we're open? It's hard to imagine the same effects would occur if participants were in a room that looked like a forest with replicated fake smells.

I once attended a Mindfulness for Leaders conference in Washington, DC, and one of the workshops I attended was called "Embodied Leadership." The facilitator, Wendy Palmer, had us work with a partner and stand facing each other, our right shoulder in line with our partner's. I was supposed to focus on my partner's shoulder and try to get past her, while she was supposed to stop me (if memory serves, by simply putting her hand on my shoulder with intention). I could not move past, and neither could anyone else in the room. The next time we were told to look at the wall ahead of us and visualize a triangle of energy leading to a point on the wall, which represented a goal we each identified. This time, when we each moved towards this envisioned goal, not one person could be stopped. Nothing physically changed about our stances or our muscles, but our focus and our energy shifted. And everything changed.

Waves of learning emerge from many of the stop moments I wrote about over the last 7 years, including the following one. I often wrote about time and my struggle to get ahead of it but I now understand I wasn't searching for time management skills, like I thought I was. I was urging myself to reach for my spirit but I wasn't ready or able to listen. My obsession with not wasting time was actually a plea to be more present. Energy is entwined with time and space. Rushing through time squeezes out possibility, leaving no space for life-giving energy; only frenetic energy that tends to separate can flourish in a vacuum of time and space.

2016.10.23 – A Dwelling: Space in Time

Time. Wasting it. Spending it. Sharing it. Saving it, needing it, giving it. So many human needs are entwined with the cultural concept of time. Somehow the moments of our lives have become synonymous with economic values, and a framework for living is described in what is spent, saved, needed, or wasted.

We had the Kindergarten and Grade 1 teachers for a day and there were learning intentions to fulfill. We wanted to support their work with young Indigenous children. These teachers have students who attended the summer program we run in partnership with an Indigenous preschool. The program is a nurturing, joyful, inclusive, loving place to be. Lots of shared learning (45 children painting a mural together!), play, community building, cultural learning opportunities. No judgment of families who cannot get their children there on time or who miss days in the two-week period—just acceptance and joy they came.

So now we have brought the teachers together who will work with these children throughout the year, to help them understand and support their Indigenous learners. To make some shifts to ensure the children and their families feel seen.

And yet. We started with our same old framework. Look at the curriculum—the big ideas, the curricular competencies, the First Peoples Principles of Learning. Should we spend time planning units or lessons? Should we go outside? Who should speak first? How can we make time for the Elders to speak, and what will they talk about?

Do you see how ridiculous we were?

The manager of the Indigenous preschool was part of our planning team and she was adamant that we need to have a welcoming circle. But the rest of us worried about time. We settled on an opening question for the circle: “What brought you here today?” Someone suggested it should be written on post-its and put on the wall to save time, or if it had to be a circle of sharing then it should be small groups so it would be quicker. With the manager’s insistence, we decided to stick with the full circle. I allotted 20 minutes to the over-stuffed agenda and it took an hour and a half to complete the circle. I was moved by what people shared, but a voice in my head kept noticing the time. Spending time, saving time, sharing time. I was worried participants would get bored or think we were wasting time.

All the information in the PowerPoint that was scheduled to follow the circle time was covered by the wisdom already in the circle. The slides were superfluous, and would have been a waste of time.

Linear paradigms, ticking clock. Circular paradigms, opening space. Seen. Felt. Heard.

Elder Fred John (Xaxli'p First Nation) who opened the day looked at each of us and said,

"Slow down! It is showing on your faces. Slow down. Children are such pure spirit. What energy are you bringing to the classroom? Slow down!"

Did teachers think it was a good use of time? I hope so. But I can't control the outcome. If a seed was planted for one person to slow down and be more present, then it's worth it.



Actually, there was one person.

The seed is gingerly taking root.

Around the time I wrote the above reflection, I was taking a graduate class, participating in the Simon Fraser University (SFU) President's Dream Colloquium on Indigenous teachings, working full-time as a District Principal, and taking over an early learning management position because of delays in hiring a replacement for the person who recently retired. Instead of recognizing this was simply unattainable, I strove to complete every task and ignore my need for rest or connection. It's easy to lose sight of what's important when you become completely disconnected from your body and your spirit. How can you truly see others when you can't see yourself?

Manulani Meyer (as cited in an interview on Aloha Authentic, 2018) says, "It is a discipline.... When you really learn to love, you've gotta start with yourself. And loving yourself is radical.... And when you do that well, we heal, and when we heal we heal the world." I believe the opposite is also true. When we don't love ourselves, we don't heal, and when we don't heal, we can harm.

The first e-postcard I wrote for Dr. Fels's graduate class at that time was a pivotal 'stop moment' (Applebaum, 1995; Fels, 2012) that pulled on my sleeve, arrested me, shook me, and highlighted how distraction allows harm to slither into the spaces between us, wedging out connection and care.

2016.09.26 – A Dwelling: Wish you were (I was) here....

And yet, how often have I heard complaints (my own included) about the demands of the curriculum, the lack of time, the requirements of the system... a blinding of responsibilities that marks us. We perceive ourselves as captives of an educational system constructed by others, reinforced by our own labours and tasks, as we comply with institutional demands, seemingly impotent, no matter how loud we voice our protest. Too often we fail to attend to those moments that may restore us, and [others], to who we truly are. We succumb and thus are culpable, complicit. (Fels, 2010, p. 9)



I leave later than I should. I said I would be there between 4:00 and 4:30. There won't be much to set up for the parent evening, but as the school district representative I want to be there to help the agency members get ready. I leave my office at 4:15 and drive faster than I should to arrive at the school just after 4:30. The StrongStart educator is still in her classroom. She graciously provides materials for the childminder who will usurp her space for the evening. Gracious even though she didn't know we would be using her room. I forgot to tell her.

She is sitting down, with her phone in her hand and she looks up at me when I enter. I carry a stack of papers to give her. They are Punjabi surveys for the Ministry's review of StrongStart. I'm late and in a hurry to leave them for her and rush down the hall to make sure the library is ready. People will start arriving soon.

She smiles, a wobbly smile. She tells me a parent just called her. The parent's five-year-old daughter, one of the children who attended the StrongStart centre, has died. She had cancer. She returned to StrongStart in the spring and everyone was hopeful. Now gone.

I wish I could say I stopped everything. That I sat down and comforted her. Hugged her. Kept the Punjabi surveys in my hand and brought them in another time. Life matters. People matter. Stop and pay attention.

Instead, I stood in the middle of the room and said I was sorry. I said how sad that was, how awful. I was awkward. And rushing. Eventually she stood and I launched into my explanation of the Ministry review and the Punjabi survey. She smiled and tears filled her eyes. She apologized, said she was having trouble concentrating. I hugged her and said I was sorry and left the Punjabi surveys for her. I rushed out the door and down the hall.

Someone forgot to bring a dongle for the presenter's laptop.

This stop moment certainly stopped me. I have returned to it many times, held it, turned away from it, tried to forget it, refute it. But it is mine; it is, at least in part, me. It is also a gift—a catalyst for possibility and change. This pull to stop is my teacher, and “like monsters in fairy tales, they wouldn’t whisper to us or stop us in our tracks if they didn’t have something to tell us” (Jardine, 2006, p. 271). I also recognize the distance I had travelled from my self, from the place and stance I feel at home: the quiet stillness, the solidity and sturdiness of tree trunks, the slow and steady rings of growth, and tethered stretching of branches. I had become untethered, shape-shifting to perform more tasks and fulfill more demands. I was bouncing on a sea of unpredictability, a destructive response to my environment and desire to please.

Heidegger (as cited in Moules et al., 2015) suggests hermeneutics is “also a quest for *self-understanding*” (p. 25), which “involves seeing what is possible in a situation *for me*, what concrete possibilities are available for action, given who I am, given where I am, and given what I am encountering in [a] particular situation” (p. 26). I have come to understand that living a disconnected life, running to keep up and striving to meet external expectations (real or perceived) leaves me with narrowed possibilities, unable to find my self, never mind start with my self and recognize the possibilities available *for me* in a given situation. When I arrive physically in a space but my mind and heart and awareness are elsewhere it is not possible to respond with presence, or awareness, or grace, or love.

I thought of myself as a kind and caring person. Yet I had unconsciously created or participated in an ecosystem that did not allow me the time to break from the tasks of activities and programs I had created in order to be present for the actual people those programs were supposed to support. Activities and programs I was proud of creating, lined up and counted as conquered soldiers—look at all I’ve accomplished! I imposed my will to get things done, unconsciously leaving debris and lost opportunities in my wake.

*“We need to ask ourselves, what am I practising?
Is it the practise of being busy?”*

*(Hanilee Aggotstader, Contemplative Practices Training, personal
communication, February 18, 2022)*

Amid this maelstrom of over-reach, another incident occurred that underscored the importance of self-care, and the need to love yourself first, and heal yourself first, as Manulani Meyer (as cited in an interview on Aloha Authentic, 2018) spoke of. All these ideas are interconnected—self-awareness, self-love, presence, spirit, energy—words that converge upon ancient ideas that need re-membering and embodying. We often hear how important it is to put your own oxygen mask on first, and I have said that to others, but paid little heed myself as I sprinted and balanced and danced on past my threshold.

“We can’t meet others more deeply than we’re able to meet ourselves.”

*(Mette Boell, Contemplative Practices Training,
personal communication, January 27, 2022)*

I participated in the perpetuation of mental models that value achievement over presence, doing over being, expecting accomplishment to lead somewhere and believing the destination is what we desire. However, it is the process, not the destination, that lives unfold within.

I hired a wonderful person to assume a management position overseeing a department of about 20 people. She was enthusiastic, knowledgeable, and ready to jump in and get things done. And I let her, without taking the time to carefully support the transition. She was replacing someone the members of the department looked to as a much-loved grandma. They trusted her, and respected her, and were mourning her retirement. I was so relieved to remove something big from my spinning plates, I did not consider the effect hiring someone with a completely different personality would have on them and I neglected to support the new manager in navigating and building relationships with each member of the department, many of whom were grieving.

Not long after she began, I got very sick. I never miss more than a day or two of work, but I could not go to work for almost three weeks, suffering from stomach flu, exhaustion, and a torn rotator cuff from a distracted fall. I wouldn’t stop, so my body did. When I returned to work, I heard from some members of the department who were unhappy. I was finally able to physically and emotionally show up and I’m so grateful for the spirit of the manager, who willingly stepped in with me.

2018.02.20 – A Dwelling: Showing Up

After much discussion and reflection, we agreed we would meet in two smaller, more intimate groups instead of the large meeting that we usually hold. We needed to slow down and take care, in our deeds, our language, and our energy. We began in a circle, many people entering it warily, uncertainty visible in their stance. I opened the meeting and began by apologizing for letting them down and letting the manager down by not supporting her as she began this new work, by not bridging the transition more carefully with all of them. I knew how different the two managers were and I should have been more care-full recognizing this may be difficult for them and for her. I allowed myself to get too distracted and wasn't present for them. Then the manager spoke and without ego or defensiveness she too apologized. She explained her intention behind some of her actions and admitted the mistakes she made. The energy in the circle shifted palpably. Gone was the wariness, replaced by care. When others spoke they were forgiving, extending understanding, willing to try again.

This meeting was not a list of to-do's, or pro-d to absorb. It was a genuine coming together, a meeting of hearts, in a circle of human beings. This written reflection doesn't capture the connection I felt as I looked sincerely into each of their eyes and asked their forgiveness. Or the growth for me (and I believe for the manager) as we offered presence and heart and received it in return.



“Leaders of every sort, in every walk of life, carry great responsibility. And our first responsibility is to do no harm” (Palmer, 2007, p. xxxiv).

Self-care is imperative in order to show up in relational spaces in a good way; to be present to the energy and heart of another with our best selves. And yet it can still feel selfish. The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines selfish as “concerned excessively or exclusively with oneself: seeking or concentrating on one’s own advantage, pleasure, or well-being without regard for others” (“Selfish,” n.d., para. 1). The self-care I am speaking of is not without regard for others, it is entirely *with* regard for the other. Others are central to the need for self-care, the through thread of well-being that allows heart connection.

When we heal ourselves, we can heal the world; when we don’t, we can harm. My quest to complete everything could have cost a dear and talented person joy in her job. It could have caused caring educators to be unhappy in theirs. A department of 20 people and the children and families they touch could have all been affected because I was too busy to take care of myself and too exhausted to support them. Self-care is a radical act, and a selfless one. Striving, running, accomplishing is an easy well-worn groove—one that is ultimately selfish. I have since learned self-care is a continual journey, needing constant re-(k)newal and re-minding, tending and in-tending. Re-(k)newal indicates something known and forgotten and needs to be ‘re-known’—I re-knew, knew again, through the process of renewal. It is easy in our culture to slip back into always doing, and forget about ways of being.

It is not good enough, [Arendt] argues, that we busy ourselves with time-consuming, repetitive tasks, or engage in work that while productive only maintains what already is. She calls for thoughtful action that requires that we look again at that which occupies us, and consider the consequences of such action. How can we, she asks, unthinkingly engage in tasks of labour and work that support bureaucracies, governments or industries without considering the consequences of our engagement; why do we engage in tasks that dull our senses or sense of responsibility to the wounding of others and ourselves, to our community (global and local), to our environment? Arendt asks of us critical and insightful acts of imagination that attend to the consequences of our actions in relationship with and in the presence of others. To take action is to be responsible to that which we may have not yet imagined. (Fels, 2010, p. 6)

The Spirits of Educators

Those of us raising our children have to remember how important it is to nurture our own inner lives so that we can offer our children the kinds of support they need to develop their inner strength. (Lantieri, 2008, p. 7)

Richard Wagamese (2019) describes being overwhelmed in trying to evoke the positive change he wanted to see in the world. The enormity of the changes needed left him feeling hopeless, not knowing where to start. One of his teachers used a stone thrown in water as a metaphor for living life, and for changing the world, one ripple at a time.

“This is how you change the world,” she said, and tossed the pebble....
“The smallest circles first,” she said. “The smallest circles first” (p. 80).

Do what is doable right now. What small circles will I attend to first in this time of chaos and change? Myself first—emotional, spiritual, and physical health. Then try to support the emotional, spiritual, and physical health of others, and help them do the same. Those are the first circles. Be well and walk with care, in relation.

2019.05.18 – A Dwelling: Kindergarten Transitions

When the teachers entered the space, they did so with a slight hesitancy. They were polite but I could feel an edge to their energy. We met in unfamiliar territory—a local community agency office instead of the school district space. We were starting something new and different together and I wondered if the teachers were worried about what would be asked of them.

To begin dialogue we used the iceberg strategy that I learned from Compassionate Systems Leadership. It is a tool to look below the surface of easily seen events or symptoms to understand the patterns and trends, the systems and processes, and mindsets and cultural artifacts that ultimately create the events and symptoms. When we focus only on events/symptoms, we miss the hidden mindsets, structures, and systems that lead to what is visible. I used a cold as an example. What are the symptoms you feel/see/hear? What patterns and trends do you notice with respect to the colds you get? What structures or processes are in place to support or hinder your recovery? What personal beliefs and behaviours could lead to colds, or protect from colds?

That's when the conversation really began. They expressed feeling guilty about taking a day off from work because the kids need them, they feel pressure from parents to have a 'Pinterest perfect' classroom, and they feel responsible for keeping all the balls in the air.

Later we debriefed the icebergs they completed in small groups about kindergarten transition, and the negative tone and resentment towards parents who the teachers perceived were not supporting their work shocked me. I wasn't sure how to respond in a way that would keep the dialogue open yet offer other perspectives. I asked what support might look like. They responded support meant taking the teacher's advice, reading with their child every night, coming on fieldtrips. They seemed unable to empathize or understand the situations their refugee families were facing, for example, or even ascribe parents' reluctance to engage with the teacher as a sign of respect and trust.

"Parents need to be more involved. I can't even book fieldtrips because I don't get enough parent helpers."

"Could you just pick up a book and read with your child once in a while?"

"It's almost like, they just get their kids to the door and say here, you do it now."

We can't give from an empty well. Teachers who are overwhelmed, worried about doing enough or doing more, never feeling like they keep up, or that they need to reach a level of perfection, can't extend an open hand to someone else. They feel judged by parents and they judge parents in return. And the system is not designed for parents and teachers to get to know each other. Add a language barrier on top of that and there is little

chance for joining forces and holding each other up in their joint mission to support children.



They feel twisted and battered. And worried about what else we would ask them to do.

But they listened. There was something about the space that allowed them to hear.

The head of the refugee support centre spoke about the families they support and the trauma those families face. She explained some are not literate in their own language, never mind reading a book in English. It helped that she hadn't heard the earlier conversation. She was offering something fresh instead of refuting what they had shared. They heard another community member talk about what it is like to have a child with multiple diagnoses and feeling judged by educators and other parents. They heard a third, the manager of early years programming at the community agency, talk about her fear of sending her daughter to kindergarten and feeling blocked from entering that space, unaware what was happening behind the closed and forbidden door. The teachers heard.

By the end of the day, when we created an aspirational iceberg, something had clearly shifted. There was an open energy in the room. The edge had disappeared. When I asked what they would like to see as children enter the school system, they said they wanted to see smiles, excitement to be there, a sense of community and belonging, curiosity and excitement to learn. And the biggest truth? This is for all of us, children, parents, and educators.

I asked the teachers for feedback about the session, but didn't send the link until about three weeks later. I beat myself up for not doing it sooner, but it turns out it was better to wait. After all that time, they still remembered. When I asked what their takeaways were, they said,

"I am learning to be more relaxed with how much I get accomplished in class. My expectations of myself have been too high."

"I am not alone in feeling overwhelmed by all the things that 'need' to get done."

"It was very reassuring to know that there is no shame in not knowing and acknowledging that fact."

"It was nice to hear parents' voices about their concerns, questions, and goals for their children. It was a great reminder before Ready Set Learn, Play Into K, and Welcome to Kindergarten activities to help answer some of those questions for parents as well as helping to feel empathetic and understanding towards new families into the school system.

We are going to try asking parents to share their 'voices' on chart paper. Hopefully this will help parents feel valued and that we care about their opinions/concerns/questions...."

"This session has made me more understanding and accommodating to the needs of the kids and their families. I am trying to figure out ways to fulfill the 'symptoms' we wanted to see in our aspirational iceberg."

This shift happened because of connected hands of support—district and community—holding teachers up so they can see another view. Left alone, possibility is harder to perceive as they slouch under the weight of perceived or real expectations. We all do.

The Spirits of Children

District discipline review committee (DRC) meetings where we decide next steps for students who have been suspended for serious behavioural incidents have offered a surprisingly emergent portal of learning and possibility. They spotlight the devastation of missed opportunity and invite lingering in the aperture of hope in a space of possible becoming.

I have struggled to make a difference within these meetings; the structure didn't appear to allow for meaningful exchange, connection, or understanding in an hour long, high-stakes meeting. I started asking the students about their dreams: Do they want to graduate? Do they have any goals for post-graduation? The number of times those questions are met with blank stares enflames my feelings of inadequacy. I usually follow up with what they like to do in their free time: Do they like animals, sports, video games, whatever. With one student I resorted to food she likes to eat and her favourite colour. Nothing. She could tell me nothing about who she is, what she wants, what she doesn't want. An apparent lack of self-awareness makes it difficult to understand the role they play in the circumstances of their lives. Things happen randomly to them; they have no agency. No awareness of their emotions, or preferences, or feelings or impact on the world around them.

When someone tells me they have a goal, I silently jump with elation and relief. One student sat morosely during our discussion, parroting what he knew we wanted to hear until I asked him what he wants to do when he graduates and he looked me in the eye, leaned forward, spoke clearly. He wants to be a mechanic. He plans to get a job at McDonald's next year so he can buy a car (he even gave the specific model and year and proudly showed a picture on his phone). He's going to save money so he can slowly buy parts and rebuild the car so when he gets his license, he'll have a car to drive. Relief. He's not lost. I want to hold on to his dream with him, although I hardly know him.

These observations occurred before a global pandemic, online learning, mask wearing, social distancing, systemically induced fear. Then, in spring 2021, we received the results of the Middle Years Development Index Survey (MDI; Human Early Learning Partnership, n.d.), and this student self-report survey indicated a large number of our Grades 5 and 8 students are struggling. Social and emotional development indicators

revealed approximately one-third of Grade 8 students experience worry and anxiety (33%), have low self-awareness (27%), and struggle with perseverance (37%). When measures of optimism, happiness, self-esteem, absence of sadness, and general health are combined, approximately half of respondents emerge as having low well-being (52% in Grade 8 and 45% in Grade 5). Sixty percent of Grade 8 students and 30% of Grade 5 students did not identify an important adult in their school they feel connected to, while 34% of Grade 8 and 22% of Grade 5 students report a low sense of belonging in their schools.

These results parallel an increase in dangerous behaviours among students, many of whom were not struggling behaviourally or socially prior to the pandemic. Both suspensions and DRC meetings increased significantly once we returned to in-person classes. It was as though we had all lost the ability to connect and communicate and care.

What is happening to the spirits of our children? I know these outcomes are not because adults in schools don't care. But the best of intentions do not always lead to the results we desire. Noddings (2005) explains in order for the circle of care to be complete, students need to recognize and respond to a teacher's caring acts. Otherwise, the circle is incomplete and the act cannot be characterized as caring, despite the best intentions of the carer. This can lead to teachers and support staff becoming "burned out by the constant outward flow of energy that is not replenished by the response of the cared-for" (Noddings, 2005, p. 17). Conversely, Goldstein and Lake (2000) found teachers' job satisfaction increased when they have caring relationships with their students. Relationships are reciprocal and we respond in kind to the acts we receive from others. During a pandemic, those acts were stunted.

We physically distanced from each other, students were in limited sized cohorts to reduce the number of people they were exposed to, and we wore facial masks to keep our germs to ourselves and protect us from the life breath of another. Would that person in the grocery store be the one to give me a disease that could kill me or give me the germs I pass on to a loved one? We learned to eye each other with suspicion and we stopped seeing and giving smiles behind the anonymity of masks. A global narrative reinforced distrust of the very breath that gives us life and naturally led to tentacles of

fear seeping into our pores and grabbing tenacious hold, not easily pried away by the introduction of different rules.

The stresses created by living in a global pandemic have far-reaching effects that we are only beginning to recognize. Even for those (like myself) whose income was not affected and whose family was not seriously infected with COVID, the unrelenting weight of uncertainty and low-level fear, the lack of control, and the constant change and readjustment of our daily lives generated stress that sits in the background and accumulates until the crush becomes too much.

Where does this stress go? It depends on how aware and mindful we can be while experiencing it. In a British Columbia Schools Superintendents Association (BCSSA) webinar, Kim Barthel (personal communication, May 20, 2021) explained, if we can feel our feelings for 90 seconds the chemistry moves. However, if you suppress unwelcome emotions, they can stay in your body for decades.

Oberle and Schonert-Reichl (2016) studied the link between classroom teacher burnout and cortisol levels in elementary school students. They found significant differences in students' levels of morning cortisol depending on their classroom. In classrooms with higher teacher burnout, the cortisol levels were higher for students, indicating the possibility of a 'stress contagion.'

Is the teacher becoming stressed because the students are stressed, or are the students 'catching' the teachers' stress? Does it matter if the results are the same? The reciprocal nature of relationships and the interconnected reality that science is beginning to explain, mean that our emotions are not ours alone. None of us can control the energy another person brings to our encounter, but we need to recognize and be responsible for our own. None of us do our best heart-centered work when we are not well, or when we are surrounded by others who are stress-filled.

As a new teacher, I had days when I felt disorganized and unprepared for the day ahead. It seemed to me the students coincidentally decided to display their most challenging behaviours on those days I was least equipped to deal with it. It was some time before I realized they were responding to the energy I presented them with.

“What emotions do you want children to feel in your presence?”

(Monique Gray Smith, Keynote Speaker, Weaving Love and Joy into the Journey of Truth and Reconciliation, personal communication, February 21, 2020)

And how will I enter space with children to ensure the likelihood of them feeling those emotions in my presence?

Self-care, and the skill and knowledge required to care for ourselves effectively, are not frivolous, or fluffy, or selfish. Our collective well-being relies on individual self-care and self-compassion. Self-care can be difficult when we’re existing in a spiraling climate of stress. Oberle and Schonert-Reichl (2016) suggest, “It is conceivable that teachers’ occupational stress, emotional exhaustion, and feelings of depersonalization from students affect their ways of interacting with students, and contribute to less positive and more stressful classroom environments” (p. 31), which in turn creates more stress and burnout—a downward spiral. Further, “prolonged exposure to stress [for teachers and students] ... [can] affect the metabolic, immune, and nervous systems, and pose a significant risk to health outcomes” (Miller et al., 2007, as cited in Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016, p. 31).

Lantieri (2008) defines stress as “the body’s reaction to any situation that we perceive as an emergency. It is not the events or circumstances themselves. It is our bodies’ reaction to them” (p. 34).

Nagoski and Nagoski (2020) differentiate between stressors and stress and explain stress has a cycle that needs to be moved through before it will leave our bodies. They suggest various ways we can routinely let our bodies know we are safe (exercise, meditation, hugs, laughter, etc.). If we don’t move through the stress cycle, regardless of whether the stressor is removed or not, stress accumulates in our bodies causing health risks.

Sherri Mitchell (2018) similarly shares that “energy and emotion have a natural flow. Every thread of energy and every bit of emotion that rises has a distinct and predictable life cycle; it emerges from source, follows a patterned circuit, and then returns to source” (p. 68). We need to move through the cycle of emotions (including stress) so we do not become stuck in them.

The myth of the heroic leader, or the good teacher, or the loving parent is that we keep soldiering on, overcoming obstacles, burning through exhaustion, cutting ourselves off from our selves.

When we don't heal, we can harm.

Visible Effects

2020.02.23 – A Dwelling: Transitions, Recognition

Transitions can be an unstable time for students, particularly transitioning from elementary to middle and from middle to secondary school. I've heard considerable anecdotal reports of 'losing' students during these times (either emotionally or physically) and I'm curious to learn more.

I invite staff who work with children and youth and who are interested in discussing transitions to come and share their concerns and ideas. Fourteen people sign up for this particular meeting; six people arrive. An experienced teacher stretches his legs out, leans back, and watches. He doesn't say anything until about halfway through the discussion. Someone suggests putting names of every incoming student on charts at a staff meeting and identifying who is not connected to a staff member. Teachers could then commit to connecting with those who are not already connected. He responds, 'That just won't work. We tried it at another school and within three months it died because teachers didn't buy in. They've already got way too much to do and now you're asking them to take on extra kids? It'll never work.'

His younger colleague adds to the discussion. 'Kids should be failed in elementary and middle schools. It's a shock to them when they come here and can't do the work and they actually fail. I know there's research that maybe it's not the best thing for all kids, but still. How are we supposed to teach them?'

Two men speak.

*Why don't we fail kids sooner,
they just aren't ready for our academic courses,*

they say.

It's not fair to the students,

they say.

*How are they supposed to feel when they realize
they can't do what others are doing?
They look like morons,*

they say.

I squirm, anxious and frustrated with my inability to say something that will erase their harmful message. I can't soothe their hurt or their feelings of inadequacy. In my more generous moments, that's how I choose to perceive them.

In other moments, I want to get rid of them, the way they want to get rid of students who don't measure up to their ideals, who make their jobs harder.



Parallel judgments.

*I reluctantly recognize myself
in their words and feel the
drain of shattered hope.*

*They make my job harder and
self-awareness painful.*

The next morning I sit in an early learning conference, surrounded by former co-workers and friends, community partners, and new colleagues. I am cushioned in the cocoon of friendship. Elder Eugene Harry opens the session.

One man sings and speaks.

*Every child is a gift,
he says.*

*Hold the sacred spark of flame alive in each young child.
Every parent relies on us to see and nurture their child's flame,
he says.*

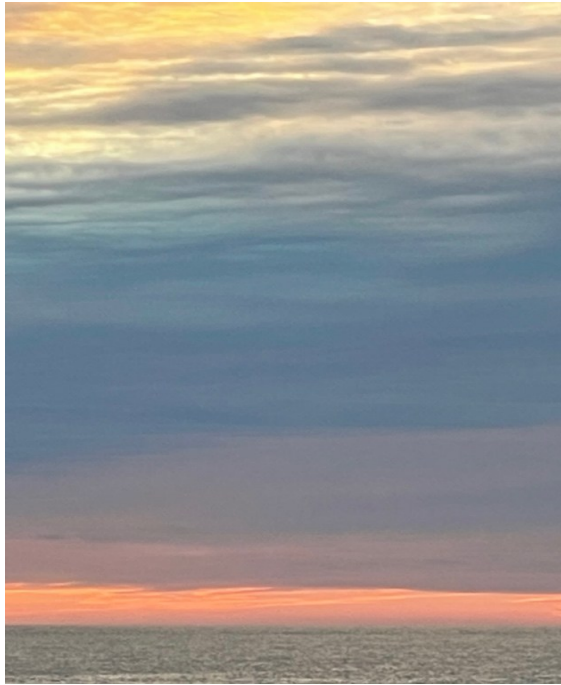
My heart beats faster with his energy. More than 250 people stand silently, arms upturned. He breathes hope and joy into the space.

He circles the room, singing, drumming, speaking, enfolding us in his positive energy and heartfelt messages. I begin to believe I know what it means to start in a good way.

Moving to the centre of the room, he speaks of wellness, reminding us to nurture our mind, body, spirit—our own centres.

*Don't let your spirits get lazy,
he says.*

You will get sick.



*I come alive with
the forward pull of
possibility.*

*Juxtapositions. I
can almost believe
yesterday's
conversation didn't
happen.*

Monique Gray-Smith stands to begin her keynote address.

A woman speaks.

*Someone spoke her future into possibility for her,
before she even recognized the words could reflect her future,
she says.*

*The students you are helping to raise up will be entering a system,
how are we preparing them for that?
she asks.*

They need to know who they are, what their gifts are.

*Their roots need to go deep,
she says.*

*So when others' words knock them over, they can get back up.
Love is medicine,
she says.*

*Love is medicine,
she says.*

We all need to take this up in our own way. How does it become central to our work? I know when I don't take care of myself I feel more vulnerable. If I don't sleep, I wake up vulnerable. Teachers with feelings of inadequacy, are vulnerable. How can I support them so they can support children?

*Everyone deserves to be treated with love and dignity and respect,
she says.*

*What emotions do you want children to feel in your presence?
she asks.*

*What emotions do I want colleagues, parents, educators, to feel in my
presence?
I wonder.*

Parallels continue.

Ahh, this is hard. I see the flame in every child. Sometimes it takes a little time to breathe possibility into their flame, but I always find their spark. With adults my eyes are sometimes dulled. The Indigenous worldviews offered by the speakers at the conference illuminate understandings of children and being human that starkly contrast with that expressed in the transitions meeting the day before. The emotions I want others to feel in my presence are not dependent on their worldviews, but on mine.

A middle school teacher tells his principal to tell his superiors it's him or the kid. If he comes back here, I'm out. I'll not have that kid back in my class.

A math teacher tells the principal she has to get this student with special needs out of her class. He's not doing anything and this class wasn't intended for kids with special needs.

A principal asks about a student with a behaviour designation who wants to register. Do I have to take him? We already have so many.

Where should these children go? Who is responsible, if not us? What emotions will they feel in our presence?

Creating Webs of Support

Our public education system needs to influence behaviour by undertaking to teach our children... how to speak respectfully to, and about, each other.... (Truth and Reconciliation Commission Background & Elaboration, as cited in Directions Evidence and Policy Research Group, 2016, p. 5)

It starts with all the adults who work to support children. How do we speak about, to, with, and for, each other? I'm reminded of the way I speak about those I disagree with. I'm reminded of the judgment and dismissal I feel when others do not reflect back my ideals. I'm reminded of the silence, when words simmer but remain unspoken.

Sheri Mitchell (as cited in Lincoln Theatre, 2018) advises,

What we speak creates form. We live in a vibrational universe. When we talk about the web of life...what we're talking about is quantum entanglement. Because we understood the way that we are connected in an energetic and spiritual way.... The way that we speak creates vibrations that go out and connect with other organized matter and create new forms within the reality that we're living together.

What webs do I create with the words I release?

2021.04.28 – A Dwelling: Waterfall Absorption

Three zoom meetings tumbled over each other this afternoon, a waterfall of time, concern, hope, and frustration.



The metaphor of a waterfall is an apt description of my work world. The rushing onslaught of endless drops, sometimes a trickle, sometimes a splash, sometimes sweeping me away over a cliff while I scrape desperately at something solid to grab on to. Avoidance is useless—standing under or beside or within a waterfall means you will be touched in some way. The residue of encounter present in the moisture that clings to me. Some moisture, or experience, being absorbed into my being; others evaporating into the atmosphere, invisible, coalescing to hopefully be taken up by another.

This flow began with a principal, a counsellor, and a police officer sharing worry about two students entwined in conflict. I heard their expressions of genuine care for each boy's personal safety. I saw each adult's vulnerability and uncertainty and love. Both boys speak of taking their own lives, both have a history of trauma. Both their families exist in crisis and all three adults pour hours and hearts into working with the boys and their families, worrying about them, trying their best to support them. I express, through the filter of the zoom screen, my gratitude for their actions and their hearts; I inquire about unmentioned steps; I offer an idea. I feel inadequate and worried and inspired as I log out to join the next wave.

Deep breath. Log in. This time I enter a care team meeting for a student who has displayed worrisome behaviours since arriving at the school a few

months ago. He disrupts classes, brings alcohol and marijuana to school, and fights and threatens students. He is the 'badass' on campus and has been suspended numerous times. The suspensions only solidify his reputation. The school team has expired their toolkit.

I join from behind a screen, as does his community-based counsellor. Everyone else meets in person—the school counsellor, various support workers, vice principal, the student's parents. The school counsellor opens with a land acknowledgement then launches into a list of the struggles and concerns and what the school has done or will do: cognitive testing, move him to the school's alt program for one class, work on a behaviour support plan, et cetera. She tells the father not to worry because he'll have input but she'll get it started. She tells him she doesn't actually work with his child, but she has met him. She has papers ready for him to sign for psych-ed testing. She talked quickly, at the end acknowledging it was a lot to digest and asking if they have any questions. One of the support workers stepped into the pause and quietly asked if the father would like to share anything.

"Yes, I would. Thank you." And he began to paint a picture of his child, gifting us with insight and humanity as a counterweight to the cascading tasks and consequences and complaints. Each word a brushstroke adding layers of complexity and dimensionality to a human child, a beating heart screaming for recognition—demanding it any way he can. A picture emerges of someone who experienced trauma, who has trouble trusting, always expecting rejection. He described a boy who is good with his hands, afraid to make mistakes, responsible for his family. He likes playing basketball, enjoys kayaking and fishing. He likes the feeling of accomplishing something, but if he doesn't think he can do it well he won't try; appearances matter to him. The father pauses.

The school counsellor leaps into the pause to reiterate they are also concerned about his academics so she'll give dad the paperwork for testing. They are hopeful if he does English in a different space it will be better for him.

Did she hear what the dad was offering? Was this her expression of care, to be accountable and show we are doing enough, no stone unturned?

The community counsellor remained silent until then, but her voice joins the conversation, explaining she sees a vulnerable child who is reflective and struggling to deal with his emotions. She asked, "Can't we stop suspending him?"

I had to leave for another meeting, so I thank the father for gifting us with their story. I tell them I am grateful to have been able to hear it and learn more about their child. I apologize for having to leave. My heart stays there as I log out, log back in elsewhere.

I join the Changing Results for Young Learners meeting, late. I don't want to be there; the pull of the previous meeting stopping me from engaging.

Irritation blooms in my chest when the facilitator puts me in a breakout group. I thought I could use that time to turn off my camera and return emails.

The momentum of the meeting waterfall pulls me forward despite attempts to avoid.

Three heart-giving StrongStart educators pop up on my screen. They lift me up and ground me as they each speak of their 'wonder child'. Each had been asked to use five words to describe the student who is the focus of their inquiry. As they use their individual words to breathe life into the essence of a child, I am reminded of an optometrist lens—click, click, click into focus—each click unique to the individual being seen. "I used to think my wonder child was determined, but no, he's actually independent, and I say that because...." "My wonder child is so full of empathy—you should have seen what he did..." "I watched my wonder child's structure get broken by another student. He picked up some blocks, walked over to where the other child was sitting with his mom, and held out the blocks as an offering to the other child."

Click, click, click—tears blur my vision as children come alive through the lens of their perceptions. When that lens is generous the person blooms into being, limitless possibility; when the lens constricts, possibility shrinks, stature diminishes.

The stories woven in each of my afternoon meetings literally bring tears to my eyes. I am so grateful for the lenses educators use, when they breathe life into possibility for a child. Just the simple act of seeing, opens space for a child's essence and gifts to emerge. To witness that happen is itself a gift.

Juxtaposition—click, click, click.... The previous day I experienced a snapshot of a school while covering for an absent principal. I followed the sound of laughter down the hall and walked into the gym where a kindergarten class was in full swing. Immediately a bunch of tiny five-year-olds ran up to show me how they could hula-hoop and dribble a basketball and run really fast. They were so beautiful! I walked over to the teacher and said how amazing they were. Without missing a beat, her immediate visceral response was, "until they're not." She didn't smile.

In the same school, a young boy lay curled up on the medical bed. He angrily left his classroom and came to the office, lay down facing the wall. The teacher followed and told the secretary to call his mom and send him home. The secretary came and got me because the boy wouldn't speak to his mom or the secretary.

I walked in slowly, carefully, as though approaching a wounded bird. At first he wouldn't acknowledge me, then he slowly started nodding or shaking his head to my questions. I asked him softly if he was okay (no response, huddling further towards the wall). Did he feel sick (no), did he eat today (no), did he need some food (no), can I help him in any way (no). I got his

backpack from his classroom in case he wanted something to eat, placed it beside him. I asked if he wanted me to leave him alone. Nod. I told him I would be next door if he needed anything.

The secretary follows me into the office and whispers his dog died on the weekend. His dad is in jail, and the death of the dog brought up a lot of feelings. My throat constricts.

The teacher was angry with him (which she started to explain in front of other students when I went to look for his backpack) because she had been away the day before and he ran amok in the school - "No one even sent him home!" I stop her monologue by smiling at her and say I think he might be hungry so I've come to get his backpack.

When the recess bell rang he left the medical room and went upstairs toward his classroom. I went to find him because I didn't want him to get in trouble. I found him sitting on a bench in the hallway. He was still hidden in his hoodie, and when I asked him if he wanted to come outside he informed me he wasn't allowed. I said maybe he could come outside and stay with me. "No, I'm not allowed." His obedience to the teacher's directive was intriguing to me. His teacher arrived, stood tall next to his crumpled form, put her hands on her hips, feet apart, and declared, "No way, he's not allowed outside. And by the way, you're not going to music after recess either. You can do shredding for me while I photocopy." Her tone softened ever so slightly with that last statement as though extending a kindness. I told her she could go for her break; I've got him. She walked away and he threw his backpack against the wall, walked into the classroom, and slammed the door. I picked up the backpack and stood outside the door, peeking through the window to make sure he was okay. He sat down at his desk, his back to me. I waited a few minutes then quietly went inside and gave him his backpack. He was doing his work, his hoodie was off, and when I told him I was going outside on supervision, he said, okay. He had calmed right down. He wanted to be in his classroom.

I try not to judge the teacher. How can I see her differently so perhaps she, in turn, can see this student? Assertiveness might mask fear. Negativity could be an expression of exhaustion. Lack of awareness causes unintended responses. That's the best I can do right now. Click, click?

Two days; many views; multiple lenses. Click, click, click. Judgements, assertions, opening and closing spaces. The waterfall of rushing time carries me off to the next, and the next, and the next. A heart opening, or closing, stop me.

Trough

*There is a trough in
waves,
a low spot
where horizon
disappears
and only sky
and water
are our company.*

*And there we lose our
way
unless
we rest, knowing the
wave will bring us
to its crest again.*

*There we may drown
if we let fear
hold us within its grip
and shake us
side to side,
and leave us flailing,
torn, disoriented.*

*But if we rest there
in the trough,
in silence,
being with
the low part of the wave,
keeping
our energy and
noticing the shape of
things,
the flow,
then time alone
will bring us to another
place
where we can see
horizon, see the land
again,
regain our sense
of where
we are,
and where we need to
swim.*

*(Brown, 2000, as cited
in Wolfe, 2007, p. 61)*

Time has passed since these encounters. I still think about all of these people—students and staff. What should I have said, done, changed, offered? I still apparently buy into the myth of the heroic leader bestowing grand gestures and wise solutions. Instead, the reality feels more nebulous—the smiles, the looks, the silences, the questions asked and responses given.

I shared the last incident I described above with a friend and she asked me why I didn't say something to the teacher about her behaviour. I began to feel inadequate, as though I didn't 'lead' and should have done something to control. All I can say is that it didn't feel right. I didn't feel called to control her, but to offer her another view/possibility. I didn't respond to her anger, or her suggestions he should be sent home. I offered the student respect, options, some control over his surroundings. And I tried to offer her respect, options, and some control over her surroundings by not engaging with her frustration and also not creating more tension. If I respond with the same energy, whether to a child or an adult, it creates more of the same. I don't know if my actions were the right ones; I only know they felt like the right ones *for me*, "given who I am, given where I am, and given what I am encountering in the particular situation" (Moules et al., 2015, p. 26). My response was authentic to me, at that time, in that place, given the in-sight I developed thus far. What may be right for someone else comes from their personal in-sight leading them to fulfill their response-ability. There is no formula.

A memory surfaced from an incident during my teenage years. My father was a man of few words. He didn't offer quick opinions or directions, but when he did speak we knew he meant it. He owned a gas station and an acquaintance from my school worked part-time there. One day the student told my dad he had homework so he couldn't come to work, but I knew he was really going to a party. I was mad, embarrassed really, that he lied to my dad without consequence. I told my dad, expecting him to fire him or at least let him know he knew he had lied. My dad simply replied, 'Well, he'll have a smaller paycheque, won't he?' He wasn't embarrassed at being lied to, and he didn't feel the need to fix or prove anything. A natural consequence of this boy's decision was already unfolding and my dad's intervention was unnecessary.

Other memories surface as I reflect on the day and my shoulds, coulds, woulds. I recall life as a beginning teacher, trying desperately to care for my students, while controlling their behaviour, and making sure I was covering the curriculum (my duties as I saw them

at the time). I was learning, and trying, and clinging, and misstepping, and occasionally flowing in sync with the movements and energy of my students. Snapshots alone are not stories; a picture only tells 1,000 words of assumption. They do not uncover the entirety of a life, or a profession, or a relationship, or a heart. I am no different than the educators I observed; I just occupy a different position right now with the space to offer the possibility of a different view, a kaleidoscope of potential refocusing while peeking through the curtain of the waterfall.

I did not weave all these stories together with an intention of proving a point—buttressing specific assertions about leadership or wholeness or energy and spirit. My learnings emerged from within the stories, those stop moments that nurtured my ability to notice and perceive. The stories revealed themselves to be about energy and spirit, fragmentation and harm, wholeness and healing. The fragmented way I lived my personal life mirrored the fragmented way I led in my professional life. How could it be otherwise, for we lead from who and how we are?

Leading, like educating, is a relational exchange, one that begins with knowing and relating to self. I cannot abandon my self and hope to help others; I cannot be a leader without first being a whole human. And I cannot live a fragmented life and hope to share wholeness with others. When we heal our selves, we potentially heal the world; when we don't, we can harm. Living and leading from wholeness opens possibility for relational energetic exchange that nourishes.

Sherri Mitchell (as cited in Bretton Woods 75, 2019) shares,

If I can't show up as a whole human being, then the community that I was born into is never going to benefit from the gift that I've carried into this world.... The time for symbolic gestures is done. ... It's time for us to show up and strip away all the marketing and show up whole. (56:59)

I transition from this section with two more reflections I wrote while noticing my self in the context of relations. The learning, and becoming, is an ongoing practice.

2022.03.14 – A Dwelling: Losing Balance

Leading is not about a job; it is about how we lead our lives. How we lead our lives is also how we do the professional work we are called to do, in any given moment, time, and circumstance. I have always been a seeker of balance, equilibrium, solidity. Being in disequilibrium personally is not confined to my self—that energy follows me everywhere, influencing decisions and actions and interactions. We are not siloed beings, no matter how much we might fool ourselves we can compartmentalize. The energy of one compartment flows into the other; the construct of a compartment an illusion.

I continue to be (and need to be) reminded that when I don't practice daily self-care, self-compassion, self-love—I tend to tip off balance, even just a little. That tip isn't a solitary act; it's the result of losing my equilibrium and being susceptible to the push and pull of events and people around me. My tip reverberates, creating even a tiny ripple for those around me. My tip could be the one that tips someone else further and the ripple grows. Their ripple returns to me and I wobble more, losing my centre. We are constantly ebbing and flowing in conjunction with one another, each of us creating and responding to waves of energy and emotion.



We all seem to need more equilibrium right now, and we cannot receive it from outside of our selves; there are too many incoming waves pushing up against our emotional shores. Equilibrium only emerges from within.

I see people wearing emotions on their sleeves, moods changing with the whim of movement around them. Just as a flapping flag in the wind is unable to sustain its own momentum separate from the wind provoking it, we can get lost in the puff and blow of people and situations that knock us off our centre. That is when we see educators lose their patience with children; administrators snap at staff members; parents accuse schools. When we don't heal, we can create harm. When we lose our equilibrium our capacity to respond thoughtfully diminishes. We react in ways that at best don't help, and at worst create harm. The ripples we initiate are our responsibility—a reflection of our response-ability - despite the waves that batter us and tip us off centre.

We are given one life; do we live it consciously and intentionally, or do we flap back and forth depending on the puffs and blows of those around us?

It is my responsibility to practice self-care, self-compassion, self-acceptance, self-love before I can send that out in ripples to others. So, too, it is for all educators who work to support the development of children. How can they provide care, compassion, acceptance, and love for children if not first for themselves?

As I write this I am looking out at a foggy, windy, wet west coast day. The ocean in Ucluelet is banging against the rocks, the tree branches swaying with the changing winds, everything is blanketed in steady rain. Yet the rocks stay firm, redirecting the waves that attempt to move them. The tree trunks tall and sturdy withstand the pull of the wind. The drops of rain pool in dips and flow into crevices. If the rock is weakened it will break amid the onslaught of waves; if the trunk is malnourished it will crack under the push of the wind; if the ground is unstable it will wash away under the drip of rain. Life, like nature before me, is a constant dance of energy—flow and strength, rootedness and movement, self and other. The energy I emit and receive dances within the balance I hold.

Even a soaring eagle, so majestic and serene, needs to flap its wings every now and then to regain momentum. There is no 'there' there; there is only constant movement, re-balancing, re-finding and refining through daily practice.

At a recent Compassionate Systems session, one of my peers talked about what was happening in Ukraine and how heavily that was weighing on her. That is not a problem we can solve by ourselves and intellectually it can feel like my meditation practice isn't helpful to so many of the existential crises present in the world.

But I know every time I meditate I feel better; I sleep better; I make better choices; I am more focused, more centred. I also know the energy I bring to an encounter has an impact on the other person, either positively or

negatively. Stress is contagious, so why wouldn't calm be? And that encounter ripples and reverberates across each encounter that lies next to it. That does make a difference. Or at the very least, the possibility it will make a positive difference is worth the effort to try.

I mentioned this during a Compassionate Systems session and Hanilee Aggotstader (Compassionate Systems Leadership, personal communication, February 18, 2022) suggested we ask ourselves,

Do I choose to practice every day, or do I choose the practice of not practising? Do I choose the practice of being too busy?

The choices I make become the moments of my life.

My choices are my life.

2022.06.11 – A Dwelling: Returning to the Path

I am doing a meditation led by Hanilee, noticing my body relax.

The practice is not about staying with the breath, but about discovering when we have wandered off, and coming back. When you notice you have wandered away from your breath, just gently returning, not criticizing yourself. It will happen for all of us.

Leadership practice, life practice, breath practice are all the same. We will all wander off, lose course, misstep. Notice when that happens. Don't criticize; gently return.

I had noticed how contemplative practices nurtured my wellness, and my ability to enter difficult spaces and hold my centre. I congratulated myself on arriving to a space where I could withstand the push and pull of others and therefore contribute from my centre. It was a short-lived moment of pride. Life re-taught me how we will all wander away from the breath, or the path.

Tensions around me at work began to seep into me and became generated by me. An unhelpful flow of contribution that increased the more the exchange continued. I started to feel unworthy of my role and responsibilities; I didn't feel like I was making a difference and I began to feel overwhelmed by the fire hose of student behaviours. So I began working longer, exercising less, meditating only in flashes. And I could withstand tension even less, allowing stress around me to seep into me, contributing more stress with my reactions. A spiral of energy, and exchange.

Notice. And gently step back in. I slowly carved more space. Let the letters I had to write wait a day or two while I owned space for my self instead of working late into the evening. I meditated before bed again, even while my mind raced with to do lists.

This period of the pull of tension, push of stress, seeking calm happened over the course of three or four weeks, until I slowly held to a small boundary, a sliver of time, and a moment of quiet. Space builds on itself, allowing more resistance to the intrusion of negative energy. And I can contribute positively once again.

Tending, attending, in-tending, so we can intentionally tend to others.



Quantum social change describes a conscious, non-linear, and non-local approach to transformations that is grounded in our inherent oneness. It recognizes ... our deepest values and intentions are potential sources of individual change, collective change, and systems change.... We are the leverage points, and ... how we show up in every moment matters. Quantum social change does not require us to wait for some remarkable leader or hero to introduce solutions that will save us—it is about each of us acting right now, within our own dynamic context and spheres of influence, to generate new patterns and relationships. (O'Brien, 2021, p. 4)

Space is a leverage point for the emergence of self.

‘How we show up in every moment matters’ seems such an obvious statement, now. The world I inhabit both shapes and is shaped by my unique presence within it. Who I am, how I am, and where I am matter deeply to what I create and nourish in the world. Or, conversely, what harm I leave in my wake.

This chapter anchored my self in the landscape of this in-query. Where I am from, what I have experienced, the place I was born into, the cultural teachers and tethers and fractures I experienced, have all created the lens through which I see and perceive the world around me. The clarity of hindsight tends to negate the effortful exploring and recognizing and relating with self within contexts—contexts of history, family, culture, community, place. The self-location exploration revealed patterns and relationships and cultural gaps that explained the lenses that led (and continue to lead) to my worldview and understandings. It clarified my I-sight so I could more fully perceive and re-cognize the ‘I’ where my energetic patterns emerge. Contemplative practices of meditation and time spent in nature as well as Indigenous teachings of place expanded my eyesight to more fully perceive and re-cognize all beings and to begin to understand the interconnected web of all life and my place within it, so I may more consciously generate new patterns and relationships. When we live and show up to relational spaces from a place of fragmentation, our energies connect to create more disconnection and alienation. I explored what that means for my own spirit and energy, as well as that of children and educators.

In the next chapter I explore the spaces between and among all living beings and the possibilities of relating anew, in wholeness.

RELATING

I've been considering the phrase 'all my relations' for some time now. It's hugely important. It's our saving grace in the end. It points to the truth that we are all related, that we are all connected, that we all belong to each other. The most important word is 'all.' Not just those who look like me, sing like me, dance like me, speak like me, pray like me or behave like me. ALL my relations. That means every person, just as it means every rock, mineral, blade of grass, and creature. We live because everything else does. If we were to choose collectively to live that teaching, the energy of our change of consciousness would heal each of us—and heal the planet. (Wagamese, 2016, p. 36)

The previous chapter was a journey of locating my self, being in relation with my self, and exploring my self in relation with others, a re-cognition of the energy that shimmers within, between, among, connecting us indelibly. We do not live solitary lives. We are inextricably bound to all our relations, both human and more than human.

This section spends time in the spaces in between and among us. We impact and are impacted by our encounters with all beings; our presence within a space shifting the energy, the relational space imprinting us in ways both noticed and ignored. How might we create new patterns of relating and a re-cognition of the spaces and relations we inhabit? How might new ways of relating offer new possibilities of co-creation, of world-making, of leading in a good way?

2022.03.21 – A Dwelling: Encounters

One does not simply learn about land, we learn best from land.
(Meyer, 2008, p. 219)

I walked past various trees on the lighthouse portion of the trail today, noticing familiar tree friends anew. The twisted trunks of some fold over themselves in places. They provide interesting photo opportunities for the tourists, enticing climbing posts for children. Hundreds of people touch them, slide on them, sit on them, caress them, eliciting joy from the experiences. Loving the tree to death, the bark rubbed clean, skin-less.

Rubbed shiny and raw by human encounter.

Like the trees, we too are sometimes twisted and calloused from the battering of time and events, joy and disappointment. Human encounter reinforcing the twisted state, limiting our ability to grow differently by the polished sheen of well-worn expectations and easy assumptions.



How do we remain open and resilient when harmed by relational encounters? How do we contribute to healing when we have been the one to harm, even unintentionally?



And yet, shoots of life and possibility burst forth from the cradle of the most unexpected protector.

Harm, healing, transformation, and renewal.

How do our unquestioned habits and practices and beliefs heal or harm our relations? When we assume a tree is a thing for our consumption, an object to fulfill our wants and desires, we can more easily cause harm to it. But if we can re-cognize a tree as a living and life-giving being, we can come to be in relation with it. Thus it is with all beings. We heal our selves and our relations with and among others with the way we perceive. We all belong to each other, as Wagamese (2016) wisely advised. The way we understand the other—whether tree, student, colleague, relative, ancestor, animal, flower—can either create a life-giving energy or a soul-destroying one.

We create patterns with our beliefs and understandings; choose carefully. What energy do we give, what consciousness do we create, what web of relations do we nurture?

I begin this chapter with an exploration of relations that formed the foundation of our country we now call Canada—relations with Indigenous Peoples based on attempted erasure and colonized superiority, fragmenting relations, understandings, and knowledge, and creating profound harm to children, adults, and communities. The Canadian identity I have worn is a result of the stories I have digested, influencing how I see and perceive and relate. We do not reach wholeness or healthy interconnectedness from fractured relations and we cannot separate the relations with Indigenous Peoples that are foundational for our country from everything else. The patterns replicate, as fractals in nature. O'Brien (2021) explains, "From the perspective of quantum fractals, every person who takes actions based on universal values such as equity, dignity, compassion, and integrity affects all scales. Connecting to others from an [I/we] space transcends separation and fragmentation" (p. 111). Connecting to others from an us-and-them space reinforces separation and fragmentation. Relational spaces matter, because "it is the quality of our relationships [with both human and more than human beings] that creates new patterns and possibilities" (O'Brien, 2021, p. 103).

Following an exploration of relations with Indigenous Peoples, I then move to an exploration of ways we come together in relation to create generative social fields with others, and how being in relation in and with nature engenders being and becoming anew.

Reconciling

At a more fundamental level we have to ask ourselves: What kind of world do we want to live in? (Davis, 2009, p. 165)

Much as the potter molds clay into a finished shape, particular patterns of behavior lead to particular results that reverberate across time and space, and in this respect individuals and societies create themselves through their moral choices while also creating their futures. (Fierke & Antonio-Alfonso, as cited in O'Brien, 2021, p. 110)

If I had written this dissertation 10 years ago, my exploration of leadership would not have included reference to reconciliation or equity. I swam in a sea of whiteness I didn't see, believing my perceptions were objective reality. My blinkers were firmly in place, unaware I was not seeing the picture whole (the more I learn the more I recognize there is so much more I still do not see or know). I was vaguely aware of inequities and unequal playing fields—a sort of ladder world where I was ahead of some and behind others. But I did not recognize where and how I am, impacts all others. And I compliantly accepted the status quo as just the way things are, without questioning who benefits from the status quo and who is harmed.

2016.11.16 – A Dwelling: Fault Lines

The truth about stories is that that's all we are. (King, 2003, p. 32)

I was invited to attend a session that was part of a dinner series being offered for administrators interested in learning more about the history of Indigenous People in BC. The person running the session invited me to come and speak about the SFU Dream Colloquium on Indigenous Teachings course I'm taking and how it has informed my understanding of Indigenous worldviews. I arrive just as a PowerPoint is being shared about land claims in BC.

She speaks about the Delgamuukw court case that was heard by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court at the time, Allan McEachern. After months of oral testimony by Elders, he did not grant title of the lands to Nisga'a people. The case was appealed when the provincial government changed and the new government revised their stance on certain issues. The Appeal Court overturned the original decision.

Chief Justice Allan McEachern didn't listen, she explains. The Nisga'a created a dance and a mask with tin ears to represent this white man who didn't understand.

I sit quietly listening to the presentation. There was more, but this is the gist of it. That man is my uncle and for the first time I am uncertain. I knew him to be kind, smart, hardworking, and to have integrity. I lived with my aunt and uncle during that case so my aunt wouldn't be alone when he travelled to hear witnesses. I worked as a legal secretary at the time, at his former law firm, where he was universally respected and admired and the decision was considered to be 'correct.'

I sat in the room, eating the dinner, while people laughed at the tin ears.

*A fault line
emerges.*



From September–December 2016, I participated in Simon Fraser University’s Dream Colloquium—“Returning to the Teachings: Justice, Identity, and Belonging.” Each session involved ceremony hosted by local First Nations, public lectures, dinner and dialogue with the local First Nations representatives and speakers from across North America. We learned from the Katzie Nation, the Semiahmoo Nation, the Tsleil-Watuth Nation, the Squamish Nation, the Musqueam Nation, and speakers such as Chief Robert Joseph, Wab Kinew, Rupert Ross, Wade Davis, Manulani Aluli Meyer, Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas, Jennifer Llewellyn, John Borrows, and representatives from Reconciliation Canada. As I write this, I am struck again by the gift of teachings offered and the spaces of connection and learning we were invited to inhabit. The experience was life changing for me, and the learning continues to deepen and evolve as I revisit, remember, reread, and retry.

The ceremonies and lectures were open to the public, but you could also apply to participate in a class that met bi-weekly. That cohort hosted dinner for the representatives of the Nations and guest speakers after the public events. The opportunity sounded interesting, but I dismissed it because of work responsibilities and my other graduate class commitments. However, at that time, I was learning to take baby steps towards noticing what pulled me and this definitely tugged repeatedly. I couldn’t stop thinking about it, so I finally submitted my application right before the deadline and fortunately was accepted.

I recently came across my application and re-read my reasons for applying. I still reach for those same aspirations. I spoke of wanting to expand my understanding of Indigenous teachings, the history of relations between First Peoples and European settlers, and the resulting legacy of colonialism we continue to live. I expressed that we all have a responsibility and a role to play in knowing the truth of that history and working towards healing.

I spoke about the importance of educating the whole child, and nurturing the whole teacher doing that work, and my disappointment that we do not talk about spirituality in education. By omission we teach ourselves and each other that our spirits are irrelevant and should be hidden. Taggart (2001) describes a “spirituality of interconnectedness” (p. 327) that I was seeing in the Indigenous teachings I had been reading (such as Meyer, 2008), and I was hoping the Dream Colloquium would help me develop a deeper

understanding of the wholism found in Indigenous teachings and worldviews. And finally, I talked of BC's redesigned curriculum apparently built on the foundation of the First People's Principles of Learning (FPPL) yet educators often ignored the FPPL from fear of saying or doing the wrong thing. This excuse for inaction frustrated me. In my application I said, "The health of our planet and the health of our relationships with each other and ourselves requires greater awareness, consciousness, and a deeper understanding of the past and how it affects our ways of seeing and understanding the present."

I share my writing from that time as my own offering, a laying down of pebbles to track some of my unfinished learning, unlearning, and questioning. I continue to embark on this journey with hands and heart bound by my own worldview, culture, and history. Our journeys can't be otherwise, for they are personal—entwined in the stories we have been told and digested, in the experiences we have been given and those we have chosen, and the cultural filters our eyes squint to see through.

I recently read a peer's description of ceremony she learned during the Dream Colloquium, and I am struck by the difference in what we absorbed. I noticed the ceremony, but as a periphery to the words being shared by the speakers. She absorbed the particularities and nuances of the actual ceremony we witnessed. I witnessed ceremony as a secondary offering, a taking / taking for granted on my part; she witnessed it as a teaching and learning. A witness to ceremony. I was a witness to words, reflecting my colonized understanding of value at the time.

2016.11.28 – A Dwelling: Coming Together

One of the first classes of the Dream Colloquium was led by facilitators from Reconciliation Canada. I arrived worried because I had not finished the last couple of pages of an assigned article. I assumed we would be put into groups and told to discuss sections of the article, and I was hoping I wouldn't be put in a group that had to summarize the parts I hadn't read. I have been so schooled in this linear paradigm of following instructions, doing what I'm told and discussing what someone else 'knows' (after all, if it is published it must be truth).

The actual unfolding of that class was an indication of the shift in consciousness, awareness, and presence that we were invited to open to. Instead of the usual 'read, discuss, report out' model, we sat in a circle and listened to Shelley Joseph describe her family's experiences with residential school and the ongoing trauma they continue to try to heal from. Her story reverberated with pain and I can only imagine how hard it was to tell. But the way she shared, more than the words themselves, really impacted me.

She modeled something I have rarely seen. She talked about a shameful time in our history but she did it in such an honest, open, and clean way. There was definitely anger in her story but somehow it didn't invite defensiveness. She described her anger and hurt without spreading anger and hurt. It made me want to take responsibility for change. It was a forward propelling talk, a call for living together in a better way.

Later, the facilitators placed us in small groups and as we moved to our separate sections of the room I walked slowly, a weight of inadequacy on my shoulders. Our task was to talk about reconciliation in our own lives. I had no idea what to share with a group of strangers - I didn't have a story of reconciliation. I sat, searching the others' faces for signs of something that would reduce my unease. The facilitator suggested we go around the circle counter-clockwise, which meant I would speak second. As I listened to the first person speak, a memory slammed into my heart.

I had forgotten about the neighbours in our first house, but suddenly they were standing in front of me. I saw colours, heard conversations, felt my four-year-old confusion as though it was yesterday. And when my turn came, out fell the story – of shame, and racism - that came from my family.

We had a small dirt road enclosed by thin strips of trees between our houses. My sister and I used to play all sorts of games there but we had always been warned that if we see our neighbours we were to run home. They were Danger. I wasn't sure why, but always obeyed. It added to the aura of excitement to play in the bush, next to their house. And they had a teenager; that in itself was Danger. Teenagers were Dangerous.

Our neighbour's name was Red, I was told. "Red? But that's not a name. Why is his name Red?" I recall asking that question over and over, unsatisfied and confused by the shrugs and non-answers I received. My parents and neighbours called him Red, as though they were saying Bob. It wasn't a hidden label.

Not until the words tumbled out was I even aware of this memory nor did I realize why my parents called him "Red." My parents were Good People yet they called him Red for Red Indian. These are facts I witnessed and digested. I twisted with shame in my chair, not wanting to look in the eyes of the strangers in the circle, yet unable to stop myself, hungry for some recognition that maybe I could still be a Good Person in their eyes.

"How will you perceive us? How will we, in the temporal haste and elusiveness of this moment, receive you? Who are you in our presence? Who might you become? Who do we seek to become in the presence of others?" (Fels, 2010, p. 6)

The perceptions of others help to shape who we can be and become. Racist beliefs, actions, and words limit our mutual becoming.



*Cycles of
Becoming*

We all want to be seen and understood—beyond labels, judgments, or stereotypes. Nel Noddings (2005) offers that one aspect of an ethic of care is being able to see a better self than someone is displaying in that moment. The circle offered that for me.

Each person spoke of deeply personal experiences; some, like me, expressed shame from the words tumbling out. Others shared touching stories of healing wounds with family members. One person said that she has always resented the racism she faces, but hearing our stories she understands it is just people, sometimes good people, who don't know better. It helped to hear our stories, she generously offered.

We were all completely present. We honoured ourselves and each other with honest words, open listening, and tender acceptance. There was no written definition of Reconciliation to remember from the class, but the experience of it was profound. We had co-created a sacred space. A live energy pulsed, a rhythmic heartbeat joining us together, in our circular web. It felt like a living entity had come into being through this sharing. When the facilitator asked if we wanted to say anything more, someone said, please can we just sit in this silence longer? We all felt the “silence for a moment—not the absence of words but the presence of understanding” (Senge et al., 2004, p. 78).

I have spent many years in educational institutions, and continue to work in one. I have enjoyed many classes and gained much knowledge. However, when a class can become a pulsing energy in a co-created sacred space, I know something has shifted. I didn't learn *about* reconciliation—I experienced it; I felt it. And I can't forget it.

*“It's a path we walk on rather than a goal we get to.”
(Hanilee Aggotstader, Compassionate Systems Leadership [CSL] Master Practitioner
class on meditative practice,
July 12, 2021)*

The space we co-created that day was a generative space (Senge & Boell, Master Practitioner Training, personal communication, June 30, 2021). It wasn't a productive meeting; it was a life-giving joining together.

We can embrace a different way of being in the classroom; a way that honours a wholistic way of living and an experiential way of learning—classrooms as generative

spaces for growth. The excuse of not knowing is no excuse; if I don't know I am responsible to learn.

But learning takes patience and time (First Nations Education Steering Committee, 2008) and it is a process, one I continue to unfold within. Hanilee Agottstader (Compassionate Systems Master Practitioner Training, personal communication, October 24, 2021) counsels the contemplative practices participants to take the time to get to know meditation practices for ourselves before embarking on passing it along to our students. Learn it and embody it first—only then are you ready to share and to teach. I continue to be caught in the teeth of the colonial model of 'read, discuss, report out'—or 'learn/accumulate, interpret, teach'—hurry up. Each person's learning, including my own, unfolds over time. I struggle with the tension between the need for patience and the imperative for change.

Chief Robert Joseph (SFU Dream Colloquium speech, personal communication, September 8, 2016) told us Reconciliation begins with us, at our kitchen tables. But it's the kitchen table that's so hard. It is calling us to live differently, to practice our daily lives differently, to step outside of well-worn scripts and ascribed roles.

As I write this, I watch the ocean swell in and out, flowing with the pressure and pull of the tides, and the seasons, and the moon, just as we arrive and leave, flowing with the pressure of our contexts and the pull of situations and cultural expectations. While not impossible, it is effortful to swim against the tide of training.

I hold a privileged position in society, flowing from the colour of my skin, my professional title, my doctoral studies. With privilege comes responsibility. Kovach (2009) suggests, "Responsibility implies knowledge *and action*. It seeks to genuinely serve others, and is inseparable from respect and reciprocity" (p. 178, emphasis added). This doctoral path is grounded in praxis. It is a doctoral degree in educational practice—action and practice are central, a lived experience informing what I am seeking to learn. I feel the pull of responsibility to live into the teachings and to live forward ethically and relationally. Otherwise, what I learn and share on these pages is not knowledge or understanding, it is simply inert information (see Meyer, 2001).

2017.09.16 – A Dwelling: Meeting Across Space

One way or another we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way, or we are also living the stories we planted – knowingly or unknowingly – in ourselves. ... If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives. (King, 2003, p. 153)

I arrive at the meeting on time, an unusual feat for me. I usually try to squeeze in one more email or phone call before racing out of my office with little time for travel. But I'm aware this meeting could be difficult and I don't want to be late.

As I enter the classroom I feel the palpable tension. Two of the adults bustle about the room, feigning cheerful busyness while the new facilitator moves silently, slowly, separate from the group. The fourth wears a frozen face and stiff movements reveal her anger; she doesn't even pretend. These women will share classroom space that used to be hers alone. We plan to run an Indigenous early learning program two mornings a week, while continuing to run the StrongStart program every afternoon. The change has proven harder than anticipated.

The manager from the Indigenous preschool I partnered with to implement this program arrives a few minutes late. She brings a couple of guests with her. They move silently, creating a circle of tiny chairs with Indigenous cultural artifacts in the centre as one of them readies his drum.

I glance at my watch, wanting the meeting to get underway so I can return to my office in time for my next meeting. I have the first inkling this coming together may not be what I anticipated - an opportunity for the manager and I to say a few words to get everyone back on track. The agenda I emailed the night before begins to dissolve.

Eventually the manager invites us to sit. We perch on the tiny chairs, forming an uneasy circle. When everyone is seated, she begins to speak in a shaky but determined voice.

Instead of the discussion about communication, materials, and use of space I expected, she shares her experience as a child of the Sixties Scoop, growing up in foster care, disconnected from her culture. She describes her own surprise at how deeply she was triggered by setting up this Indigenous learning space. How important this space is for their families. And then she apologizes, offering that maybe they could have gone slower, not changing everything at once.



She stops and there is a moment of silence. I'm touched that she has shared this deeply personal story and I prepare to say something, assuming it's my turn to now reach across to her apology and offer one as well. I weigh possible words to show I heard and care, while also moving things along. We still have bulletin boards to discuss, and I'm conscious of the time.

I completely misread and misunderstood the context.

As I weigh phrases in my head, the man begins to drum. The strength of the beat intimidates and halts me. Justifications and efficiencies dissolve. He sings in rhythm with the beat, his deep voice mesmerizes me. His drum beckons my heart to beat in rhythm. I listen in silent compliance.

Eventually his drum is silent but the beat continues to pulse among us. He begins to speak softly and I lean forward, straining to hear. I realize he is revealing details about his experiences in residential school. I'm shocked into silence, unable to move as I hear descriptions so horrific I assume I misheard. I remain quiet, afraid to speak. He begins to sing and my eyes lose focus, tears threatening to overflow. Shame and uncertainty drip into my heart.

One by one each of the manager's team speaks of their lost culture, their trauma filled pasts, their determination to make a better future for all Indigenous children. Anger and hurt beat beneath the surface of their words, but they speak in measured tones. My colleague and I, the two white people in the room, sit quietly. We cannot enter this discussion, only witness it.

Finally, the Indigenous early learning facilitator rises and begins to drum and sing, her power and determination palpable with each beat. Eventually she stops and looks directly at me.

She begins to speak. 'I am here and I don't care if my words make you uncomfortable. That's your thing. Not mine. I have been invisible for too long. My people have been invisible for too long. On land that we were the first to walk upon. We will no longer be silent or invisible! We have one room in an entire district and you are worried about others being visible here?'⁵

I'm breathless.

It didn't occur to me this moment was my making, that my attempt to smooth things over the previous day had actually shattered her dream for the space.

Voice. Power. What does it mean to have voice, to speak and be heard? What if your voice is too loud, speaking words too harsh, reaching to pull others' understandings too far? What does it mean to soften your voice, manipulate your words, reconstruct them in an effort to not offend? So a flicker might have a chance to be heard by someone who doesn't have to listen? Communication trapped in colonization.

Her Voice shatters me

The words pierce my complacent superiority.

Unexpectedly.

No baby steps. I'm pulled to leap. I am silenced by her anger. I am silenced by my fear. Of her, of going too far, too quickly. Of not going fast enough. Of being too small, too weak to make this partnership work. To effect real change.

Her anger pushes my words back through my throat and they dissolve, burning my heart. I am invited to listen, to witness, to open space. It is not my turn to talk. I am shamed by my unexamined expectation of being heard. I wear a cloak of privilege, obvious to her; invisible to me.

My colleague listens to my voice, tight with the effort of fighting back tears. As I speak to her on the phone, I move my chair so I can face the wooden shelf, away from the glass walls of my office.

"I thought I got it. But I don't. Every time I think I get it I come up against something that shows me I just—don't—get it." I can't stop the tears. They

⁵ I use the single quotation mark to indicate this is my recollection of her words; it is not a direct quote.

drip down my face. I feel stripped and exposed. A gaping hole deflates my chest. Vulnerable in my unexamined lack of awareness.

Her voice reaches out, soft and consoling. But her words are unbending.

She reminds me about power structures and colonization. Her words shine a light on the ingrained and often unconscious ways we work to limit the possibility of and for others.

My eyes open to my own complicity.

My colleague reminds me that if it was going to be easy, it would have been done already.

2017.10.07

We met again today, with no agenda, no expectations except connecting and communicating. We sat awkwardly, politely, engaged in stilted small talk. Unsure how to start this meeting, I waited. Eventually, the Indigenous facilitator told us a story of her family and then sang a sacred song. She explained they often start gatherings with a song to begin in a good way. It will help us begin our work with good hearts and to invite ancestors to be there to support our work together.

Unknown revelations didn't burst forth from this meeting together. Grand schemes weren't hatched, large problems weren't solved. But we started in a good way. And we began to learn, and heal, and relate. I am grateful for her gift, one she was generous to share.



Soft petals of opportunity carefully unfurl when space is held open. It is beginning to occur to me that my role is not to provide these opportunities, but to hold space for them and to be present within them.

I fear the momentum of habit and predetermined scripts that threaten to fill the space, squeezing us all out.

Colonized Mind

A few years ago, I partnered with a non-profit agency to offer teachings about residential school to members of the school district and partner groups—Ministry of Children and Family Development, Fraser Health, the City, non-profit agencies, early childhood educators, teachers—called “Building Bridges Through Understanding the Village,” led by Kathi Camilleri.

After spending the morning creating a safe learning space, and providing information about colonization and residential schools, she led us through a role play of a traditional Indigenous village. Some of us were children, others parents, aunties, hunters, ancestors. Kathi had us sit in a way to replicate the roles in a village. Cultural artifacts were at the centre and children formed a circle around them. Behind the children were the parents and behind them were the aunties who helped to raise the children. Beyond them were the Elders guiding the raising of children, and along the outer circle were the hunters, then ancestors. When she (role playing the Indian Agent) came to the village to try to assimilate everyone into settler culture, she started by removing the artifacts from the centre, metaphorically stripping the culture away.

I was role playing a child in the village, so I was sitting close to the artifacts. She quickly began picking them up, and a few were not included in her bundle. My unconscious response saddens me. I automatically reached to pick them up and hand them to her. Fortunately, I stopped myself, but while others were trying to hide the precious artifacts, I reached to help the colonizer, exposing how effectively I too have been colonized—brainwashed into submission. Rule Follower. Authority Admirer. Unquestioned acceptance.

2021.05.30 – A Dwelling: Hazy Sight

I hear the news story while I rush to get ready for work, groggily hurrying through my morning routine. The words sandwiched between COVID updates and the ongoing fighting in Gaza, easy to dismiss in the onslaught of daily horror stories. The words jolt me momentarily—did I hear that correctly? I heard the facts but they didn't penetrate, just as the horror from all the news stories float past my awareness, bouncing off my defences to dissolve beyond me.

The bodies of 215 children were found in unmarked graves at a residential school in Kamloops (Dickson & Watson, 2021). The local Nation hired someone to do some sort of scan, I think. The announcer moves on. I wash my hands, removing makeup residue. Get dressed. Rush off to work. Continue with my day.

I hear it again after work. This time the Premier has made a statement about the discovery, saying he was horrified and heartbroken. The words start to hit like the first raindrops of a coming storm, but I avoid the onslaught as I rush on. I wonder how they can know for certain from ground penetrating radar; my mind claws to find a way to rationalize, dismiss. Resistant to absorption.

Knowledge of facts is not knowing something. I'm not yet ready to know.

Saturday morning I receive an email from our Superintendent. He directs all schools to fly their flags at half-mast. I feel the weight begin to sit on my shoulders. It's getting harder to rationalize; I feel my mind slowly start to bend. Again I move on, sit in the sunshine, eat breakfast.

Shortly afterwards our District Principal of Indigenous Learning sends an email to all staff. Her words pull me forward, through story. The raindrops land, and puddle on my skin. She urges us to imagine a thriving community where children laugh and play and work alongside adults. She pulls us to imagine the sounds of laughter, and then a community of silence—the deafening silence of a community with no children. Imagine the sobs reverberating across the land as children are forcibly taken away, and many don't return, with no explanation. Imagine.

Finally, I stop. The self-protective barrier leaks. I can imagine. She doesn't let me hide in the shelter of ignorance or innocence. I am coming to realize the epitome of white privilege is basking in the glow of ignorance; the freedom within the protective barrier of not-knowing.

I recall the role play we did in Building Bridges Through Understanding. Prior to that experience, I had only a cognitive awareness of children being forced to attend residential schools. Prior to that experience, I recognized it was horrible; I didn't yet feel the horror. Words describing children's experiences of residential school shocked me; but I remained separate. Through role play, I became a child torn from my family; I saw the emptiness and devastation of a childless village. The unbearable weight of

witnessing the damage done to your child, and being helpless to fix it. The guilt, the shame, the loss of identity, of community.

Part of the process of awakening is recognizing that the realities we thought were absolute are only relative. All you have to do is shift from one reality to another once, and your attachment to what you thought was real starts to collapse. Once the seed of awakening sprouts in you, there's no choice—there's no turning back. (Dass, 2014, para. 7)

*Seeing only so far,
the lure of foggy comfort is
an easy path.*



Knowledge of facts (mind) is not knowing (body) or understanding (spirit; Meyer, 2001). *Knowing* is painful, awakens shame, breaks apart my carefully constructed bubble, the daily routines, the stories I have been fed and digested and marinated in about my country, my people. Because of the colour of my skin and my European ancestry, these are my people. The people who did this are mine. I have benefitted from the colour of my skin and my European ancestry; surely I must also be responsible for seeing and listening and learning and healing. The carefully constructed identity of being Canadian begins to disintegrate as I accept this story into my heart and the first tentative buds of understanding begin to emerge.

Two. Hundred. Fifteen. CHILDREN. Buried in unmarked graves at a *school*. No explanation, no ceremony, no acknowledgement, no accountability, no ownership. This gravesite of children at a school exists in Kamloops, BC (Dickson & Watson, 2021).

Without my current circle of colleagues, friends, peers, mentors—I could ignore, shake my head at the sadness and wonder who could possibly do this. I could have remained ignorantly separate and therefore complicit. The command in that email doesn't allow it. It is an invitation to imagine. Imagine!

It was hearing it multiple times, the connection between the email and my memory of the role play I participated in that brought home the devastation. I should not have needed all those layers to finally absorb what had happened. But I was pretty well buttressed with my questions: How do they know? Is it true? How could that be? What does it mean?

So many layers of film in front of my eyes, and I know I'm not there yet. But enough layers were peeled away that I could see through the opaque screen. Imagine. I am so disconnected from my own Croatian heritage, for many reasons. And yet, I imagine if 215 Croatian children were found in unmarked graves about 300 miles from my home, in BC... in Canada! And to know many suffered abuse, their deaths unremarkable enough to not inform family members and mark their graves, simply because they were Croatian. How could I get over that? Knowing it was sanctioned and hidden and nobody was accountable for it. How could I function within that context? Knowing the people you meet every day, work beside, socialize with, get to say they didn't know, and then get on

with their day. They wash their hands, they get dressed, they go to work. They rush past. We dismiss and in doing so we fail to see the humanity, humanness of another.

At first, I wondered how to lead during such an important time when instead, I needed to follow—feeling humiliation rather than humility. I am coming to recognize that leading *is* following when that is called for. It is not leading over others, it is leading from within. It is choosing openness and humility instead of authority and ignorance. Recognizing when to follow, is as important as recognizing who to follow. Choose carefully.

This entire experience is my/our context. We have been conned by our text, eh? Those stories I have been told and believed about being a kind Canadian need adjusting to recognize the entire context anew.

2021.06.05 – A Dwelling: Drumbeats, Heartbeats, Together

The local Nations organized a ceremony and walk at the park, the original site of the residential school in our town, to honour the lives of the children whose bodies lay in unmarked graves at a residential school site in Kamloops. I walk there with my husband, arriving a little early, and see the orange shirts in the distance. I recognize principals, secretaries, Indigenous liaison workers, teachers from the district, and community partners who come into view as we move closer. Our new neighbours arrive with orange feathers pinned to their jackets.

The drumming begins, the powerful beat pulling everyone together. A man wearing a bear head and fur begins moving through the crowd, moving slowly to the beat, advancing towards the circle. I sense his arrival marks something important but I lack knowledge to understand its meaning. He begins to dance in the middle of the circle, joined by an eagle dancer. Eventually a little boy, no more than three or four, clothed in a bright orange shirt, bounces to the middle, moving to the beat with Eagle and Bear. Eagle takes his hand and the two move in unison, joy alight on his face. This ritual and teaching existing on land that may contain the bones of his ancestors, on land that symbolizes the amputation of culture from the lives of children. This boy learns and teaches through his delighted movement in unison with Eagle and Bear. His smile connects us all—spectators, perpetrators, ancestors, elders, settlers, learners.

We begin the walk to the most recent site of the residential school, my husband and I near the back. Ahead of us is a sea of orange, pulled forward by the heartbeat of the drum and singers' voices in the distance. We walk along the highway, police holding traffic, cars lined up as far as I can see in both directions. Forced to stop. Forced to look, to wonder, to reflect. Rushing is forbidden as we walk in unison, slowly progressing forward together.

I walk in silence and hear an Indigenous family behind me say they feel bad if the people in cars didn't know this was happening. I am struck by the irony. As settlers, many of us live wrapped in the cloak of not knowing, afraid to look, to see, and to know.

Eventually, cars are alternately allowed through in one lane and one after the other they honk and wave, raise their hands, yell thank you, bow heads, record on their phones. I absorb the beat. And the orange. Ahead of me there might be two hundred people. Two hundred people of all ages, sizes, shapes, possibilities. Imagine.

Two hundred fifteen children lay buried, anonymous, lives unlive, possibilities undiscovered, families unwhole. Circles broken. I imagine the lives of those moving together today. I see teachers ahead of me and imagine the lives they touch; I see a mother pushing a baby carriage, an older teenager carries a toddler on his shoulders. The lives they live and will live, the lives they touch and will touch. Imagine.

I see a counsellor who works with children living in care. I recall a presentation she did when I first arrived in the district. She described the children who would graduate, almost apologetic the new program could only speak about four graduating that year. At the time, I chafed against the measurement; four lives are FOUR LIVES! Imagine the lives those four reach and touch and pull together. Her work is immeasurable.

To my left, two boys bursting with energy scramble up the side of a hill parallel to the road, running hopping moving to the beat, their heads bobbing up and down as they follow the moving form of the crowd, creating their own path. Who are they, who will they become, who will they reach? How will they teach?

A woman to the right holds up a sign that says, "And the children whispered, they found us."

Imagine. What if all those 200 lives in front of me dissolved like the lives of children buried in Kamloops, energy gone, relationships unravelled, connections severed. The reverberations felt through life and through death. We are all connected. We remain connected; we are responsible. How do we ready ourselves to be response-able? There is no hiding, anymore.

The Persian poet Rumi said,

*The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you.
Don't go back to sleep.
You must ask for what you really want.
Don't go back to sleep.
People are going back and forth across the doorsill
where the two worlds touch.
The door is round and open.
Don't go back to sleep.
(Barks, 1995, p. 36)*



*Wake up.
Imagine.*



Relations with another require seeing and perceiving and receiving another. Sight and perception require awareness—of both self and other. We cannot be in good relations with ourselves or with others when we remain hidden or when we refuse to see.

Our relationships don't move in a linear path; they wind and twist, climb and fall. The spaces and energy that bind us can create webs of love or traps of anger and mazes of mistrust. Each of us mark the spaces we inhabit; we are never simple bystanders. We are connected. How do we frame the spaces of community we inhabit?

2019.09.06 – A Dwelling: Containing Circles

The Kindergarten teachers and StrongStart educators are asked to form a circle. They dutifully move the tables to the side of the room and slide chairs into a semblance of roundness. Some people sit and chat, leaning forward to see each other, while others sit quietly alone in the boundary of the shape. They watch the others and wait to begin.

The facilitators ask the participants to share what they are doing to support Indigenous learning in their classrooms. The energy shifts slightly—or maybe I'm imagining it. But I start to feel a little uncomfortable knowing it will be my turn too. I'm new to the district, in a position of perceived authority and feel the need to say something important, even though I'm not in a classroom any more. I can't pass. I suspect if I'm feeling that way, so are others.

One by one, people say they invite Elders in, they use books from the Indigenous library, they go outside more, they had a presentation, they all have 'stuff' to talk about. A few apologize for not doing enough yet. Eventually we arrive at the last person in the circle. By the time it was her turn, she was very irritated. She says she doesn't know where to begin. She's tried lots of things and nothing is ever good enough or quite right so she's not sure where to go now or what she should or shouldn't be doing. A few heads (who had already dutifully spoken) nod their heads in agreement. They look at me and over at the district principal with a tilt to their heads and a silent challenge in their eyes.

I'm grateful for her voicing this. I know if she is thinking this, so are others but they're too afraid, or too polite, or too resentful to say anything aloud in the circle. That, in itself, is a barrier to Reconciliation. Simply forming the shape of a circle doesn't create a circle in the sense of creating an equitable or safe space, or removing barriers, or eliminating hierarchy. In this case it forced compliance and mask wearing. And simmering resentment.

I asked them about the why. Why is this work important? Silence. Until the same person recited a perfect textbook answer about generational trauma and Truth and Reconciliation. An answer that did nothing to propel her forward, but made her feel powerless and resentful.

Slowly people started talking. An Indigenous woman sitting next to me talked about how shocked she was to learn that not everyone knew or understood about residential schools. She assumed everyone knew. Someone else talked about Justice Murray Sinclair and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. I talked about our environment and how little we understand the places we inhabit and how far removed we are from our food sources. Our planet is being destroyed in the process. We have an opportunity to learn from ancient wisdom that we tried to destroy. I wanted to talk about the First Peoples Principles of Learning that says learning involves exploration of one's identity. What does it mean for our own identities when we have to face the truth in Truth and Reconciliation?

Or when we have to challenge our own beliefs and change our teaching and living practices?

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960/1989) suggested that we cannot step over our shadows; we are connected in a continuous thread with our past, with traditions, and with our ancestors, living out traditions that have been bequeathed to us by others. The echoes of history are always inadvertently and deliberately inviting us into both past and new ways of being in the present and, thus, we live in a world that recedes into the past and extends into the future. Rather than pitting ourselves against history, we therefore need to remember, recollect, and recall it. (Moules et al., 2015, pp. 1–2)

The opportunity to reach back and peek, even briefly, at the traditions and understandings offered to us or denied us was cut short on this occasion. Lunch had arrived. Dialogue contained. We'll discuss math in the afternoon.



*Without time and space
to unfurl, the promising
bud of new ideas
retreats.*

The questions we ask are a framing that creates the boundaries for what can exist inside of the frame. How do we continue the practice of containment with our colonized questions? Our collective leadership can only emerge from within the questions we are framed by.

We have a ways to go.

Reconciling Self

At the first session for the President's Dream Colloquium series, Chief Robert Joseph told us Reconciliation starts with ourselves, at our kitchen tables. In that spirit, at our first session with Reconciliation Canada we were asked to share the gifts we bring to the process of Reconciliation. What my schooled mind heard was, "Tell everyone your strengths." It is not just semantics. Gifts are given to us; they are something we uncover and share. I have been taught strengths are something we build through our own effort; they are something we own.

I have been hostage to many circles where we are asked to talk about our strengths, something we're proud of, something others might not know about us. Each experience accompanied by feelings of inadequacy and imposter syndrome.

This night, like those other times, I sat politely uncomfortable, my mind furiously editing the possibilities of palatable answers I could safely offer. What if these strangers disagree with my self-perceptions? I avoid anything that speaks of too much commitment or action or possible arrogance. I settle on words that safely distance me from all three—I am responsible, I am hardworking, I care. Safe, generic.

Most people in the circle say one or two similar things; some look down or speak quietly or a little apologetically. Then it's almost my turn. I watch and listen in awe as the person next to me sits up straighter, leans forward and says, with unabashed gusto, "Oh, I have so many gifts to share!" She began to list them with joy and excitement, not arrogance.

I was dumbfounded. I had never seen anyone do that before. I had never seen anyone be so clear and unashamed of their gifts and able to share the information with beautiful joy. I had been raised and enculturated to downplay, not speak about, my gifts. But we all have unique gifts, and those gifts are all needed to meet our collective responsibility to our times (Mitchell, 2018) and for the earth (Wall Kimmerer, 2023).

I want to try again:

- I'm really curious and interested in the life experiences of others;
- I'm really good at seeing multiple sides of an issue;
- I listen to others and I don't assume I'm right;

- I'm a very reflective person;
- I'm open to learning new things; I mean I'm really open. I'm not just willing, but interested in changing, improving, growing, and doing and being better.

I'm ready to share these gifts with others joyfully and in service of moving towards reconciling and healing.

Still Wondering, Wandering...

So, what is Reconciliation? What does it mean to reconcile? I offer my interpretation with humility as someone still learning the depth of harm and destruction that has framed (and in some ways continues to frame) relations with Indigenous Peoples in Canada. I believe Reconciliation is understanding interconnectedness and living in healthy relations with ourselves and with others (human and more than human), in a good way. The circle facilitated by Reconciliation Canada I described earlier has sat with me for years. I look at it, hold it, re-view it. I continue to draw from it and learn from it. The spirit of love for self and others, the spirit of shared learning, the spirit of appreciation and honouring the spirit of each other needs to be there. Reconciliation is not something we do by checking off the boxes; it is never going to be done. Reconciling calls us to live differently, to practice our lives differently and to share our gifts openly. Sherri Mitchell (2018) speaks of the importance of accessing our individual gifts in order to “manifest them in the world collectively. This is how we will heal the wounds of our shared history and form a more humane pathway forward” (p. xx).

The Reconciliation Canada (n.d.) website states, “Each person has an important role to play in reconciliation. Reconciliation begins with oneself and then extends into our families, relationships, workplaces and eventually into our communities” (para. 4). Jennifer Llewelyn (Dream Colloquium lecture, November 10, 2016) asked us what it would look, sound, and feel like to live our lives in reconciled ways—not to be independent, self-sufficient and disconnected, but *to be interdependent*. This is true for systems, environments, communities, as much as for humans and all beings. She's not saying interdependence should be, or might be, or could be. It is. We are relational.

Instead of an accumulation of knowledge, reconciling really is about an uncovering of knowledge, a returning to that begins with ourselves. It is an uncovering process, and an unlearning journey. I have accumulated much to release and discard and heal.

Colonization didn't just happen to the visibly colonized; it happened and is happening to all of us. The conditions and systems we create and perpetuate without even seeing. Colonization places a film over our eyes, hearts, and minds that stops us from really seeing, believing and understanding. We all lose. I don't mean to suggest poor me, I've been hurt by it too. But I do mean to say poor us; we've all lost something valuable.

Elie Wiesel (as cited in Mitchell, 2018), implores us to remember,

The center of our universe is right here, right now. It doesn't exist somewhere out there. The universe exists within us all; it is in our backyards, our kitchens, and our community centers. This is where we must meet and begin having real conversations about the pain that we all carry; we must come together with awareness and understanding, and replace our rigidity with openness, and trade our apathy for empathy. It will be uncomfortable, and it will certainly cost us. But, the cost of not doing so will continue to be paid in lives lost. This is an unacceptable price to pay. *We must show up.* (p. 67, emphasis added)

Perhaps reconciling is showing up, with openness and love and truth. It is not to fix, but to be in good relations with ourselves and with all others encountered on our paths. And to move forward on that path in a good way.

When we join with others in an open, honest, loving way, we can generate new worlds. We are world-makers—what will we co-create?

Opening Generative Social Fields

There is a line in a sacred book of the Mayans that says, "We did not put our ideas together. We put our purposes together. And we agreed. Then we decided." (Senge et al., 2004, p. 78)

Joining purposes is incredibly powerful, and unfortunately rare. But joining purpose is what will lead to meaningful and life-giving possibilities. Not a charismatic, decisive, heroic leader who pulls a flock of followers to higher ground, but a collective shift in consciousness, achieved with time and space and deep listening, opening and presencing. Senge and Boell describe the possibilities inherent in what they call generative social fields. The sharing space facilitated by Reconciliation Canada, described earlier, was certainly a generative social space that emerged within and among our hearts, from our honesty and our presence. Though the facilitators had an

intention for how to set up the space and place everyone in groups, each person within each group needed to fully show up, in a good way, for a generative space to emerge.

My professional life is composed of an endless string of meetings, characterized by structured, business-like task generation or completion. However, there tend to be few actual *meetings*—a coming together of mind and spirit, a generative space of possibility when we join with shared purpose and open hearts. Holding space for the possibility of emergence is not easy. It takes courage and strength to swim against the well-worn rivers of expectations and expediency among others who are comfortable in the familiarity of known outcomes. For more is asked of all of us to tend to spirit generation instead of task generation. When it happens, there are *meetings*—opening, sensing, being and becoming, together.

Senge and Boell's generative spaces are similar to Lynn Fels's (1999) description of "Aha moments" (p. 50) in performance when unexpected landscapes dance together in a moment of possibility. It is a "landmark or signpost in a co-evolving journey-landscape(s) that welcomes further exploration and contemplation" (Fels, 1999, p. 50) and arises from a place of trust. A generative social field is a trusting space where we open ourselves to the freefall of possibility, not knowing the outcome, just that we need to be there, at that moment, with those people, hearing seeing feeling all of it.

Fels (1999) goes on to describe the possibilities inherent in the between spaces, the spaces between the 'real world' and the possible world, the communication and interplay between us that brings forth a new entity. I wonder about the possibilities inherent in generative spaces. Are generative spaces so different from the world of performance and drama she describes? We don't know where we are going; our destination emerges through the between place we inhabit and co-create together. She quotes Brook (1993), who says,

The essence of theatre (and drama) is within a mystery called 'the present moment.' 'The present moment' is astonishing. Like the fragment broken off a hologram, its transparency is deceptive. When this atom of time is split open, the whole of the universe is contained within its infinite smallness. (pp. 97–98)

The present moment of a generative space unfurls the possibility of eternity felt in a single moment. Energies, hearts, positive intention come together and generate anew.

Generative spaces are not about creating a 'thing,' although some 'thing' might result. It is about being and becoming, in community. Fels describes how being 'in role' can inform real life. I do not see generative spaces as role playing; I see them as close to real as we ever allow ourselves to become. They do not happen with hardened masks or impervious shells. They come to existence in the porous openings of a soft heart, a melding of intention, energy, openness.

Fels (1999) speaks of the possibility that arrives in a performance when the "not yet known becomes known, as when Mario's clotheslines came into being, sounding presence by Mario's counting⁶⁶" (p. 57). However, an offering needs to be received; Mario's clothesline had to be seen, understood, and picked up by the co-creator in order to unfurl possibility. It is not the act of one person; it is the interplay between or among participants who are participating fully in the present moment. Such it is within a generative social space. We don't create or embody that space alone; it must be shared in order to generate possibility.

Just as not all "performance realizes moments of transcognition in which the not yet known becomes known, absence sounding presence" (Fels, 1999, p. 61), not all meetings or coming together become generative spaces. Fels (1999) also points out the knowing, or "space-moments of learning" (p. 61) may not be shared by everyone.

I have written earlier about discipline review meetings that have become generative spaces, the possibility of being/becoming available for all of us who are present in that space. But there are times that fall short of that possibility of becoming. Without the honest engagement and open presence of everyone, it easily falls back into well-worn ruts of us/them, accusation, denial, anger, hurt, and the struggle for control. At best, a

⁶⁶ Fels (1999) describes a role play she and a student were co-creating about the fishing industry in Newfoundland. In character, she asks Mario questions about the town they 'see' from their boat, in an effort to bring it alive for their audience. Mario refuses to go along when she asks about the size of the town and its population, until he suddenly suggests they should count the clotheslines to figure it out. His reference encourages clotheslines to magically appear in their imaginations, weighted down with evidence of the life of the village – workmen's overalls, children's diapers, etc. come into being.

flat place of stasis, at worst a turmoil of harm. The same holds true for classroom encounters.

My first conscious recollection of a generative space happened when I attended Parker Palmer's Centre for Courage and Renewal in April and October 2016. They used a Quaker framework to create a space for deep listening and non-advice so we could experience the wisdom each of us holds within. No fixing or advising, just coming together and deeply listening.

2016.10.20 – A Dwelling: Making Contact

I am at Parker Palmer's Centre for Courage & Renewal for Leaders on Bainbridge Island. This is the last weekend I will be with a group of strangers who have become close, trusted people in my life. We have shared stories, laughter, tears, wisdom, hopes, fears, and dreams.

Monthly conference calls with 4 others have quietly changed me. It wasn't until I reflected on where I started in April and where I am now that I realize the changes I have undergone, thanks to the generous sharing, deep listening, and careful seeing of my peer circle group.

Maybe it's easier to do this with strangers—people I spoke to on the telephone for a total of 10 hours over 5 months. We don't know each other's back-stories, only what we offer in the moment. There is no predetermined script or typecast role to play. We see, hear, and honour each other during those calls.

Making Contact

*I believe
the greatest gift
I can conceive of having
from anyone
is
to be seen by them,
heard by them,
to be understood and
touched by them.
The greatest gift
I can give
is
to see, hear, understand
and to touch
another person.
When this is done
I feel contact has been made.*

(Satir, 2011, Making Contact section, para. 1–17)

The kindness of strangers. It gives me hope. The next step is to extend that generosity to those we know and love as well as those we know (or think

we know) and don't like. But first we have to let go of the stories and labels we construct for ourselves and others.

Let people carve new spaces. New stories. New narratives. New becomings.



We accept and even celebrate the cycle of renewal, blossoming, receding, rebirth in nature, but not in each other. Like nature, we are all in process, always. Who can we become throughout the cycles of our lives?

Every behaviour meeting holds the possibility of new becomings, not only for the student who is the focus of the meeting, but every person who shares that space. I began asking students questions to learn more of their story. Not merely the story of an act of behaviour that brought us to that meeting, but the story of an unfolding life of hopes, dreams, contributions, gifts, worries, possibilities. In these meetings I seek to not merely problem-solve, but to search for ways to breathe life into possibility with and for this person.

Sherri Mitchell (2018) shared a teaching from Kiowa author M. Scott Momaday,

We are what we imagine. Our very existence consists in our imagination of ourselves. Our best destiny is to imagine, at least, completely, who and what, and that we are. The greatest tragedy that can befall us is to go unimagined. (p. 13)

How we inhabit spaces, how we explore, and dream, and imagine, and live within them is world-making. If we're not tethered to what we value, in service of helping students become more of themselves, and holding space to be our selves, we lose our way just as much as the child who behaved in a way that led to the meeting.

I see myself in the students with whom I meet. I may not have brought a knife to school, fought someone, sold drugs on campus, or misused social media. But I did struggle against authority, fall victim to peer pressure, feel confused about who I was, struggle with worry about and a sense of responsibility for my family, confusion about my place in the world, lack of awareness of my emotions or my gifts. I currently wear a title of positional authority and I have also been scared, confused, hurt, worried. I have felt inadequate, felt judged and judged others, done or said things I wish I hadn't. And I, like each of these children, have more than that to offer. I am them; they are me.

We begin each of the behaviour meetings with a territorial acknowledgement and reminder of the Stó:lō teaching of a good heart, good mind, and good feelings that has often been shared by Stó:lō leaders at district events. These words inspire me and I aspire to live them. I offer these words, not as a teaching I live and know, but as a reminder to all of us who came to the behaviour meeting that we strive to arrive with a good heart, good mind, and good feelings. That we come together in a good way to support this person. I offer these words as a gesture of hope, an introduction and intention for our coming together. The hope of generating possibility.

2022.05.16 – A Dwelling: Sharing Gifts

This particular student had never been in trouble before, except for occasional silly behaviour. He was a student at one of the middle schools and one day caused considerable damage to one of the washrooms. The school needed to be evacuated, causing anxiety among students and staff. The cost of repairs was about \$4,000.

We met—the principal of the school, director of instruction, and two other principals, and the boy and his mother. We began with a reminder of the Stó:lō teaching of a good mind and a good heart. I explained the purpose of us coming together was not more punishment but to problem solve and determine the best plan forward for him as he transitions to secondary school.

He was personable, friendly, said all the things he thought we wanted to hear. He told us a sad story about not seeing his dad very often and maybe that was why he did it. We gently pushed and pushed back, mirrored what he said, asked again. Eventually he lost the brave veneer, the easy excuses. The mask fell away. I think maybe it's harder to maintain the impervious shell of a mask in the face of sincerity and care. And a refusal to settle.

When I asked what his gifts are, he struggled as many do. Why is it we learn to deny our gifts? We learn that the culturally acceptable answer to that question is, "I don't know." As a community, why would we do that to our children? We are here, I believe, to share our gifts. But first we need to know them.

His mom shared he is very good with young children, and eventually he admitted that little kids like him. Afterwards, when the committee met to try to create a plan for him for the final three weeks of school, we thought about that particular gift. We wanted him to see himself as a contributing member of a community, to know that he matters. One of the members of the committee is the principal of an elementary school. We decided the student would do his work at that school for the remainder of the year. He would also help at the school and work with little ones.

He behaved well, did his work, and helped out. However, I was surprised to learn some staff members were unhappy about him being there. It was an unusual placement, one they had not seen before. Assumptions surfaced in order to maintain the status quo. What if he influences the Grade 6 girls? What if he misbehaves? What will we tell the other parents if they ask questions? We shouldn't disrupt the well-worn system because of course things will go wrong.

In fact, he contributed positively. The principal told me one particular story about this boy being the only person who could convince a kindergarten student to come inside the building after recess. He refused to come in after recess and every time the teacher approached he ran further away. No one

could coax him in and no one knew what was wrong, until they asked this student to help.

I visited the student towards the end of his time at the school to see what he learned and how he felt about his time there. I asked him about that incident and how he managed to get the student inside. He shrugged and said he didn't really do anything. He just walked over to him (by that time the little boy was sitting by the tennis court) and asked if he could sit with him. He sat beside him and told him his name. He told him it was okay, he wasn't in trouble but they were just worried about him and want to make sure he's safe. He chatted with him a bit and eventually asked him what was wrong. It turns out the student was wearing his favourite boots and the sole of the boot had become unstuck and was flapping. The older student told him a story about a time his favourite shoe broke and how sad he was. He asked him if it would be okay to go back inside and the little guy agreed. They walked hand in hand back to the classroom.

He didn't really do anything.... Except that he intuitively knew to ask permission to join the small child in his space, he sat beside him instead of towering over him or sitting face to face. He calmed him by telling him he wasn't in trouble and everyone cared about him. He asked what was wrong and empathized with him. He didn't assume there was something wrong with the child; he assumed something was wrong that caused him to behave in this manner. He asked if it would be okay to go inside; he didn't demand it. But he didn't really do anything... except see this child, respect this child, and care for this child. That is a gift. In sharing with another, he contributed to his community. It matters.

*I believe
the greatest gift
I can conceive of having
from anyone
is
to be seen by them,
heard by them,
to be understood and
touched by them.*

(Satir, 2011, Making Contact section, para. 17–27)

We came together that day and generated a new idea for this student to share his gifts—to contribute to the community instead of harm it. To imagine a new possibility with and for him instead of a new punishment designed to 'teach him a lesson.' We came together that day, joined in purpose and intention and care. Behaviour meetings have the potential to be generative social fields.



Community grows and possibility unfurls when nourished with presence.

Sharing of gifts opens possibility; contributions in meaningful context flesh out the humanness of each person. Nel Noddings (2005) teaches that an ethic of care sees a better person than the one we might display in a moment and Monique Gray Smith (Weaving Love and Joy into the Journey of Truth and Reconciliation conference, personal communication, February 21, 2019) talks about others who spoke her future into possibility for her, at a time she could not see it for herself. We grow in community with others; we see ourselves in the reflections others offer us. We rely on the contributions of all in a thriving community. What happens to the growth of a child when we don't allow the space for them to contribute and to repair the harm they caused? When we don't offer the gift of being seen—seen for the best possible self they can be, beyond the results of an action? Robin Wall Kimmerer (Braiding Sweetgrass, Livestream Experience, Kripalu, personal communication, August 14, 2023), explains that we all need each other's gifts to meet our collective responsibilities for the earth.

A generative social field is a space of co-creation, one that parallels the natural world. Nature also teaches of the importance of community, and the generative possibilities available when we share our gifts. For example, Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) described the relationship and contributions of the three sisters: corn, beans, and squash. When they grow together, in an Indigenous method of farming, the sisters support the life of each other. Corn grows first, straight and tall. Beans follow second, using the corn stalks to support their vines. Squash grows later, close to the earth, shaded by the elder sisters. The corn makes light available to the bean, the squash reduces weeds and shades the roots, and the bean provides nitrogen for the others to flourish. A community of shared gifts. Kimmerer explains,

It's tempting to imagine that these three are deliberate in working together, and perhaps they are. But the beauty of the partnership is that each plant does what it does in order to increase its own growth. But as it happens, when the individuals flourish, so does the whole....

The most important thing each of us can know is our unique gift and how to use it in the world. Individuality is cherished and nurtured, because, in order for the whole to flourish, each of us has to be strong in who we are and carry our gifts with conviction, so they can be shared with others. Being among the sisters provides a visible manifestation of what a community can become when its members understand and share their gifts. (p. 134)

Generative spaces of presence, of shared gifts, and mutual interdependence are life-giving. We *feel* it because it is true. It is true for human kin and for natural kin.

I've led behaviour meetings that don't become generative. Families enter the space with anger, students enter with defensiveness or mistrust, committee members enter with assumptions, I enter with a scattered mind and unfocused heart. Any one of us can send the meeting in a different direction. Sometimes we can course correct for each other, but other times, we just try to get through in the best way possible.

2023.02.16 – A Dwelling: Falling Short

*The parents showed up to the meeting without their child, informing me they had no intention of subjecting him to our bull****. They were angry, wanting to know what proof we had of his latest assault, what right we had to accuse him. Yes, they admitted, the police had charged him and he would pay for that but it had nothing to do with the school. They told me this meeting was a complete waste of time, and I didn't know what I was talking about.*

I met with them privately that day, not wanting to subject the other committee members to a barrage of insults. I tried my best to refocus the conversation on the child and what we needed to provide so he could be successful. I insisted we would need to meet with him before he could return to school. I knew of other children who had moved schools because of this child, or families that expressed concern about this child being in the same school as their child because of his threats. I didn't tell the parents that, but it weighed on my mind.

Eventually the mother agreed to meet with the committee on another day, with her child. Everyone was on edge; we had all been the target of their anger, or the anger of families in similar situations. We braced for another onslaught of insults.



The meeting began. The mother placed her phone on the table, hiding it under her purse, but we could all see she was recording us. I noticed an eye roll when I began the meeting with the land acknowledgement and Stó:lō teaching. I began asking questions that the student refused to answer. The mother explained she had told him not to answer questions about the incident. I asked about whether he wants to graduate and what plans he has after graduation. Again, the mother interrupted and told us she had no concerns about that. His uncle will get him a job. Others tried to ask questions, offer ideas or suggestions.

I consciously breathed through the meeting. Tried to notice my body, to remain present, to not become defensive.

You choose to breathe into whatever may be happening right now, instead of distracting yourself from it. (Mortali, 2019, p. 21)

The best we could do that day was to have a semi-polite conversation. There was no co-creation, no opening of possibility. No generative space. No connections built.

We moved the student to another school.

Generative spaces of presence, just as performance described by Fels (1999), cannot be replicated simply because it has the same agenda, or even the same people. The moments of coming together, a melding of energy, intention, and heart cannot be repeated simply by following the same script. Each person, and each idiosyncratic way of showing up on a given day, changes the landscape, shifting the land on which we stand, and thus the way we inhabit the space. Therefore, how (and why, and when) each of us shows up matters, it matters, it matters!

Hope becomes the beacon held out before us that this generative social field may become again, or become anew. Having felt a generative social field once, it remains a forever possibility. I try to begin meetings with this hope, with the open space of opportunity, if only the others also show up, ready to dance, embrace, and re-imagine together. Everything becomes possible when we come together, in presence.

Receiving Natural Relations

It does not take long while practicing these seemingly simple rituals before we realize that we are indeed sharing breath with everything around us.... We are sentient beings connected to everything around us in ways that modern science is just beginning to recognize. (Salmon, 2021, p. 18)

It does not matter if you view land as Mother or sky as Father. These are simply extensions of another's world-view. What matters is that you have some kind of relationship with this place we live and breathe in, and if you only have an academic one, you must at least seek those who do not. It is the quality of our relationships that will help us evolve. (Meyer, 2013a, p. 99)

Relationship with place has become central to my learning process. My emerging understanding of place began with a belief I must know the names of each being in order to know place. Perhaps a colonized comfort in the ability to categorize. Perhaps it is respectful to know names, but more learning emerges when feeling energy, being present with more than human beings, rather than categorizing them.

As I write this, I look out over the Pacific Ocean, see the tide move in and out, watch the rain fall amidst the fog in the distance. Crows trace a line connecting one tree to the next, and I hear the call of unseen birds, unnamed. Is the tide coming in or out? Who does the birdcall belong to? I visit, admire the scenery, take photos and think about my research and the visual metaphors of different tree shapes. Does that mean knowledge

of a land? I lived years observing for my own consumption and peripheral pleasure instead of living within, among, together with the land in reciprocal relations.

And yet. Being in nature inspires me, I feel resonance with the swaying trees; my heart and mind attune to the forest as I walk the trails. I know which bend in the path marks the spot where the 'Emily Carr trees' emerge, the smell of wet dirt, fern, tree bark merge with the salt of the ocean spray to create a place of smell. My lungs breathe clear, my mind expands, my heart beats in tune. Not an academic knowledge of place, but a felt sense of place emerges as I immerse in the energy of place, in relation with it.

2022.10.02 – A Dwelling: Entering Spaces

Mindfully communing with the forest is a profound practice of self-discovery. Every tree, stone, plant, insect, movement of wind, shaft of light, patch of shadow, and flying bird have something to teach us if we can empty our minds and open ourselves to them. (Mortali, 2019, p. 25)

This summer, I entered my summer vacation with a combination of yearning and dread. Yearning for space, quiet, writing, connecting. Dreading the mountain of expectations I had placed on the limited time I had in Ucluelet: rest, write, exercise, meditate, rest, be with friends, hike, explore, write, write, finish dissertation. Quickly, only 3.5 weeks.

I entered my 'holiday' space warily, uncertain where to begin. The first morning there I unintentionally walked into a ritual of coming into myself, as I softly and respectfully came into the living ecosystem of the beach. I entered it differently; in fact, I usually bypass it on my way to the forest. I entered softly, savouring the smells, the feel of air on skin, the sounds arriving in layers—the booming of ocean crashing on rock, the whisper of wind in branches, the melody of birdsong persistently emerging from different directions.

I entered softly, stayed, embodied my senses and listened to my heart and the heartbeat of the surrounding living relatives already in community prior to my arrival. I attuned to the energy of place, and to my self—an unexpected co-mingling of life-force through the ceremony of mindful entering. It wasn't planned; it was felt.

My vacation time was productive, and calm. I wrote and connected with my self, with my environment, with friends, and newly recognized kin.

I experienced my day and time differently as a result of what I looked for and saw. Time changed as my perception of it changed. I saw beauty because that's what I looked for. I slowed my movements so tiny plants could penetrate through my over-schooled perception. Beauty seeped into my moments and became my day. Instead of expecting and maybe looking for busyness, I became stillness and openness and energy. Time shifted, perception shifted, relations shifted.



My heart filled.

Two months later, wisps of memory linger. I feel myself succumbing to pressure, activity, accomplishment. I am moving further from the teachings of nature and toward imposing the expectations of achievement. So much needs doing, we need to do, to fix, to prove and improve so we can be approved. And time once again becomes scarce. It eludes me; I am coming

to exist outside of it and thus try to control it and stuff more into it, try to expand it so I can spend and expend more of it.

Hope lingers, held in the cradle of memory. I hold desperately to the tendrils of remembrance.

2022.07.25 – A Dwelling: Emergence in Unfilled Spaces; Learning to Listen, See, Feel

*What emerges in unfilled spaces? What worlds are uncovered in silence?
How can we nurture silent spaces in classrooms to allow emergence?*

What tethers us amid the tensions of conflicting pressures to complete tasks, cover curriculum, control behaviour, have perfect looking classrooms? Can silence hold space there? Can imagination have room to unfurl?

My walks at the beach or in the forest, after years of slow immersion, are gradually guiding me to slow down, look closely, listen intently – and worlds emerge in layers. I linger, close my eyes and listen, look closely from different angles. Suddenly tiny flowers become visible among the gravel, or on the rocks, within the grass. Birdsong muffled by crashing waves or louder crows, slowly emerge into my awareness. Life always there, while I careened past it in my quest to swallow steps. Beauty ignored, life denied, worlds unseen.

I have been drawn to the rocks on our beach, lately. Large black and grey boulders that, depending on perspective, represent barriers to the ocean or invitations for climbing. I used to avoid them, preferring the forest trails, quietly cocooned in the stability of large trees instead of the rough, uneven boulders leading to more boulders, then ocean—paths without destination.

This morning I sat still on the rocks, swirls of fog buffering my vision of larger vistas. My focus, of necessity, in a smaller radius. Immediately to my left subtle shades of green, graceful grasses of differing hues and heights became my world, for a moment. Braided beige tops of long stemmed, stiff grass next to lush, thicker blades folded over under their own weight. Below the stems nestle flatter plants, holding flowers intent to open to the day.











My mind first registered grass and the immediate recognition dismisses possibility. What is lost when we cannot or will not see anew?

Chambers (2004) advises that finding a path with heart requires sustained attention and the ability to “learn to listen to ourselves and to others” (p. 7). I have been schooled in obedience to the words of others without recognizing the words in my own heart. I have followed the demands and paths others have laid down, believing they know best which direction to follow. Listening to others can be a dangerous enterprise without first attuning to my own heart space and knowing.

And listening to others requires re-cognition and attunement to communication beyond the realm of human words—birdsong, waves, wind, rainfall. Absence, too, teaches. It holds space for attunement—absence found in the silence behind words, the stillness beneath movement, the darkness beyond light.

Birdsong that emerges behind the insistent chatter of crows has taught me the importance of listening beyond noise, of hearing the smaller voices and the wisdom they have to offer. Waiting for the silence behind sound so new wisdom can flutter to awareness. Through meditation, learning to attune to the silence in my mind so the wisdom of my heart can also speak.

Chambers (2004) goes on to explain the Dene teaching that “being willing to listen is a highly valued quality and is a characteristic of both good

teachers and good students [and leaders]" and "the teacher's responsibility is to speak and to show while the learner's responsibility is to watch and to listen" (p. 8). I know when I teach well, I have first listened. Only when I listen well, within the curious stance of a learner, can I teach. Teacher and learner are interwoven, mutually reliant and supportive roles.

Our bodies, senses, minds, and hearts are but one expression of one species, one manifestation of the living earth. When we draw closer to the field of life pulsing through our feet, flowing through our lungs, and moving through our digestive tract, we are communing with a larger, more expansive model of who and what we are. (Mortali, 2019, p. 9)

Natural kin are teaching me.

2022.07.16 – A Dwelling: Place and Personhood; Nature as Person

“[Graham] Harvey observes that from an animistic perspective, ‘the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human.’ Persons, he goes on to write, are not equated solely with human beings in many cultures. Rather, the term serves as a broader umbrella for those beings who are perceived as displaying agency (and this encompasses landscapes, rocks, and bodies of water, in addition to plants and nonhuman animals)” (Van Horn, 2021, p. 4)



I have written about being ‘overly noted’ with the words of other people, trying desperately to understand and embody the wisdom of others as I reach for insights. Yet, as I walked and listened and smelled the beach my first day in Ucluelet this particular trip, I began to notice teachings surrounding me. Tiny buds of flowers growing wild on the trails or between the rocks that I’ve only noticed in passing. This time, they beckoned to me, holding my attention, gently speaking to my heart. I noticed. I heard.

I began to understand the danger of only valuing what we (humans) cultivate. The beauty that surrounded me, engulfed me, saturated my senses, yet only saved for vacation time. Savoured on a beach walk, then returning to my books so I can learn and continue my scholarship and do The Writing. The learning was back there, on that beach, and carried here, in my heart.

The parallels to what we do and have done in education are clear—only valuing what we cultivate, missing or dismissing the teachings students

carry in their hearts or their cultures. The same dismissal led to residential schools. Dismissal harms the one who is dismissed (students or nature) and also the one who dismisses. It is much easier to harm when we don't see the inherent value in another's being. We harm the spirits of children, and our selves, and we harm the planet and all our relations within it.

I read about the Whanganui River in New Zealand, which "gained legal status as a living entity with the same rights of personhood as a human being" (Van Horn, 2021, p. 5), and there are other places around the world where personhood is granted to nonhuman entities. The recognition that watersheds, mountains, rivers, nonhuman animals are not just 'there' with humans at the pinnacle of some imaginary pyramid, means that teachings cannot only come from the minds and words of humans, but from all beings.

Why, then, are humans the only experts quoted in scholarship?

I was drawn to record birdsong in Deroche and tree frogs in Ucluelet and I included them in my portfolio for Compassionate Systems Leadership Master Practitioner training. I thought it was a nice way to illustrate the beauty of nature. But now I understand the recordings as quotes. Just as the words of others have been a portal to a new line of thinking and understanding for me, so too is the sound of raindrops on forest leaves, waves crashing against rocks on the beach, birds calling to one another, nature's teachings, uncultivated by humans yet receivable if we learn to listen.

My life becomes more when I learn where to look. There are teachings everywhere and the ones I choose to find through the power of strong choice flesh my life out, make it fuller, let me soar. (Wagamese, 2021, p. 53)

Perhaps the relegation of birdsong to background noise, and of grass to green blur can be paralleled through the family relations relegated to annoyances, obligations, old grievances. When we no longer see the particularities of the beauty of a family member or student or colleague becoming a(k)new in each encounter, and we no longer hear the particularities of a communicated melody in birdsong (or frog song), then we negate kinship in those lost recognitions. We become other; we become isolated and alone. Our becoming ceases. The possibility of Reconciliation lost.

Being with/in nature has offered me unexpected new understandings of relating, of seeing, of being. Over time, I had succumbed to “place blindness” (a term Micah Mortali, 2019, credits to Richard Louv), where I no longer consciously saw the natural world around me. I noticed pretty scenery, but did not register the fullness of life or feel the vibrancy of energy in the natural communities I entered. I had become anesthetized by the dull thrumming of computer screens, artificial light, white noise, and exponential to do lists. That numbing is not what I dream of for current or future generations—the children we are entrusted to nurture and the adults supporting them.

I often still need to remember to listen, to feel, to sense among natural kin, but I am learning. Gregory Cajete (1994) tells us,

If our collective future is to be harmonious and whole, *or* if we are even to have a viable future to pass on to our children’s children, it is imperative that we actively envision and implement new ways of educating for ecological thinking and sustainability. (p. 23)

I originally read that to mean that we must teach *about* the environment. I am coming to understand the possibility of teachings *within*, *among*, and *from* the environment. The environment herself is our teacher.

Amba Sepie’s (2021) words also take on new meaning for me.

Our own connection [with Mother Earth] must be made anew, so that we care for Earth because we *know* she is our Origin, not just in some intellectual sense but in the deeply felt sense of understanding we are kin.... Such knowledge does not come to the wanderer without effort. If it does not come from generations of blood and sweat in one place, then it has to be cultivated and woven into place where we stand – where we birth *now*. (p. 26)

My understandings of and within the places I dwell require cultivation, ongoing tending and intending, presence and learning. I birth anew as I relate anew. A relational space of becoming within place.

O’Brien (2021) counsels that the quality of our relationships can offer the creation of new patterns and possibilities for world-making. In relation we can co-create our best imaginings for our individual and collective futures. We live in a time of increasing change and complex problems. We also live in a time of exciting possibility for seeing, feeling, and becoming anew, not only for ourselves, but for all beings.

2023.08.14 – A Dwelling: Attuning, Listening, Accepting

*Can we live in such a way that the earth can be grateful for us?
(Kimmerer, Braiding Sweetgrass, Livestream Experience,
Kripalu, personal communication, August 15, 2023)*

I am participating in an online course with Robin Wall Kimmerer. She's delivering it from the east coast of the US so it is very early morning for me. My immediate world is fresh from slumber, birds singing the day awake while the sun stretches her rays to coax the world to unfold from darkness.

Perhaps because I was so recently in dreamland, Robin's questions touch me deeply. She begins by asking what the earth asks of us, and then explains our answer depends on what we think the earth is. In western culture we tend to see land as machine; Indigenous cultures see land as relations.

She challenges us to live in relation with the natural world and in order to be in respectful relations we need to know names – not categorizations. You need to get to know a being so well it reveals its name to you. "If you were a plant," she asks, "rooted in place, how would you let your name be known?" Scent, shape, behaviour, leaves, seeds, roots, blossoms, pollinators—who are your neighbours, how do you move?

She invites us to go outside and listen for a plant being that calls to us and then sit with big, open, radar attention to what it has to say. Listen radically with mind, body, emotion, spirit. I comply.

I walk out the back door, grateful no one can see me. I close my eyes, listening, smelling, feeling the air and energy surrounding me. I think this might be silly but I breathe deeply for a moment. I open my eyes and feel myself drawn to what I have been told are Lilies of the Valley, my husband's favourite plant in our garden. I've always found them to be a bit boring, just large leaves stretching upwards, with tiny white flowers that make a brief appearance. I obediently go and sit with them, determined to follow Robin's instructions to listen intently for 15 minutes.

I force myself to stay focused on them and at first I see only a sea of green leaves. As I look longer, I notice the insects flying or crawling nearby. And I notice that the leaves I've only seen sitting at attention, reaching upwards, have positioned themselves differently. At least one leaf in every cluster has flattened itself to lie horizontally. Like an outstretched hand, the leaves are held out to receive.

Beads of dew rest languidly on the cradle provided for them. I am mesmerized at the ingenuity of collecting moisture in this quiet and simple fashion. It hasn't rained for weeks and the sun is already causing tiny beads of moisture to form on my upper lip. Without a strategy, these plant beings would shrivel with dryness.

A tear forms in my eye. Words float into my awareness.

Robin was right. I had only to see, and feel, and listen.



*Dew
Cradle*

This chapter explored three relational spaces and the possibilities inherent in each: relations with Indigenous Peoples in this country we now call Canada, relational spaces that become generative through open, honest presence, and relations with natural kin.

Relations with Indigenous Peoples have laid the foundation for our country we now call Canada. The legacy of attempted erasure makes for a shaky and crumbling foundation, and like fractals in nature that pattern will continue to replicate until we address it and heal. If we hope to reconcile and rebuild, we must reimagine, relearn, and re-story. We must learn to own our responsibility for learning truth in order to work towards reconciling and walking together into the co-creation of our collective futures.

Generative social fields offer a hopeful space of reimagining, co-creating, and becoming, when we enter relational spaces with our full presence and open hearts, when we deeply listen and fully see. Generative social fields do not emerge in isolation; they are co-created relational spaces.

Re-cognizing our interconnections with all of nature, re-cognizing all beings as relations offers the possibility of living as an ongoing act of reciprocally relating instead of an act of consumption. I learn from observing nature and also from sensing within the natural community.

Relationships constantly evolve, shift, transform, grow, diminish, heal—the energies we provide feed the spaces between, among, within us.

What will we co-create from our relational spaces? I move now to an exploration of creation in education.

CREATING

When we engage creation, we must be willing to be responsible for everything that we create, knowing that the world is interconnected and that every thought, breath, and action influences the whole. This requires us to choose our creations consciously. (Mitchell, 2018, p. 141)

Lacking wide-awakeness, I want to argue, individuals are likely to drift, to act on impulses of expediency. (Greene, 1978, p. 43)

Choosing involves action as well as thought. (Greene, 1978, p. 48)

What do we seek to create in our educational endeavour? I choose the word ‘create’ deliberately. We often talk about ‘fixing’ our education system, but spend very little energy exploring what we can create through education. *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (L. Brown, 1993) defines ‘fix’ as to “secure from change, vacillation, or wandering; give stability or constancy to (the mind, thoughts, affections, purposes)” or to “place definitely or more or less permanently” (pp. 961–962). Our formal education system has been fixed in place since its inception, with occasional tinkering and adding to a static framework. We might focus more on coding than handwriting, more on research than memorization, more student groupings than rows, but many classrooms look eerily similar to ones my parents attended, even though we live in different social, political, economic, and environmental contexts.

A common use of the word ‘repair’ is to “restore to a former state” (L. Brown, 1993, p. 2547). Seeking to repair our education system implies the system served and supported everyone and we want to return to what was (residential schools, segregation, streaming?). We do not live in the same economic or social reality as we did 100 or even 50 years ago. We can learn from the past, but returning to it is not helpful.

Creating, on the other hand, implies to me a belief in what can be, with each educational act a potential opening of possibility, an emergence of hope. The *Oxford Dictionary* defines creation as “the action of making, forming, producing, or constituting for the first time or afresh” (L. Brown, 1993, p. 544). To create is to bring something into being anew. What possibilities can we co-create with and for our students, our communities, our planet? For education is not a neutral endeavour; it has impacts and consequences, sometimes life-affirming and sometimes harmful.

Robert Fritz (2010) describes the difference between problem-solving and creating and explains each orientation reflects a different mindset. When we problem-solve, we attempt to make something go away (e.g., misbehaviour); when we create, we attempt to bring something into being (e.g., a community where everyone feels a sense of belonging and makes meaningful contributions). At their core, problem-solving and creating have opposite intentions. A problem-solving orientation can actually reduce the pull for creating and ironically reduces the likelihood of actually solving the problem. Fritz describes it as a loop:

The problem leads to actions designed to reduce the problem. The problem is reduced. This leads to less need for other actions. This leads to fewer future actions. This leads to the problem remaining or intensifying anew.
(p. 40)

Peter Senge (CSL Training, personal communication, August 27, 2021) describes this phenomenon as ‘Shifting the Burden,’ which happens when we solve problems with quick fixes that relieve immediate pressure but do not address foundational solutions. Because pressure has been alleviated, there is little motivation for further exploration for foundational changes (which usually take longer) and eventually the problem will reassert itself. An example of this occurrence is the way we respond to behaviours in school. Remove the student from the classroom or school, or hire more people to ‘handle’ students exhibiting misbehaviour so they don’t need to be in the classroom and *voilà*, ‘problem’ solved...? The impetus to change the ecosystem that activated the behaviour in the first place or the impetus to learn from the communication the student is sharing through the behaviour is removed and thus disruptive behaviours continue and we are asked to move more students and/or hire more and more people to ‘fix’ the behaviours.

In this chapter, I explore contextual purpose of my work as an educator and a leader. What do I seek to create as I share my energy and life force in this educational aspiration? What values and intention(s) guide the choices I make? How do I understand those I aspire to support? Wade Davis (2009) implores us to ask ourselves what kind of world we want to live in. I believe the kind of world we choose becomes the beacon we move towards in each educational act—each act revealing, as Douglas Sloan (2005) reminds us, what we believe it is to be human.

I begin by examining what I/we value, and the images I/we hold of children and educators. Those images guide what I believe can be the purposes for our education system and the ways we enact educational aspirations. Without awareness, we merely maintain the status quo, harming through our mindless maintenance of unquestioned following. Maxine Greene (1978) urges teachers to

attend more fully than [we] normally have to [our] own lives and its requirements; [we] have to break with the mechanical life, to overcome [our] own submergence in the habitual, even in what [we] conceive to be the virtuous, and ask the 'why' with which learning and moral reasoning begin. (p. 46)

In my master's thesis (Alvarez, 2008) I explored students', teachers', and parents' understandings and expectations of care in school. It didn't surprise me that people had different understandings of what dispositions and actions characterize a caring teacher; what surprised me was how closely aligned the adults' opinions were to their own stories of being cared for, or not cared for, in school—and how unaware of that alignment they were. Teachers who described their own memories of thriving in a competitive environment, for example, unconsciously recreated that same competitive environment for their students, whether or not their students felt cared for in that kind of setting. Disregard for the needs of others is like planting trees in an ecosystem we enjoy, without thought to the nutrients those trees need to survive and thrive, and then becoming surprised (and possibly irritated) when they start to wither. Each teacher I interviewed was surprised to recognize the connection between their own education and experiences of what they characterized as caring, and the ecosystem of care they attempted to create for their students. The creation of what they considered to be caring was an unconscious and unexamined act, yet one with profound implications for the students they attempted to care for. If students do not receive the teacher's act as caring, it is not a caring act despite the best intentions of the carer (Noddings, 2005).

I share this example as a reminder of the importance of making conscious, intentional choices as we enter educational relationships with students. We seek to make a positive difference in lives and communities through education. To enter into an educational space without awareness and clarity of purpose and responsiveness to what is, is disrespectful, and possibly harmful, to ourselves as educators, to our students, to their families, and to the communities we inhabit. Our actions reverberate and can have far-

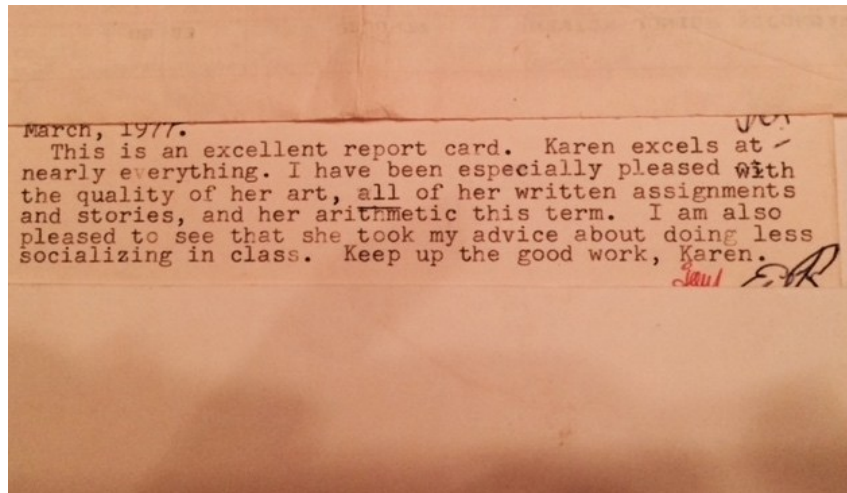
reaching effects, whether we intend it or not. Education is too important to be an unconscious act.

Everyone has opinions about our education system—we should do more of this, less of that, talk about this and not that. Our expertise is born of our own experiences in school, either heart-piercing memories of harm or nostalgic stories of fun, popularity, achievement. Perhaps a combination of both, depending on the teacher and students and the ecosystem co-created in a specific classroom. Either way, our opinions about education are based on story—individual stories of our pasts. Therefore, educational ‘change’ tends to be rooted in a past orientation, with the ever present ‘we’re-educating-them-for-a-world-that-doesn’t-exist’ flavour—a fixing rather than creating mode. We tinker, without really examining why we pull children and youth together in a space we call school, at this time and this place.

I, too, am propelled by my story—the tendrils of experiences that hurt or nurtured me, shaping my identity, for a time. I enjoyed elementary school and was generally a ‘successful’ student, as measured by marks and teachers’ comments. However, I also learned some forms of intelligence are more valued than others, and I learned to listen to the judgments of others instead of my internal voice. It has taken years to regain the ability to hear my voice and value my knowledge and experiences, after being veiled within the stories my teachers told about me (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Grade 7 report card—good student, stop talking. Approval as reward for lost voice.



Undated – A Dwelling: Grade 4 Identity Formation

We lined up in the drop off bay at the front of the school, right beside the road, in front of the windows of classes. Nothing to hide us. I was nervous. My friend Sandra was a good runner. She said she was nervous too, but I knew she was just trying to make me feel better. I knew I wasn't a good runner and I hated the races we had to do for the yearly fitness tests.

We lined up in twos: one girl, one boy. The teacher yelled "Go!" and we took off. I tried moving my legs as fast as I could, pumping my arms. But Lonnie took off in front of me and my embarrassment grew in proportion to the gulf that grew between us. I stopped pumping my arms. I kept running, but slower. If I wasn't trying, I wouldn't be defined by my failure—only by my lack of interest in a silly race.

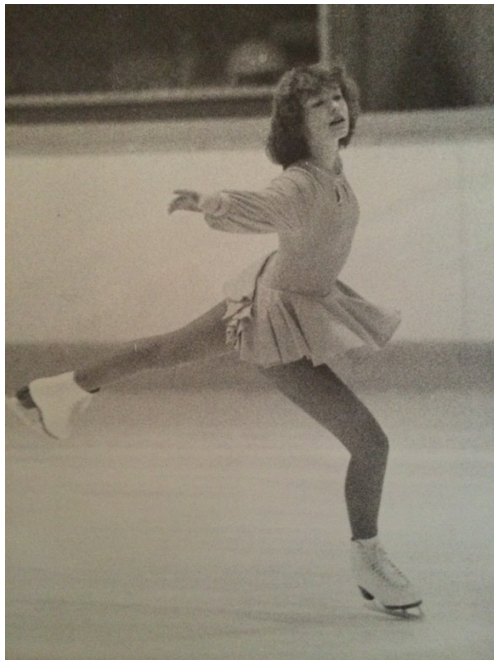
I hadn't counted on my teacher's anger as I finally crossed the finish line. She yelled, "That was a terrible time!" I laughed nervously and walked away, but she followed me. "That was terrible! You should be ashamed!"

Now everyone knew I wasn't athletic. A whole new identity. Good reader, non-athlete.

It wasn't until years later that I realized skating competitively and practising daily just might qualify me as an athlete. The teacher said, "That was terrible!" and any thought of athletic skill evaporated. I became defined by my lack of fitness, a shadow of judgment that still chases me.

Figure 2

Skating



*"How will you perceive us?
How will we, in the
temporal haste and
elusiveness of this moment,
receive you? Who are you
in our presence? Who
might you become?" (Fels,
2010, p. 6)*

Lisa Delpit (1995) shares an Indigenous story of a young boy learning to listen to himself:

A little boy went out with his grandfather and other men to hunt bear. After capturing a bear and placing it in a pit for skinning, the grandfather sent the boy for water to assist in the process. As the boy moved away from the group, his grandfather called after him, "Run, run, the bear is after you!" The boy tensed, started to run, then stopped and calmly continued walking. His grandfather called again, louder, "Run, run I say! This bear is going to catch and eat you!" But the boy continued to walk. When the boy returned with the water, his grandfather was very happy. He had passed the test.

The test the boy passed was to disregard the words of another, even those of a knowledgeable and trusted grandfather, if the information presented conflicted with his own perceptions. (p. 101)

My teacher said those words about my running time in frustration almost 40 years ago. I'm still trying to disregard them. I'm sure her intention was not to hurt me; she was just annoyed but I internalized a harmful message that has stayed with me.

The helpful part of the teaching I received that day was to question purpose. What is the purpose of physical education and why does it matter enough to include in school? Is it the fitness test? Or could it possibly be helping students to understand how their bodies move, how to take care of their bodies, how to enjoy movement and its benefits for health? If so, why does fitness need to be offered in a format of tests and competition?

Our values guide our intentions and our intentions guide our choices. Do we choose a path that opens or one that closes possibility for learners and learning? What do we see for, with, within our students? How does our ability to see open or impair their own insight?

2022.07.14 – A Dwelling: Value

I arrived in Ucluelet last night, my long-awaited summer vacation. My much anticipated Time to Write. Three weeks to work on my dissertation, the feeling of pressure to get it done wrapping tentacles around my shoulders.

This morning I began a ritual, a felt sense of entering into place, both environmental and heart-centred. I walked alone on the beach, climbing rocks, listening to sounds, smelling the salty fragrant air, feeling into my body as I entered this living space. I carefully place my feet on rock, between tiny plants determined to thrive, pathways between long strands of grass that stroke my fingers as I gently join the lifeforms already present.

Sounds lick at my eardrums and slowly enter my consciousness. I stop, close my eyes and listen. More layers of birdsong surface; I differentiate between notes indicating the variety of birds exchanging life force with their surroundings. In my slow movement I begin to notice the particulars of lush greenness. Tiny, vibrant blossoms enter my awareness – yellows, purples, soft whites, magenta with yellow centres, fuschia with white streaks. How many times have I walked past the bushes containing these jewels and not noticed? How many weeds have I pulled without noticing their beauty? Who chooses what is a weed and what is a flower? That which grows naturally is somehow less valued than that which is cultivated by humans.









Later, sitting at my writing desk I can see the easily accessible beauty of the flower basket we transported from home. White, soft pink, and coral petunias we purchased and arranged in the container we chose and paid for. We enjoy its obvious beauty; we had a hand in creating it. We bought the plants, we own them. The obvious crowds out the emergent. I overlooked the beauty and value of what is natural to here (any 'here' I happen to be).



Learning is another form of beauty. Do we only value that 'learning' we imparted and arranged for students, with the obvious markers of what we have determined is intelligence? What do we miss in the beauty of knowing that exists outside of the artificial structure of school? What beautiful knowing is natural to here, wherever 'here' is for each student we 'teach' and every human being we meet? What do we stifle from emergence when we weed out whatever doesn't fit into our basket of value?

Literacy is important, but I'm not sure I ever asked how a child is literate within their environment—their family structure, their relationships, their community, their place. What does literacy look like for this student? What does becoming numerate mean for this child's life? What are the purposes, needs, and markers of physical health for our children? How do the arts open pathways—body ways, heart ways—to understanding ourselves and the interconnectedness of all life? To what end are we teaching children to be critical and creative thinkers? How do we teach social and emotional

learning⁷ to nourish healthy lives that flourish in community, beyond the artificial confines of the school basket?

My ceremony of mindful walking, listening, smelling and entering a life space this morning allowed me to perceive beauty that exists regardless of my understanding or perception of it. I came to be in relation with my surroundings, which exist beyond me and yet are also connected to and within me.

What ceremony of mindful teaching will allow us to enter the life space of a classroom to come into relation with our students and perceive the beauty of ways of being and knowing that already exists in each of them? The students' lives exist beyond me and yet are also connected to and within me.

What matters in this educational aspiration? What already is? I am not arguing against teaching literacy, numeracy, the arts, physical health education, science, social studies. I am questioning the intention with which we enter the space of learning of any given topic. And I'm concerned about what we dismiss for and within each student in our quest to 'cover' the curriculum and impart pre-determined content.

Busyness comes with the territory of leadership and it's critical for leaders to learn how to manage the precious resources of attention. Paying attention, leaders told us, means that before venturing out and engaging the stimuli of the outside world, leaders must venture inward – before action comes listening [and seeing]. It means taking a moment, as the poet David Wagoner describes, to 'stand still ... listen,' for in that space you will find images of what's possible so that you can reach out, engage the unknown, connect, and challenge convention. (Intrator & Scribner, 2007, p. 77)

⁷ I refer to social and emotional learning as defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (n.d.) domains of self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, self-management, and responsible decision-making.

2018.08.22 – A Dwelling: Creating the Future

Most Western education is highly saturnine in tone: we like order, hierarchies, grades, tests, a gloried past, control, deprivation, remoteness of various kinds, and weighty seriousness. (Moore, 2005, p. 13)

The Deputy Minister talked about his new government's vision and priorities for education to an audience of about 300 superintendents, directors of instruction, district principals and other district leaders. We sat at large round tables and politely listened to his speech, squinting to read the graphs and tables in his PowerPoint slides. The presentation matched the sterile atmosphere of the large ballroom we were housed in, while the sun sparkled off the water and families laughed and played on the beach outside the hotel. Ironical to lay out the direction of our education system in a joyless vacuum, hermetically sealed from the outside world.

On the surface, his plan sounded like nothing new—more testing, data, preparation for a workforce we can't anticipate. But everything he said rested on unstated, apparently self-evident assumptions about the need to prepare a workforce to sustain the economy.

*Someone in the audience asked the Deputy Minister to remember 'soft' skills such as relationships, creativity, and social emotional learning. He responded that 'of course' those matter too; he just didn't have time to mention them in this talk. But for **three hours** he spoke to educational leaders in BC about his government's direction in education without once mentioning humanity, relationships, care, inspiration, joy, the planet. He spoke only about job training for a future we can't imagine.*

I get so frustrated when people talk about educating our youth for a world we can't imagine. Yes, change may be happening more rapidly, but it always appeared that way compared to what came before. And more importantly, we forget the role we play in shaping the future. Our actions today create the future of tomorrow! What we do now, matters.

When we create classrooms as incubators of curiosity, wonder, engagement, and reverence for all life and the world around us, we plant a seed for true lifelong learning and engagement with the world. We nurture world-makers. When our classrooms are caring, supportive, inclusive, mutually respectful places, we come closer to creating caring, supportive, inclusive and mutually respectful communities. When classrooms are competitive, punitive, or isolated job training factories – that is the future we design for our communities. How can it be otherwise? It's what we're training children to live; we are creating the tide they will need to swim against if they dream of a different future.

Where are we headed? What are we creating?

How do we educate our youth for the challenges of the next millennium? We surround them with our community, we give them

meaningful experiences that highlight their ability to be responsible, intelligent, and kind. We watch for their gifts, we shape assessment to reflect mastery and that is accomplished in real time, not false. We laugh more, plant everything, and harvest the hope of aloha. We help each other, we listen more, we trust in one another again. (Meyer, 2001, p. 146)



*Linearity is comforting, giving
the illusion of control.*

Justice Murray Sinclair (in a video for the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wjx2zDvyzsU>, accessed August 25, 2023) referenced three to seven generations when discussing making progress towards Truth and Reconciliation:

We cannot look for quick and easy solutions because there are none. We need to be able to look at this from the perspective of where do we want to be in three or four or five or seven generations from now, when we talk about the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in this country. And if we can agree on what that relationship needs to look like in the future and what we need to think about, what can we do today that will contribute to that objective? (2:11)

The idea of planning seven generations ahead or even contemplating the choices we make now impacting seven generations into the future is a new one for Western culture and education. Seven years—maybe, as we try to guess what kind of jobs we are preparing our students for. Seven generations, no. As we look ahead to the future (a future we can't yet imagine, according to those who believe our education system is to prepare workers for a future with unknown jobs), it is necessary to consider what we are seeding and nurturing now. We don't wait for the seventh generation to figure it out; we begin now so that in seven generations our relations and lives and planet will be healthy. And we look back seven generations, to understand how we came to be in this place at this time. We do not exist separately from place and time; we live within a continuum. Sheridan and Longboat (2006) remind us that living in a reconciled way means we are “not to be someone *new* but to remain someone ancient and to learn the lesson of being from time immemorial” (p. 379). They also explained, “The restoration of mind, spirit, and imagination is a sequence that requires us to know the antiquity we embody and from there to plan the ecological restoration blood memory demands” (Sheridan & Longboat, 2006, p. 366). Reaching back, being present in the now, and looking to the future recognizes a continuum of time and evolution. We enter a flow of time and history, each of us a part that manifests the whole, while simultaneously being shaped by the whole. The past, the present, and the future, and each person individually are parts that make the whole of the hermeneutic circle (Moules, et al., 2015, Zimmerman, 2015).

In recognition of her life as part of a continuous circle, Robin Wall Kimmerer (2021) contemplates what kind of ancestor she wishes to be, and in doing so, she turns to the wisdom of maple trees. She describes the soil of regeneration nurtured by a maple tree

through the release of leaves still full of nutrients. We talk about educating for a future we can't see, but

what matters most is the potential for regeneration. Building good soil enables resilience in the face of change, buffering against shortage and stress, so that life force can go into something more than survival... into becoming. It is the work of ancestors and ancestors-to-be, to support the becoming of what they cannot imagine, but trust will arise. Building good soil means preserving room for possibility, for a world open to creation again and again. (p. 183)

Natural kin will teach us, if we listen.

We begin with valuing—valuing the children we are gifted the opportunity to care for, and valuing the educators supporting them. How do we see and believe in and honour these beings?

Re-cognizing the Image of the Child

An image is a visual representation or a mental picture or impression of someone or something (L. Brown, 1993). Imagination is the “action of imagining or forming mental images or concepts of external objects” (L. Brown, 1993, p. 1312). Sheridan and Longboat (2006) explain the difference between a colonized imagination and an Indigenous understanding of imagination. Living in a colonized fashion severed from our ecology, means we come to understand imagination as originating in the human mind, separate from the sentient beings we are in relation with. They explain that, for the Haudenosaunee people,

imagination has a place because *imagination is a place*, and because everything is connected to everything else, the encounter with imagination is a living communication within a sentient landscape.... Imagination did not become a quality of a singularly human mind until mind severed itself from landscape and the depths of time. (pp. 369–370)

It makes sense that human imaginations severed from an ecological understanding would tend to form images of children similarly severed from their ecological connection. Douglas Sloan (2005) suggests that our educational practices reveal the image we hold of what it means to be human. It seems to me our educational practices are too often predicated on the image of the human as an economic being instead of an image of the human as a sacred being. Our worldview is revealed through our unexamined language:

Native Alaskan communities value children in ways that many of us would find hard to fathom. We non-Natives tend to think of children as unformed future adults. We hear about the birth of a child and ask questions like, 'What did she have?' 'How much did it weigh?' and 'Does it have any hair?' The Athabaskan Indians hear of a birth and ask, 'Who came?' From the beginning, there is a respect for the newborn as a full person. (Delpit, 1995, p. 100)

An 'it' is some thing to dominate, while a 'who' calls for respect, equity, care. Natural bodies or entities classified as 'it' are easier to justify domination over. We tend to think of an 'it' as there for our consumption and use. When nature is given personhood status, becoming 'who,' our collective responsibility to be in relation with nature replaces our power to dominate over and our perceived right to consume nature. A 'who' requires our recognition of the sacred and relational possibility.

In the same way, classifying a child at birth as 'it' reveals a likely unconscious belief in domination, consumption, use—a possibility of moulding children to serve economic or political means, a vessel to be shaped as opposed to a person to be revealed. Referring to a child as 'who' from birth reveals a respect in and recognition of personhood. A worldview which is revealed by both Meyer (2001) who advises us to look for a child's gifts and Kimmerer (2013) who assumes the purpose of education is to "learn the nature of your own gifts and how to use them for good in the world" (p. 239).

Loris Malaguzzi (1994), founder of the Reggio Emilia⁸ approach to learning for young children, speaks of the hundreds of different images there are for children. He explains,

Each one of you has inside yourself an image of the child that directs you as you begin to relate to a child. This theory within you pushes you to behave in certain ways; it orients you as you talk to the child, listen to the child, observe the child. It is very difficult for you to act contrary to this internal image. (p. 52)

Hence the importance of being aware of our images of children and of ourselves.

⁸ The Reggio Emilia philosophy and practice was created from the devastation of WWII in Italy. It is a direct result of the political, social, and cultural context of a particular place and time (which is why people speak of Reggio inspired pedagogy and not a Reggio program). Particular context matters to the creation of educational practices (see Cagliari et al., 2016).

The *BC Early Learning Framework* (ELF; Government of British Columbia, 2019) for children from birth to age eight also speaks of the image of the child as central to our work as educators. The ELF is

based on an image of the child as capable and full of potential. All children are celebrated as strong, competent in their uniqueness, and having a secure sense of belonging. ... Within the contexts of their individual and cultural identities, children are listened to and valued for their ideas and knowledge. (Government of British Columbia, 2019, p. 12)

The ELF applies to children from birth to age eight, but there is no reason this image would not also apply to older children and youth. Imagine the possibilities available when we hold our image of all children and youth as being capable and full of potential, if we celebrate all of them as strong, competent in their uniqueness, and having a secure sense of belonging, and if, within the contexts of their individual and cultural identities we listen to and value children and youth for their knowledge and ideas and gifts.

The ELF's image of the child (and youth) is hopeful, but not always enacted in classrooms. The image of the child that each of us holds, often unconsciously, is central to how we understand, see, and hold the inherent dignity of the children we work with. The often unstated and unexamined assumptions we hold lay the foundation of the educational path we create for and with our students and ourselves.

2018.03.18 – A Dwelling: Children Seen, Not Heard

The Westcoast Family Nights are held once a month, on a Friday evening at one of our high schools. Every time it rolls around, I toy with the idea of not going. I'm tired at the end of a long week, I want to work longer and get caught up for the following week, then go home and relax. Yet I go every time, and every time I'm so grateful to be there. It is such a gift to be included.

Within the context of a free dinner, cultural teachings are shared, and community relationships are formed. There are often leaders from Kwantlen Nation or Semiahmoo Nation, Elders from the local community, workers from the Friendship Centre, and district staff (usually me, the early learning manager, and a safe schools liaison) there to help facilitate the evening. The Nation leaders and Elders offer teachings as everyone visits and eats dinner together. Dinner is followed by dancing, drumming, singing from various Indigenous cultures. We are on urban land with many Indigenous families removed from their cultures. This is an opportunity to re-connect, to remember, to re-cognize traditional wisdom.



A student dances at the West Coast Family Night

I understood the teachings offered one evening by a man from the Kwantlen Nation, to be an offering of a worldview full of possibility, creating a foundation of seeing, believing and understanding based in wholeness and love and re-cognition of the spirit in others.

When he thanked the caterers for dinner he didn't say thank you for the delicious meal. He said thank you for creating this with your hearts, for

feeding my people in a good way. I can feel your love that went into the creation of the meal and that means a lot.

While he spoke to the families seated around the periphery of the gymnasium, there were two little girls running around in the centre of the room, laughing and shrieking. In my upbringing they would have been seen as misbehaving, and I felt the visceral pull of habitual roles – the teacher duty to keep everyone quiet and the good girl duty to remain quiet myself as these were not my children, or students. I could see some people exchanging looks signifying their annoyance. I remained silent. My recollection of his words are that he said,

Look at these young girls. They are pure spirit. And look how hard they are working – running back and forth – working very hard to purify this space. Thank you to them.

A completely different worldview. A completely new offering of possibility. Liberating our image of the child as one with inherent dignity and wholeness.

“What will happen to the spirits of our children when they enter your school system?” (anonymous response on a feedback form following an early years conference, 2018)

The image of the child this man offered is one of pure spirit, agency, purpose, capable of helping and healing others. He did not offer an image of obedience, an empty vessel to be filled and moulded, regardless of the gifts they might already have. Through his teaching, I was invited to recognize that classroom environments are created, unconsciously or consciously, from what we hold to be the image of the child.

The image of the child (or youth) as a vessel to be filled, controlled, and kept busy severs us from wholeness. Mind, body, spirit fragmented—divided to be overcome and conquered. The ripples of dismissal reverberate through time and fill us with a narrative that closes possibility.

As a young student I enjoyed learning, and I enjoyed the recognition that came with being a good student. That motivation served my success at school until I stopped respecting my teachers and wanting their recognition. In elementary school I created extra research projects at home and couldn't wait to share them with my teachers. In junior high I stopped doing homework and couldn't wait to get out of my teachers' classrooms. I went from having teachers who saw me and were engaged in their work and in my learning, to teachers who didn't know me and weren't engaged, engaging, or interested in my learning or, it appeared, their own work. I can only surmise what their images of youth were, based on their disinterest in forming relationships with us, the repetitive and sterile lessons they delivered, and the punitive and manipulative manner (some teachers) employed to control behaviour and subdue our spirits.

Undated – A Dwelling: Obedience as Learning

When examined, many of our modern educational assumptions and practices imply images of the child and of the adult as essentially other than human – merely an animal to be socialized, a computer to be programmed. (Sloan, 2005, p. 27)

The class obediently recited, “Bonjour Madame Tibou. Bonjour Monsieur Tibou” then waited while the tape played the next segment for us to recite. The teacher’s sole responsibility was to press play. Did he even speak French?

I dutifully followed along, reciting the lines, answering the simple questions, and was rewarded with an A in Grade 8. I was ‘good at French’—it was clear by my mark. By Grade 9 I wasn’t willing to play along any more. Getting teased for answering questions in unsafe classes while teachers did nothing cured me of my desire to do well. But in this particular class I was even more resentful. The teacher didn’t even bother to teach! He just played the tapes and we filled in worksheets.

I could tell a few other students had played along long enough too, because people stopped answering questions or paying attention. Mr. S devised a new coercion tactic to combat the apathy of a bored class. At the beginning of one class he pulled out a very large bag of jujubes. He proudly explained that he would give a jujube to those who answered questions.

We looked around in disbelief—he couldn’t be serious! I had never encountered this form of manipulation before and I couldn’t believe he would do such a thing—others couldn’t believe he would actually follow through and give a candy. Sure enough, if someone gave an answer he threw (literally THREW) a candy to them. I didn’t have the language to put to my feelings, but I was completely turned off. I felt manipulated and demeaned. When he left the class unsupervised I went over to his desk and took the bag out of the drawer. I started throwing jujubes to anyone who wanted one. When he came back and realized his candy supply had been diminished he demanded to know who had done this disrespectful act (the irony was completely lost on him). When I admitted it was me, he kicked me out. Again he missed the irony. Getting kicked out meant I was out of a very boring and degrading class, and I was simultaneously raised to the status of cool among my peers.

Krishnamurti (1954, as cited in Meyer, 2013a, p. 253) advises, “It is no measure of health to be well-adjusted to a profoundly sick society” and yet students are expected to comply with manipulation, to ignore their own visceral rejection of disrespect or be punished into submission.



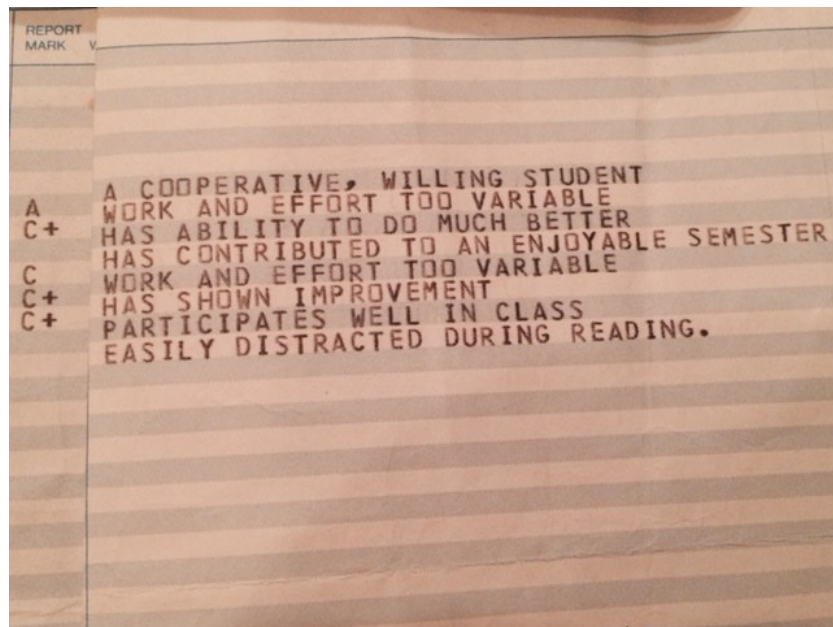
*Damage is done when
we're severed from our
selves in service of
obedience.*

I returned to the classroom the next day but we had both (teacher and student) drawn our boundaries of possibility. Our story of each other (dismitter and dismissable) limited the opportunity for learning. We each assumed the role of dismitter, and in turn we each received the mantle of dismissable. A reciprocally harmful act of disregard. French never became a language I pursued.

The lenses through which we are seen and the way we are mirrored back to ourselves define and confine the space of possibility. By Grade 10 my possibilities diminished even more (see Figure 2).

Figure 3

Grade 10 report



Undated – A Dwelling: Student as Teacher

“Every educational practice implies some underlying image of the human being.” (Sloan, 2005, p. 27)

The gymnasium was crowded and noisy. Over 600 young bodies squished together on the floor, teachers seated in chairs at the side. I was nervous. This was the first time I was to take the class and supervise them in an assembly. I wasn't entirely sure of the rules to follow – there are a plethora of unwritten rules one must understand to successfully navigate the most traditional of school practices. Minutiae for deadly traps of unworthiness.

My school associate was not coming. I was on my own, except for the numerous eyes of judgment discerning whether I could navigate successfully.

The principal scared me. She was tall and foreboding. I never saw her laugh with children, or even interact with them unless they were doing something wrong. I never saw her sit in the staffroom, get excited or surprised. Just stoic and mad. She mostly ignored me.

Jamie was in Grade 1 for the second time. He had been in my school associate's class the previous year and she and his mom decided another year with Mrs. J would be helpful. For the most part, they seemed to be right. He loved Mrs. J and was very attached to her. He was not attached to me, yet, although we had started to forge a tenuous connection. He was a determined and angry child, but also street smart, independent and reliable when given voice and leadership.

He was at the front of the line, strategically placed close to me. We found our place on the far side of the gymnasium, amid the roar of talking and laughing, and the shuffling of bodies making room for our class.

We squeezed into our spot and I eventually got them settled, after moving Charles away from Imran, John closer to his educational assistant (EA), and reminding the girls not to talk during the assembly. Satisfied we were ready, I walked over to the side where my teacher chair was waiting.

Jamie was seated next to the chair, but he squirmed and made noises that made me very nervous.

The principal and vice principal stood at the front, both looking out angrily at the crowded sea of children. They were mad and proceeded to castigate everyone (teachers were definitely included) for the noise level and length of time it took to get settled. The madder they got, the madder Jamie got. The more restless he got, the more nervous I got. I bent close to him and asked what was wrong.

“I don't want to sit on the floor, why can't I sit in a chair?” I started to explain that the chairs were for teachers, but it sounded lame even to my ears. “Why do you get to sit in a chair and I have to sit on the floor?” he asked

sincerely. I had no real answer except for tradition and hierarchy. So I sat next to him on the floor and he settled. I could feel eyebrows raise around the outside of the room, but I didn't care. He was right, and in any event, he wasn't going to give up. So I did.

I looked around the room differently from my vantage point on the floor. Why were we even packed in here? What was the educational purpose? So we could all be told off? I don't even remember what followed, but I do remember questioning the practice of assembly as authority. The purpose could have been community building, recognition, and celebration. And thought could have been given to the comfort of those participating.

Following the rules, I end up questioning the authority that imposes them. Jaime teaches me.

*We 'hierarchize'
ourselves out of
possibility when we view
smaller as less. The
smallest of pebbles fits
within the whole.*

*When opportunity
arises, sit with the
children.*



My image of the child holds that every child matters—not because they are good students, neat printers, task completers, compliant, or polite. They matter and make a difference because they are here. They are world-makers. We create worlds with our beliefs and actions and words. Each of our actions, words, tones, ripple beyond our selves, influencing and affecting life around us. We can create consciously or unconsciously, intentionally or unintentionally, but we do create.

Every being in an ecosystem is integral to how that ecosystem shapes itself. Plants of a forest grow toward or around or away from others, finding their spaces; the insects and animals nourish and are nourished by the plant life; energies entwine and pulse together. So it is in the ecosystem of a classroom. Each being growing toward or around or away from others; the learning nourishing and being nourished by the spirits of everyone there; energies entwine and pulse together. Each person matters and affects and is affected by each other person, like the rocks reshaping the river and the river moving, shifting, reshaping the rocks. As an educator, I want to help students learn the effects they have, the gifts they contribute, and the inherent value each of them brings. They are currents of possibility and my role as educator and leader is to recognize and facilitate their potential paths, not define and limit the roads they will travel.

What is true for students is also true for all of us. In the act of education, learner and educator are inseparable and interchangeable. My image of the child leads me to explore my image of the educator.

Re-cognizing the Image of the Educator

In addition to outlining the image of the child, both Malaguzzi (1994) and the BC ELF (Government of British Columbia, 2019) discuss the role of educators, which in turn reveals an image of the educator. Malaguzzi defines the role of the adult, “not as a transmitter but as a creator of relationships—relationships not only between people but also between things, between thoughts, with the environment” (p. 55). He explains, “We teachers must see ourselves as researchers, able to think, and to produce a true curriculum ... from all the children” (Malaguzzi, 1994, p. 55).

The ELF also describes the role of the educator, revealing an image of them:

Educators have opportunities for ongoing dialogue with colleagues, families, and the broader community to consider how developmental theories have shaped perspectives and pedagogies of childhood and learning. By coming together in communities of practice, educators consider many different perspectives and engage with the complexities of practice in a spirit of experimentation that is local and respectful. (Government of British Columbia, 2019, p. 12)

The ELF’s image of the educator is one who is a collaborative and curious learner. The educator is not expected to know everything but to engage with colleagues and communities to continue to learn, to engage with different perspectives with openness, to experiment respectfully. Learning is not static but evolves in local contexts.

In my experience, the stance of experimenter, learner, collaborator also requires courage. Being able to admit to not knowing or not knowing how does not come easily to all educators. As much attention needs to be given to learning spaces for adults as for children. An environment where risk-taking, experimenting, and collaborating is valued is important for all learners to develop.

What is true for children is also, always, true for adults. We are all human, some are just taller with longer experience. But all are worthy of respect and love and care and safety to stretch, “even while we affirm their competence and knowledge” (Pelo & Carter, 2018, p. 126). My hope is that we see both learners and educators as “innovators, rather than technicians, as creators rather than consumers—people who generate questions and insights and new knowledge” (Pelo & Carter, 2018, p. 126).

Titles of 'learner' and 'educator' imply student and teacher, but in reality learners and educators are interchangeable descriptors. Each role is entwined and interdependent with the other. I have both taught and learned from my students. I am both educator and learner simultaneously, as are my students.

When we view learners and educators as capable and full of potential, as sacred beings instead of economic beings, as beautiful and unique beings with their own gifts to offer, as persons worthy of our respect, not our domination... then perhaps we can begin to co-create generative, sacred learning spaces with them. The alignment—or, as described by Lilian Katz (as cited in Pelo & Carter, 2018), the congruity—in the ways in which we view and treat educators and the way we hope they view and treat their students moves us closer to generative learning spaces.

I reach for wholeness in and through education, and a recognition and valuing of wholeness within myself, within our students, and within the educators working with them. To tend to the whole child—body, heart, mind, spirit—we must also attend to the whole adult. This does not mean our professional learning opportunities become counselling sessions. Nor does it mean we don't have requirements for those teaching our children. It means we can offer "intellectually, spiritually, emotionally invigorating learning that strengthens the dispositions at the heart of a community ... dispositions to think, wonder, question, take risks, and listen beyond assumptions" (Pelo & Carter, 2018, p. 129). When educators are valued as whole humans they are better able to value students as whole humans, just as Noddings (2005) points out that our ability to care may be dependent upon our experiences of being cared for. We cannot give what we do not have.

When our image of the educator is one of respect for their whole person and their stance as a curious learner, appreciation of their unique gifts and contributions, and belief in their inherent value, we create an environment of support and engagement. When our image of the educator is built on mistrust for their work ethic, dismissal of their social, emotional, physical, and spiritual aspects in favour of only intellectual abilities, and disregard for their unique gifts and contributions in favour of palatable and predictable uniformity, we perpetuate a system of disrespect, mistrust, fragmentation, and isolation. Wholeness will not emerge from that foundation.

My image of the child and of the educator guide my educational and leadership practices. I turn now to an exploration of the purpose of education.

Articulating Purposes for Education

This is our work, to discover what we can give. Isn't this the purpose of education, to learn the nature of your own gifts and how to use them for good in the world? (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 239)

Knowledge that does not heal, bring together, challenge, surprise, encourage, or expand our awareness is not part of the consciousness this world needs now. (Meyer, 2008, p. 221)

The purpose of education is not a given, but should be constantly questioned and re-evaluated as circumstances evolve (see Biesta, 2009). We should not merely be asking what works in education, we should be asking what is desirable. However, Biesta (2009) explains that does not happen because of an

often implicit reliance on a particular 'common sense' view of what education is for. We have to bear in mind, however, that what appears as 'common sense' often serves the interests of some groups (much) better than those of others. The prime example of a common sense view about the purpose of education is the idea that what matters most is academic achievement in a small number of curricular domains. (p. 37)

Education systems are among the most pervasive, far-reaching and influential systems in our society. School is a system that both reflects and shapes individuals and communities. Yet so much of what happens in schools rests on assumptions and beliefs that are taken for granted and left largely unexamined. Biesta (2009) highlights the

remarkable absence in many contemporary discussions about education of explicit attention for what is educationally desirable. There is much discussion about educational processes and their improvement but very little about what such processes are supposed to bring about. There is very little explicit discussion, in other words, about what constitutes *good* education. (p. 36)

We should not assume that we all mean the same thing when we talk about desirable education or the purposes of education. Once chosen, an educational path must be reconsidered as the people involved change, as context evolves, as needs emerge. A complacent assumption that what once worked will still work, if only we tinker a bit here and there, is faulty and harmful.

Without clarity of purpose it is too easy to wander mindlessly through the school year, filling students' days with activities without understanding the effects of their 'learning.'

Elie Weisel (as cited in Orr, 2004) explains how the barbarity of Auschwitz, Dachau, and Buchenwald were perpetrated by ‘well-educated’ people who learned about Kant and Goethe. They absorbed information, they were compliant, they completed tasks—and probably received good marks. But their education

emphasized theories instead of values, concepts rather than human beings, abstraction rather than consciousness, answers instead of questions, ideology and efficiency rather than conscience. (p. 8)

I am not arguing against exposing the ideas of Kant and Goethe to students, but I am questioning to what purpose, in what context, and in what process of learning?

Similarly, the Italian town of Reggio Emilia recognized the devastation caused by World War II and fascism. Renzo Bonazzi was Reggio Emilia’s mayor from 1962–1976 and he described the purpose behind the creation of their unique approach to learning:

Mussolini and the fascists made us understand that obedient human beings are dangerous human beings. When we decided to build a new society after the war we understood that we needed to have schools in which children dared to think for themselves, and where children got the conditions for becoming active and critical citizens. (Dahlberg, as cited in Caglieri et al., 2016, p. viii)

What we consider to be the purposes of education emerge from our beliefs and values and images we hold of what it means to be human. Those purposes must be articulated and examined as contexts and needs evolve.

Scholars have offered wide-ranging opinions about what they believe the purpose of education should be, from “improving learning and enhancing the life chances of all students so that they have genuine choices about meaningful work, continued education, and civic engagement” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 2) and preparing “students as citizens to live in, to participate in and to sustain a democracy” (Molina & Klinker, 2012, p. 381), to care (Noddings, 2005), happiness (Noddings, 2003), imagination (Greene, 1995), critical thinking (Hyttén, 2006), and social-emotional competencies and ethical dispositions (Cohen, 2006). Care, happiness, imagination, critical thinking, social-emotional competencies and ethical dispositions are all laudable goals but only, in my opinion, within a framework of wholeness and health.

I spoke earlier about the importance of healing, because when we don’t heal, we can cause harm. Our education system needs to heal, because when it does not, it can

harm. Our planet, our relations, our selves need healing right now. Yet we do not design our educational system with healing and health at the forefront. As a system, we tend to value task completion rather than the messiness of meaningful contextual learning, compliance over responsibility and contribution, and absorption of information over curiosity and meaning-making.

I reach for wholeness in my work as an educator and a leader—recognizing the interconnectedness of ideas, relations, actions, beings. No idea, word, action, sharing of energy happens in isolation. Everything affects and is affected by the surrounding ecosystem. And yet I see us choosing complacent blindness over interconnected wholeness. We separate and isolate ideas into different subjects, we separate and isolate students from each other,⁹ we often separate and isolate students and educators from the natural environment, and we separate and isolate different aspects of our selves, favouring mind over body, heart, spirit.

Gregory Cajete (1994) explains the heart of traditional Indigenous education was to be fully knowledgeable about “one’s innate spirituality” (p 42). Education was “a journey for learning to be fully human. Learning about the nature of the spirit in relationship to community and the environment was considered central to learning the full meaning of life” (Cajete, 1994, p. 43). Spirit as central to learning; spirit connecting us all in community with other humans and in nature with all beings. Cajete (1994) does not describe economic sustainability, or individuality, or grades, or jobs. Education was a journey into becoming fully human and honouring spirit is essential to the health and well-being of humanity.

How did we come to a place where I was admonished for uttering the word ‘spirit’ in reference to educating the whole child? The processes of ‘siloin’ parts of our selves and parts of learning have led to a fragmentation of purpose and understanding away from the ecology we are inherently connected to.

⁹ Students are often automatically separated in various ways—admonishing them not to talk, separating them by seating design, separating them within categories of age, ability, needs. During COVID we separated them into learning cohorts and they were not allowed to play or interact with those outside their designated cohort. All of these separations are seen as natural and needed but is that always true? Perhaps they are merely expedient and convenient, not educationally necessary or nourishing. We certainly don’t tend to question the separations.

David Orr (2004) expresses concern for the method of dividing learning into separate disciplines for the sake of expediency because it gives the impression “the world really is as disconnected as the divisions, disciplines, and subdisciplines of the typical curriculum” (p. 23) and the harm that comes from this fragmentation reverberates into the future and across relationships. He explains,

Students come to believe that there is such a thing as politics separate from ecology or that economics has nothing to do with physics. Yet, the world is not this way, and except for the temporary convenience of analysis, it cannot be broken into disciplines and specializations without doing serious harm to the world and to the minds and lives of people who believe that it can be. We often forget to tell students that the convenience was temporary, and more seriously, fail to show how things can be made whole again. One result is that students graduate without knowing how to think in whole systems, how to find connections, how to ask big questions, and how to separate the trivial from the important. Now more than ever, however, we need people who think broadly and who understand systems, connections, patterns, and root causes. (Orr, 2004, p. 23)

Orr suggests finding ways to situate disciplinary knowledge “within a more profound experience of the natural world while making it more relevant to the great quandaries of our age” (Orr, 2004, p. 98). Traditional Indigenous ways of learning/teaching happened in context, by doing (e.g., Cajete, 1994; Davidson, 2018), not as abstractions divorced from context. Separation can describe much of the teaching and learning in modern North American education.

These differing educational formats emerge from vastly different worldviews. On the one hand is the Cartesian view that posits the separation of mind and body. This philosophical perspective rests on an understanding of the world as an “inanimate mass of matter arranged by chance into a set of shapes and energy patterns” (Deloria, 1994, p. 13), which contrasts starkly with an Indigenous worldview “that sees the world as an intimate relationship of living things” (p. 13). The interconnectedness of our world that is the foundation for all life, is rendered fragmentary through the structuring of learning into discrete subjects, ideas, locations. Wholeness divided. Fragmentation solidified. We see the results all around us in increasing social isolation, economic disparities, environmental destruction.

The BC curriculum was redesigned to respond to the changing world we are living in, taking small (somewhat timid) steps towards educational reform through increased

personalized learning, flexibility, choice, and inter-disciplinary learning opportunities. Indigenous perspectives and knowledge are also highlighted throughout the K–12 curriculum. In reference to place-based learning, the curriculum overview states, “In all of the areas of learning, teachers are encouraged [not required] to teach in ways that respect the place in which the students are—to teach from within the school and its surrounding community” (Government of British Columbia, n.d., “Indigenous Perspectives,” para. 5). However, there is no mention of wholeness, interconnectedness, or spirit. Thus, Indigenous worldviews are mentioned, not adopted.

Through the development of curriculum, the government seeks to “ensure the development of an educated society” (Government of British Columbia, Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 2), based on their definition of an educated citizen, which are those who:

- Are thoughtful and able to learn and to think critically, and can communicate information from a broad knowledge base
- Are creative, flexible, and self-motivated and have a positive self-image
- Are capable of making independent decisions
- Are skilled and able to contribute to society generally, including the world of work
- Are productive, gain satisfaction through achievement, and strive for physical well-being
- Are co-operative, principled, and respectful of others regardless of differences
- Are aware of the rights of the individual and are prepared to exercise the responsibilities of the individual within the family, the community, Canada, and the world. (p. 2)

This checklist of what it means to be educated seems innocuous but it also reflects a plan that is divorced from context, time, and place. Indigenous families living on some reserves do not have safe drinking water or housing, the need for mental health services in our community is increasing, disruptive or unsafe behaviours in our schools are escalating, the climate is changing in ways that threaten our immediate well-being and long-term viability, natural resources are exploited for profit and causing devastation to the planet, and what counts as truth is easily manipulated. I could go on.

The description of the Educated Citizen referenced above was written in 1988 following a report titled, *A Legacy for Learners: Summary of Findings*, from the Royal Commission on Education, which became known as the Sullivan Commission. It was published **36 years ago**. A few things have changed since then. Biesta (2009) advises that in a

democratic society the purposes of education should not be a given, but should be a constant topic for discussion and consideration, especially as contexts and needs evolve. Something that sounds innocuous and acceptable on the surface should be questioned. Our students and our families and our communities need and deserve more.

Educated citizens are supposed to be thoughtful, think critically, and gather information from a broad knowledge base, but what and who are they thoughtful about and towards? What are they thinking critically about, and where do they gather their broad knowledge base? Missing is creation, love, care for self, others, and the environment, living well in our places. Where is our sense of wonder in nature and in the sacred (Orr, 2004)? Where is our health, the health of families and communities, the health of all beings and the environment? What beliefs and values are these checklist items grounded in and tethered to?

The BC Ministry of Education and Child Care's stated intention for education is:

The purpose of the British Columbia school system is to enable the more than 570,000 public school students, 89,000 independent school students, and more than 4,500 home-schooled children enrolled each school year, to develop their individual potential and **to acquire the knowledge, skills and abilities needed to contribute to a healthy society and a prosperous and sustainable economy.** (Government of British Columbia, Ministry of Education and Child Care, 2024, para. 2)

Ultimately, the purpose of education is revealed to be the building of a prosperous and sustainable economy. The vision of the Educated Citizen is tethered to economic viability.

While I appreciate the efforts in the BC ELF (Government of British Columbia, 2019) to guide the education of young children in a way that values them as capable people who should be listened to, the fact the ELF is not a required curriculum, but a supplement to guide learning in the early years only, means the urgency to adopt it is absent. Further, are we to presume that after age eight we begin the economic moulding process?

The BC Ministry of Education and Child Care's (2024) official vision relegates the hopeful direction of the ELF to background sound; the birdcall heard only as muffled white noise, except for the few who learn to listen and take action with that vision of the child as guide. We are still working to develop individual potential for the sake of an ever-expanding economy. Though unstated, we know economic expansion follows from

a consumerist lifestyle, one predicated on domination over natural resources, extraction, destruction. When we consider seven generations into the future, are we still expecting an endlessly expanding economy? Is that where our life energy and the contributions of our unique gifts shall be consumed? How unique do we each need to be to fulfill the mandate of the BC education system—are we really necessary at all?

In an unquestioned quest to grow and sustain the economy, we seek the creation of more ‘successful’ people instead of more thoughtful people. David Orr (2004) laments,

The plain fact is that the planet does not need more successful people. But it does desperately need more peacemakers, healers, restorers, storytellers, and lovers of every kind. It needs people who live well in their places. It needs people of moral courage willing to join the fight to make the world habitable and humane. And these qualities have little to do with success as our culture has defined it. (p. 12)

He goes on to suggest,

We need decent communities, good work to do, loving relationships, stable families, the knowledge necessary to restore what we have damaged, and ways to transcend our inherent self-centeredness. Our needs, in short, are those of the spirit; yet, our imagination and creativity are overwhelmingly aimed at things that as often as not degrade spirit and nature. (Orr, 2004, p. 33)

In contrast to BC’s stated vision for education, the Prime Minister of Bhutan (a country that measures Gross National Happiness instead of Gross National Product to determine if they are successful or not), outlined his vision for educating his country’s children:

I would like to see an educational system quite different from the conventional factory, where children are just turned out to become economic animals, thinking only for themselves. I would like to see graduates that are more *human* beings with human values, that give importance to relationships, that are eco-literate, contemplative, analytical. I would like graduates who know that success in life is a state of being when you can come home at the end of the day satisfied with what you have done, realizing that you are a happy individual not only because you have found happiness for yourself, but because you have given happiness, in this one day’s work, to your spouse, to your family, to your neighbours – and to the world at large. (Prime Minister of Bhutan, as cited in Miller, 2014, pp. 16–17)

The country of Bhutan's stated purpose for education is that students

will see clearly the interconnected nature of reality and understand the full benefits and costs of their actions. They will not be trapped by the lure of materialism, and will care deeply for others and for the natural world. [They will do this by cultivating] deep critical and creative thinking, ecological literacy, practice of the country's profound, ancient wisdom and culture, contemplative learning, a holistic understanding of the world, genuine care for nature and for others, competency to deal effectively with the modern world, preparation for right livelihood, and informed civic engagement. (Statement of Educating for Gross National Happiness, as cited in Miller, 2014, p. 16)

Their possibility of and for education speaks to sustainability on this earth, in relation with ourselves and each other, opening possibility for life, not a taking or taking for granted. I recall Robin Wall Kimmerer's (2021) description of becoming a good ancestor by building good soil, for "building good soil means preserving room for possibility, for a world open to creation again and again" (p. 183). We do not build good soil with a vision for education that severs students and educators from the natural world, from each other, from a continuum of time. A short-sighted vision of individual success and our understanding of community as an economic engine is the result when our imagination is severed from ecology.

Every living being has a forward pull to become. A pine cone has a forward pull to become a pine tree; a tomato seed has a forward pull to become a tomato; an apple seed to become an apple. A baby fawn has a forward pull to become a deer; a newborn pony, a horse; a pup, a dog. What is the forward pull of a human being? Of course, to be human. But we codify the forward pull of a child to become a consumer, a citizen, a voter, a worker. Those may be tasks that humans engage in; but first and foremost, we are all *human*. Our humanness is our forward pull to develop and to nurture and to care for. Only in that way can we approach our life work with humanity. Education that is only concerned with academic development must expand its focus to include human development—all aspects of being human: Our emotional selves, our social selves, our physical selves, our spiritual selves, and yes, our intellectual selves. Together, they support our human development as whole beings, living together in healthy community with all other beings.

We are all here to share our unique gifts at this time (Mitchell, 2018) and as educators entrusted with caring for students in our education system, we need to help to recognize

and nurture those gifts in our students and in ourselves. An honourable and humbling and awesome responsibility. And simply put, an honourable and humbling and awesome goal for education.

See and nurture every child's gifts; honour and guide development as whole and healthy humans, living in interconnected communities in healthy relation with all beings. Instead of growing and sustaining the economy, perhaps we can grow and sustain life on this planet.

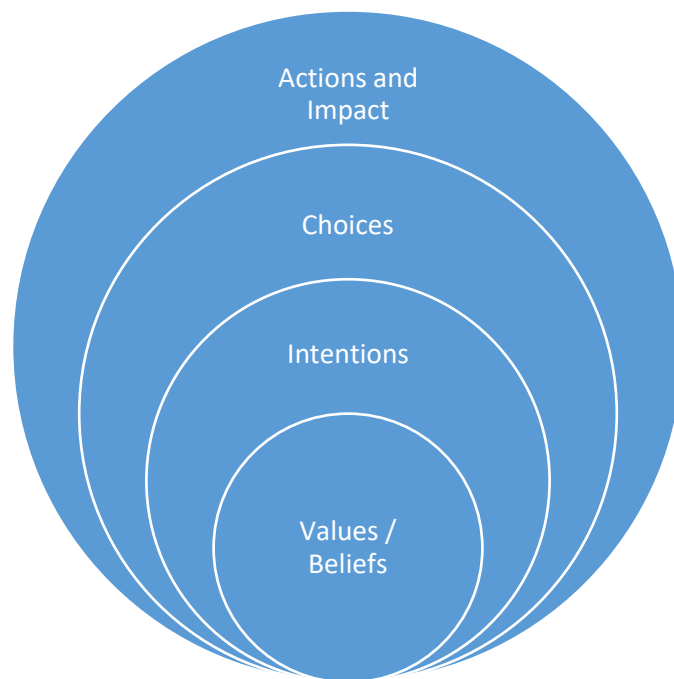
Enacting Purpose, Measuring Outcome

What can educating for wholeness with a deep understanding of the interconnectedness of life look like? Do we need to wait for the education system to change before we can begin to enact this purpose? What choices can we make now to begin the process of change?

This section explores some of the intentions and choices we can make in order to change the foundation and outcome of educational processes. Everything begins with our values and beliefs (see Figure 3), that lead to our intentions and the choices we make, which guide our actions and the potential effects we will have. What I value and believe—my worldview—also shapes what I am able to see and how I'm able to understand and respond. Intentionality is not to suggest predictability, but simply to know why we are choosing what we choose, to be aware and conscious and, as Maxine Greene (1978) commands, wide-awake as we embark on educational practices.

Figure 4

The Ripples from Values and Beliefs



Intentions

We can all lead from who we are and where we are. We do not need to wait for some heroic leader to do it for us, or wait for the education system to change so we can change within it. We can begin now, and the energy of our life work will create ripples that extend beyond our immediate classrooms or schools. It is always thus; we can choose intentionally.

I do not mean to ignore the very real constraints that exist in the system of education we operate within. But I do mean to push back against the view of systems existing separate from us; we are all part of the systems we inhabit. Will we choose the slumber of compliance and status quo or will we choose (and thus teach) the wide-awakeness Maxine Greene (1978) calls us to?

The curriculum we are required to follow is not directive in how we teach learning standards. Teachers have choice and those choices have effects for our students.

Two different teachers can take the same curricular learning standard and based on their individual values and beliefs, create a completely different learning exploration for and with students, with very different effects. A simple example is the capstone project that all students must complete to graduate. The Ministry describes the capstone as

a rigorous learning opportunity that allows students to reflect and share in personally meaningful ways, and is a requirement for Career-Life Connections and for graduation. The purpose of the capstone is to let students demonstrate the knowledge, competencies, and passion(s) that they can offer the world, as they integrate personal interests, strengths, and new learning with preferred future possibilities. (Government of British Columbia, Ministry of Education, 2019, p. 15)

As Assistant Superintendent, I have the opportunity to watch some of the students present their capstone projects and it's one of my favourite things to do. I get to hear students share their dreams for the future, reflect on their learning journeys, and reveal their passions. It is a gift to witness.

Their presentations reveal a wide spectrum of abilities, dreams, futures, passions. And they could possibly reveal the beliefs and intentions of educators. For example, if I believe my role as an educator is to prepare my students for work, I will frame this opportunity as a good chance to research jobs. If I believe my role as an educator is to help students become more self-aware and to explore their unique gifts (not necessarily in service of getting a job but in service of becoming more of themselves), I will frame the capstone as an opportunity to explore their passions, or interests. Same project, different frames, divergent outcomes.

Some of the capstones I have seen are a summary of students' research into the wages, training/education costs, work hours, and hiring prospects for the jobs they are interested in. When I ask them what they learned about themselves or how they developed their understanding of the core competencies¹⁰ through the process, they usually say they communicated because they presented their projects. An inability to express their own growth in the core competencies leads me to think the process of

¹⁰ Core Competencies are a foundational element of the curriculum. They refer to intellectual, personal, and social and emotional proficiencies we all need to meaningfully engage in lifelong learning. The competencies are divided into three areas: Communication (including collaboration), Thinking (including creative, critical and reflective thinking), and Personal and Social (including personal awareness and responsibility, positive personal and cultural identity, and social awareness and responsibility).

creating the capstone did not assist them in recognizing and “demonstrat[ing] the knowledge, competencies, and passion(s) that they can offer the world” (Government of British Columbia, Ministry of Education, 2019, p. 15).

Some students share their interests and are actually quite clear this will not be their career path. One student shared his passion for gaming and showed us a video he made of a game he was creating. He was very talented but was adamant he would never choose a career in this area because it would kill the joy he finds in his passion. Another student loves fashion and shared her concern about the impact the fashion industry has on the environment. So she shopped at local thrift stores and purchased items she then re-designed so she could upsell them to customers on her own website. For her, this was a hobby, not a career; she was considering law.

I don’t actually know how each of these students’ teachers framed the capstone. I believe the students were given lots of choice in how to engage with the project. But I do know that as an educator my beliefs guide my intentions and choices and actions, impacting the possibilities and outcomes for students. We frame the container with our questions (or assignments) that guide what can unfold within it.

Another example of the impact of intentions is the way social and emotional learning is framed in classrooms. Again, the beliefs of the educator, and not the topic, make all the difference for students’ learning. For example, if my image of the child is someone who needs to be controlled and I value compliance among my students, I will be more inclined to engage in social and emotional learning activities in my classroom to teach students to be more self-disciplined and compliant. I might choose self-regulation as my focus. Vohs and Baumeister (2004) define self-regulation as “the exercise of control over oneself, especially with regard to bringing the self into line with preferred (thus, regular) standards” (p. 2). They explain self-regulation involves regulating “thoughts, emotions, impulses or appetites, and task performance” (Vohs & Baumeister, 2004, p. 2) as well as attentional processes. I have seen many teachers use the zones of regulation that characterize moods as colours. Blue zone is when you are too tired, sick, or bored to be in a good state to learn. Green is the optimal state for learning, and is characterized by feeling calm, happy, and focused. In the yellow zone we might become frustrated, worried, or silly. The red zone is characterized by extreme emotions like anger, elation,

panic (Zones of Regulation, n.d.). I have seen posters in classrooms that show the red zone with a wild looking person who is out of control.

As a teacher, if I teach self-regulation through the zones of regulation in order to control behaviour, I may be more inclined to provide consequences if students are in the red zone. In fact, I have seen students sent home because they are in the red zone. As a result, students can inadvertently learn some emotions are 'bad' and should be hidden because they are shameful. They wouldn't necessarily come to understand their emotions or develop strategies for handling emotions in healthy ways. If the purpose or intention is to control behaviour, students may learn self-control, but not self-awareness or self-care.

On the other hand, if my image of the child is that they are capable, and I want to help them learn the impact they have, the gifts they contribute, and the inherent value each of them bring, then I would teach social and emotional learning to assist students to become emotionally healthy and self-aware. I might choose emotional literacy as a focus so students develop language to name and understand their emotions. I would assist them in learning to develop healthy strategies for dealing with stressors that might activate emotions. In either scenario, I'm 'teaching' social and emotional learning but with very different intentions and possibilities for effect. Same topic, different openings and outcomes.

My image of the child directly affects my intentions and actions. The pedagogical choices I make impact the learning that can unfold within the containers I build. The next section explores the physical environment of learning—the physical container for opening or closing possibilities.

Learning Environments

Reggio Emilia inspired pedagogy sees the child as having three teachers: the parent, the teacher, and the learning environment. The learning environment is functional, beautiful, and reflective of a child's learning. The teacher changes what is in the learning environment as the students' interests evolve. In March 2018, I visited the Opal School in Portland, Oregon where they had created a school inspired by the Reggio Emilia philosophy. The classrooms were beautiful spaces full of provocations to inspire

children. Quotes from children adorned the walls, elevating the importance of student voice and reflecting the educators' beliefs that children hold wisdom. Deeply reflective questions guided open exploration and discussion. The school supported children from preschool to Grade 5 and in every classroom (including preschool) they were exploring deep questions. These are a few of the questions I heard being discussed, or saw posted in the classroom next to provocations or artifacts of student work:

- What is gained by leaning into challenges?
- What might happen if all citizens, children, and adults saw themselves as world-makers?
- What mindsets support us to lean into uncertainty?
- Where do you see, hear, or feel love? What colours live inside of love? How will you connect your ideas together?
- What stories wake up for you when you play with our collections from the forest?
- What are the relationships among courage, collaboration, and community?
- What seeds are hidden inside of you? What are the things that others cannot see that make you who you are?
- How might better understanding ourselves help us understand others?
- What does it mean to take a stance?
- How do we understand and take action as mindful citizens on complicated public issues?
- How is the forest and our drinking water connected? How does exploring the relationships between water and people help us understand systems?
- What does it mean to care for something bigger than yourself?
- What can we do with an idea that doesn't turn out like we'd hoped?
- What is the value of listening to one another's perspectives?
- Why are stories so powerful?
- What leads people to act for others as well as themselves? What happens when they do?

- What happens when we consider the impact as well as the intention?

We can choose the questions we engage students in now. We transform education by transforming our questions and openings, our values and beliefs, our intentions and actions. I used to chafe against the system of education that stopped me from discussing spirituality in education, that limited by fragmenting, that was steeped in siloes and hierarchies. And yet, as a leader I perpetuated and solidified that very system by the actions I engaged in when I didn't introduce new language, when I allowed my work to be fragmented and siloed from my colleagues', and when I bowed to hierarchy. For a time, I lived within the frame that was provided to me, instead of recognizing I also create frames for my self, my students, my colleagues. Questions, like the learning environment, are a frame for what can emerge.

The learning environment does not need to be confined by the four walls of a classroom. Every space is a learning environment, including and especially the outdoors. When I was a student, we went outside to play and we came inside to work and learn. There was a delineation between the two environments, the message given that there was nothing to learn outside.

As a young teacher I enjoyed taking my students outside but we often went outside to do the same work we would have done inside. I noticed being outside made us all feel better, but I contained the learning by providing the same learning opportunities in a different space. A small step forward, one that slowly wedged wider as I became more confident and curious. Silent reading in the shade of a tree, working on projects on a picnic table instead of a desk, presenting science projects in the courtyard, gave way to daily walks in the neighbourhood, cleaning the street and area around our school,¹¹ and mindfully tuning into our senses outside. We did close observations of plants and wildlife, recording what we saw in journals or sketchbooks. We created sound maps, noticing the various sounds in our environments and how they changed in the seasons. Those were times we all slowed down, becoming more attuned with our surroundings. The class became calmer and more engaged.

¹¹ Adopt-A-Street is a program we participated in to pick up litter on specific streets. The City provided safety vests, gloves, garbage bags, and tools for picking up garbage and we committed to taking care of the streets in our neighbourhood.

And yet. My intentions were not to help students understand the interconnectedness of life, because I wasn't fully aware myself. My intentions were to get outside the portable we were housed in. I wanted them to understand their senses by consciously experiencing them and being outside was the best way to do that. I wanted them to understand they can make a difference in their community so we adopted a street. None of these are bad goals, but again my intentions mattered. We learned about, not from.

Susan Dion (2009) differentiates learning *about* and learning *from* Indigenous Peoples and the effect that difference has on the one learning and the knowledge gained.

Whereas learning about an event or experience focuses upon the acquisition of qualities, attributes, and facts, so that it presupposes a distance (or, one might even say, a detachment) between the learner and what is to be learned, learning from an event or experience is of a different order, that of insight ... But precisely because insight concerns the acknowledgment of discontinuity from the persistence of the status quo, and hence asks something intimate from the learner, learning from requires the learner's attachment to and implication in knowledge ... (Britzman, 1998, quoted in Dion, 2009, p. 58).

Learning about, and not from, allows safe distance from feeling—an abstraction I can rationalize, ignoring the harm I perpetrate. Learning from natural kin requires an intimacy I did not invite my students into as we observed nature from outside of it. We captured tendrils of it in our drawings, our journals, our sense mapping. A start, perhaps, but not the intimacy of learning from and being connected within the community of natural kin.

David Orr (Foreword to Stone & Barlow, 2005) explains, "All education is environmental education ... by what is included or excluded we teach the young that they are part of or apart from the natural world" (p. xi). I believe my students enjoyed being outside, and began to notice things they might not have noticed before. But I would not suggest they participated in, as Fritjof Capra (as cited in Stone & Barlow, 2005) describes,

Education for sustainable living [that] fosters both an intellectual understanding of ecology and emotional bonds with nature that make it more likely that our children will grow into responsible citizens who truly care about sustaining life, and develop a passion for applying their ecological understanding to the fundamental redesign of our technologies and social institutions, so as to bridge the current gap between human design and the ecologically sustainable systems of nature. (p. xv)

Learning in and from nature—literally our environment as teacher—can open the possibility of creating the emotional bonds with nature that Capra describes. My own

immersion in nature as I wrote this dissertation led to deeper learning about wholeness, systems, and the effects of our actions. I slowly began to *feel* the environment, attuning to the energy there; perhaps, as Christiana Figueres (as cited in an interview with Tippet, 2023) describes, the first tentative steps towards living *as* nature.¹² A small recognition that I, too, am part of the web of life and energy I experienced as I entered the living community of the beach and the forest. I am nature and thus capable of learning *from* natural kin as they relate to me and I to them.

I began by noticing the large scenic view, taking photos of what is immediately accessible. I came to fully understand what I was living within was not just a pretty scenic picture. The environment I am immersed in is a living, breathing, communicating, interdependent and interconnected community, independent of my consumption of it; the forest, the beach, the ocean living in symbiotic harmony, one being.

If my image of the child or youth is one of capability, strength, competence, and someone worthy of being listened to and valued for their ideas and knowledge (as described in the ELF), I am more likely to choose learning opportunities that seek to expand self-awareness, that offer choice, that provide opportunities to develop as whole humans—not as compliant students or future consumers and workers. The learning environment we unfold within can also expand the possibilities for our selves and our planet. When that learning environment is the natural environment, students can learn from and within, the environment becoming a teacher, a guide, a mentor, a relation with whom to share kinship.

Our values guide our intentions. Our intentions determine our choices for learning opportunities and learning environments that influence the possibilities of learning for all students. The next section turns to how we can assess learning to support students in developing self-awareness and an understanding of their learning and themselves.

¹² Christiana Figueres (interviewed by Tippet, 2023), Costa Rican diplomat and former Executive Secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, shared different evolutions of human learning and nature. She described how we began by learning what we can extract from nature, then learning to live *with* nature, and now we need to evolve to live *as* nature—a recognition Indigenous cultures have always known.

Assessment as Nurturance

Assessment has been a central focus of my energy these past couple of years. The Ministry of Education and Child Care introduced a new reporting order that took effect in the 2023–24 school year and I have been working with assessment leads since September 2022 from each school to help teachers prepare for the changes. We have an opportunity to evolve our understandings and practices of assessment and communicating learning (reporting). Again, our image of the child and our intentions influence our practices.

The Ministry’s goal for communicating student learning is to ensure “students take part in meaningful conversations that help them develop responsibility for engaging deeply with their learning” (Government of British Columbia, 2023, p. 5). They go on to say,

Self-reflection and goal setting are important parts of learning and development both during the K–12 school years and in life beyond the classroom. Student self-reflection on Core Competencies and student goal setting meaningfully involves students in the assessment process, which amplifies student voice. Giving students a voice in their learning helps ensure that teachers, parents, and caregivers can support students in achieving their goals; promotes student responsibility for their learning; and helps foster a lifelong-learning mindset. (Government of British Columbia, 2023, p. 6)

Assessment is a central act in the process of teaching and learning. It is not a ‘mopping up’ exercise to be done after learning is finished. It is how learning evolves.

If the forward pull of a human being is to be human, how do education practices, including assessment, assist in supporting the process of development of our students as whole humans? How do we come to understand them and recognize their learning? How do they come to understand themselves and recognize their own learning and where they want to go next? Assessment is a process of opening our eyes, minds, and hearts to seeing students, and supporting them to see themselves—a coming into knowing for and with students so ultimately they come to know themselves.

2022.03.25 – A Dwelling: Visibility

The senses open us to the world beyond, but they also help build up our world of soul within. ... Without the proper care and nurture of the senses both our inner life and our experience of the world alike become impoverished, dried up and drab, even distorted and malformed.... As the Scottish philosopher John Macmurray (1935) once said, "If we are to be full of life and fully alive, it is the increase in our capacity to be aware of the world through our senses which has first to be achieved." (Sloan, 2005, p. 38)

The ocean and forest mingle in the moist air that enters my lungs. My feet scrunch on the pebbly path winding to the beach. Head bowed against the wind I walk past a tree, only the bare trunk visible beneath the visor of my hat. Something calls me to stop and I raise my gaze, drawn by the graceful curve of the branches stretching outwards in an almost perfect arc.

I continue and the path winds to the left parallel to the shoreline. My eyes reach over my right shoulder, spotting a single bird perched atop a tall black rock just off shore. What am I missing to my left?

I become obsessed with viewpoints, taking photos of different angles of rocks, trees, shells, logs. What is visible from one angle dissolves into inaccessibility from another.





What do I miss when I don't take time to dwell? Particularities, individuality, the beauty of the tiny dissolving into the blur of the many, hidden next to the larger. The assumptions of what I expect can dominate my ability to see.





I think of children, and what happens to their beingness if we only see from one angle. Not discerning or imagining the textures of their multi-dimensionality. Or when they blur into the background, their uniqueness rendered invisible. Or when we assume and dismiss—not seeing the beauty in what we perceive as unworthy. The graceful arc of their potential, dormant under confining and defining lenses.

How do I ready myself to be present to the development of human gifts, of learning, growing, stretching, becoming? A few years ago a colleague pointed out how much effort we put into readying our external selves to enter the outside world each day, yet we spend so little time readying our internal selves. Face, hair, clothing—check, check, check—ready to go. It is with my internal readiness, readying my I-sight, in-sight, heart-sight/site, that I actually become ready to meet others in relational spaces. Without recognizing my self, I cannot recognize/re-cognize others. I rush without seeing, hurry without listening, assume without attuning.

How is the energy of my presence inviting an emergence of knowing, and not crowding it out?

After 3 weeks of meditation, exercise, immersion in nature—weeks of softening and slowing—I noticed a vibrant flower growing close to the path. It seemed to spring fully formed from nowhere; I didn't see it on my previous walk. As I stopped to admire the beauty of this being, another flew to join us.





Usually hummingbirds fly away immediately when I move or make sound, make myself known. This hummingbird stayed and allowed me to take photos. I held my breath with gratitude and reverence, insulated in our bubble of energy. I wonder if a softening of my energy invited hummingbird to dwell with me, offering this moment of awe.

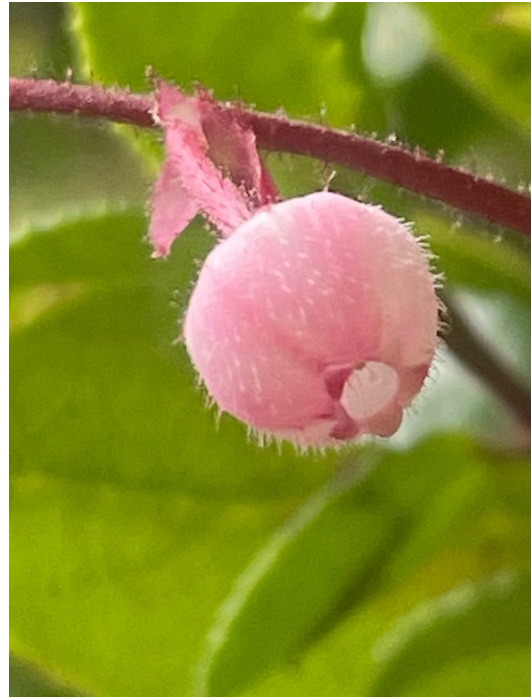
These moments of noticing, perceiving, receiving—stop moments of wonder—might appear to have little to do with the expectations of assessment and reporting. And yet, what is assessment if not recognizing and dwelling in moments of awe and wonder and reverence, insulated in a bubble of energy with our students? A softening into recognition/re-cognition for ourselves and our learners so we might see anew and recognize the marvel of learning and possibilities for future growth?

The energy I bring to a learning encounter also influences how I am able to see and perceive. Nature teaches me to see more fully, when I dwell and discern, stop and see.



By viewing the entire vista, or pathway, the particularities can be missed—blending into each other in a blur of green plant life.

Similarly, by only seeing a classroom, the particularities of individual students are missed—
blending into a blur of expectations and assumptions.



Particularities emerge when we dwell, observe, perceive. Each bud is unique and beautiful at every stage, but sometimes unrecognizable in a new becoming, without also seeing the connections between, among, within. We need to zoom in to see and appreciate the parts, while also zooming out to see the connections within the whole. Otherwise, these salal berries at various stages of development appear disconnected, different beings instead of different stages of growth.

Again, nature teaches me. We cannot truly assess students without first fully seeing them, and that requires zooming in to see particularities, nuances, unique gifts, and zooming out to see interconnections, relationships, pathways, goals.

I am reminded of climbing on the rocks on our beach. I have to look closely where I place my foot or I might step on a living being, or misstep and lose my footing. But if I don't also look up and gauge where I'm going I will wander aimlessly, focusing on the perfect footfall without understanding the path I'm on.

Zoom in, zoom out.

Undated – A Dwelling: Assessment as a Means for Student and Educator Growth

As a teacher I hated marking, delineating correct and incorrect/ good job, poor job. An unending tedious toil that didn't lead to growth; it was irritating to me and, I'm sure, to the students. If the intention is to tally correct answers, then keep giving check marks. If the intention is to make learning visible, perhaps there is another way.

In an effort to make assessment more meaningful for students and more interesting for me, I started assigning projects instead of giving tests at the end of a unit of study. For example, at the end of a study of body systems in science, I gave students choice in how they wanted to demonstrate their learning. I explained what understanding they needed to demonstrate and we talked about possible ways to show their learning. Some students wrote songs or stories or poems, others created plays or models. They had fun and I learned more about them than I could possibly have learned from a test.

They also chose their own due dates within a timeframe. I explained how many in-school blocks of time they would have to work on it and they determined how much time at home they would have to work on it. They did this by colouring their busy times in a day planner so they could see where they had time to work on the project. I gave them a date we would start working on the next unit and they decided if they wanted to hand it in prior to that time or after. Time became visible to them so it was easier to plan and organize their homework time. Not one person handed their project in past their scheduled due date, where previously I received many late assignments. And an added bonus: I did not receive 30 projects in one day to mark as quickly as possible so students could receive timely feedback. Their due dates were spaced out so I could more easily spend time with their learning. And while they worked on their unique projects I had time to be with each of them, discussing their thinking, asking questions to nudge them further, assisting with their planning process. Afterwards I conferenced with each of them to review their marks and feedback. Together we reviewed the criteria. It was an investment of time that was well worth it. Students sat up straighter, they reflected on their learning, they voiced their opinions. They emerged.



The container expanded for their learning and their possibilities increased. By the end of the project, not only was their learning clear for me to see, it was clear to them. They could articulate their learning and why they chose to demonstrate it in that particular manner. They recognized themselves as learners with agency. And it was fun to mark and provide feedback because their creative representations were so interesting.

Another example I recall was a socials unit. The curriculum at the time listed a prescribed learning outcome that students would learn the contributions of First Nations, French, and English in current Canadian society. I could have had them read about famous Canadians and write an essay to show how they contributed to Canada. But I wanted them to see their communities; to understand where certain ideas or customs or language may have originated, and to make culture visible. And I wanted them to work in community with each other, learning to listen to each other, voice their ideas, negotiate plans, commit to themselves and each other, and follow through. Students worked in groups of five or six and created a model of a city. Each student was responsible for at least one building in the city and they co-created communal spaces, including streets and parks. They included language, food, music, stories, art, fashion that reflected each of the cultures. The detail, and representations of how the different cultures are currently visible and have come to influence our current communities, in ways both noticed and unnoticed, was remarkable. Their imaginations took flight and their learning deepened. The students became visible through the expression of their learning, and through their collaboration with peers. Julian's airport included Bill Reid art, the food court sold smoked salmon and Bannock, crepes, and fish and chips. The airport stood next to a restaurant with music cd's covering the walls – The Beatles and Rolling Stones next to Edith Piaf and Susan Aglukark. They were not given a research paper assignment but they did more research into their projects

than I would have normally expected. They independently pursued the threads of their curiosity and creativity.

When I first started teaching I was bumped around from grade to grade, every year a starting over. I spent so much energy just trying to keep everyone busy and control behaviour, I missed the opportunity to slow down and let the students' interests, ideas, and gifts emerge. I was too nervous to offer much choice so I dominated the classroom. I created a tightly woven basket where only easily markable intelligence had space.

As my confidence grew, I held less tightly, and more space was opened for emergence, both mine and students'. By prioritizing time for learning and not busywork I shifted my consciousness of learning for my students, and for myself. By opening space for their voice and choice, the classroom expanded to a community of unique individuals, growing together.

When we plan from a stance of curiosity, when our offerings to children are intended as generative invitations into inquiry, when we act as teacher researchers, our classrooms become lively and enlivening places. (Pelo & Carter, 2018, p. 250)

Assessment became my growth as much as theirs.

I don't share these stories as exemplars that others should follow, or as perfection to emulate. They are merely small steps that moved me further along the path of who and how I wanted to be in relation with students, as I tried to support their learning and becoming, as I sought to be *with* my students instead of *above* them. We learn together.

It takes courage to take risks, to admit to not knowing, to open to learning. And if we want our students to take risks and be open to learning, we as educators need to as well. I spoke about how my image of the child influences my intentions and choices in the classroom; my image of the educator influences my intentions and choices in providing professional learning.

2023.05.05 – A Dwelling: Educators as Learners

A pedagogical leader orients her work towards culture-making rather than maintaining efficiencies and compliance. (Pelo & Carter, 2018, p. 117)

This year I had the privilege of working with a group of educators who volunteered to be assessment leads at their schools. They are vibrant, curious, interesting, and committed educators and it has been so much fun to do this work with them. They engaged, and questioned, and challenged me; we stretched together. In addition to those sessions, I led two in-service days, one with elementary and the other with middle and secondary.

I was surprised how nervous I was for those two sessions. I knew there was resistance to change and that some people were questioning why the Ministry was making these changes now, when everyone was so tired (although the changes had been years in the making: in my previous district some teachers started piloting changes to communicating learning in 2014; in my current district we began piloting in 2020).

In each session I tried to emphasize the opportunity for creating openings for students to become owners of their learning; to become self-aware of their learning, to reflect on their learning, to set goals for themselves. We emphasize three questions to guide assessment practices with students (adapted from Kaser & Halbert, 2013):

- *What am I learning and why is it important? (through explicit learning intentions)*
- *How am I doing with my learning? (through clear criteria, self-reflection, and feedback from teachers and peers)*
- *Where do I want to go next with my learning? (through goal-setting)*

While many people nodded their heads and engaged with the learning activities during the in-service sessions, there were some who were reluctant and appeared to be angry. They wanted to know how they would have time to write these new report cards and how they could possibly know all their students well enough to comment on their strengths and areas for future growth.

How many sentences will teachers be expected to write?

This question pierces my heart. I want to tell them as an educator you have so much more to offer than the number of sentences you can write. You have the opportunity and responsibility and possibility to see another human—to re-cognize their humanness and possibilities and gifts and contributions. And then nurture those and communicate and celebrate them.

Instead of how many sentences do I need to write and how will I find the time, perhaps we can explore how we might prioritize learning time so we have space to truly see our students. How can I organize learning spaces (physical, emotional, social, and spiritual space) for everyone to meaningfully contribute? How will I contribute?

It is like Robin Wall Kimmerer's (2021) maple tree asking how many leaves it has to drop.



Whatever is needed for regeneration, or for learning. Recognize what is needed and give it in a spirit of reciprocity (see Kimmerer, 2013). When my students truly engaged in their learning in ways that were meaningful to them, it did not cost me; it nourished me. And I, in turn, nourished them through truly seeing them. Conferencing with students to review their learning was not an addition; it replaced busywork that did not add to their learning.

Assessment can open possibility for student and teacher alike.

Like a teacher with students in the classroom, it is so much easier when everyone is engaged, when they don't question but obediently fulfill tasks, when everyone seems to 'get it' at the same time. That fantasy does not reflect reality in classrooms, nor does it reflect reality for educators' professional learning spaces.

Many educators have grown within a system that places rules above exploration, judgments above intuition, and task completion above meaningful learning. We have been moulded within a system that fragments instead of making whole: a colonized system of separation and categorization. We have the opportunity to evolve, to reach for wholeness, to engage in life work for life. This is not movement towards perfection; it is movement towards wholeness. And it is one that will take time, and support, and care—showing the same respect for the learning of educators as we hope they show for the learning of their students.

It's also important to recognize the validity in teachers' concerns. We have structured middle and secondary schools so some teachers work with more than 180 students at a time, and I am asking them to dwell and see particularities and uniqueness in each one. We do need to question the structures of our schools, those stubborn frameworks that refuse attempts at change yet don't always serve the needs of learning. (For example, the pandemic forced many things to change; secondary timetables were the hardest to shift and immediately reverted back once the pandemic was over.)

It is difficult to transform an entire system at once, making it easier to conform to the limits of its boundaries. And yet, nothing will change if we continue to perpetuate systems by unquestioningly respecting their boundaries. Each small step away from habitual practices opens new pathways of possibility. A boat that turns a tiny bit to the right will follow a path that will take it far from where it started; a slight turn to the right or the left has a profound impact on the future destination. And so it is with the choices we make in education. The ripples reverberate over time; the system slowly shifts from within.

In the 1960s, meteorologist Edward Lorenz discovered that even the smallest changes in the atmospheric currents, those viewed as being insignificant by usual standards, created huge discrepancies in developing weather patterns. This phenomenon became known as the butterfly effect of modern chaos theory.... Chaos theory taught us that every current that

enters into the flow has an impact on the overall pattern. (Mitchell, 2018, p. 137)

The questions we ask create a container for what can emerge in response. Instead of questioning the number of sentences required in a report card, *what if* we explored reducing the number of assignments in favour of assignments with more depth, more student choice and agency, more collaboration with the teacher instead of direction from the teacher? *What if* we created learning spaces and opportunities that allowed me, as the teacher, more time to check in with students? *What if* we could stop doing things because we have to, and commit to doing things because they matter? *What if* we value the complexity of questions asked instead of correct answers given? *What if* an education is a process of revealing ourselves, learning the tools to navigate the world, exploring the interconnectedness of all life? *What if* we learn to listen and support instead of direct and judge?

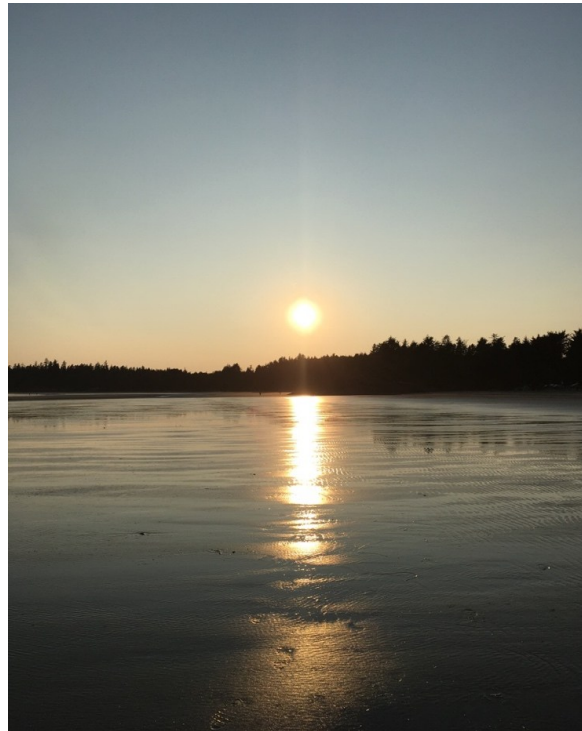
2016.04.11 – A Dwelling: The Heart of What Matters

We sat in a half circle in the bay window of the staff room, putting the world to rights as educationalists are wont to do. Wendy, the new head of the hospital school joined us. She had just signed on to work for a higher degree. She sat, like a new girl, politely listening to our wonderful theories. It was in a short lull in the conversation that she put her question. “What do you teach your students about the education of dying children?” she asked. The short silence became rather a long one.

Perhaps we and our pupils and students are all dying children. I suspect that searching for an answer to Wendy’s question is the shortest and most direct way of discovering our own answers to the whole question of the relationship between spirituality and the curriculum. (Priestley, 1997, p. 34)

This question arrests me. I started my journey looking at the purpose of education because I think it sets the goal post for everything else. Teaching, educational leadership and systems – are all, and only, in service of that purpose, however defined. But wondering about the education of dying children stops the philosophical and dogmatic arguments cold. What really matters?

What really matters to life in this time and place, with these people we are with now? Even the framing of that question is different than what is typically asked in educational settings. What really matters to life in this time and place is a far turn from what matters to careers and the economy.



What really matters? Is what I am doing now in service of that?

Chief Robert Joseph encouraged graduate students at the Indigenous Graduate Student Symposium (personal communication, March 11, 2017) to view research with the idea that love as an essence of research is important. He explained that kind of compassion and care for others matters in our research: “When emotions and research converge, we hear the truth just a little bit more.” What if we approach assessment for students not simply as data collection (where we measure words, count scores, spit out percentages) but as a compassionate way of seeing and understanding another, a way of bringing to sight the possibility inherent in a sacred being? Can we analyze with compassion and care, and love the steps taken, the risks endured, the bridges crossed as students grow and learn? Assessment as an act of love. Radical.

I began this chapter by asking what we seek to create in our educational endeavours. Our collective and individual acts of creation flow from our values, beliefs, intentions, and choices. It all begins with who I am, where I am, and who I am seeking to support and how I understand and value them (and myself). Education is not a recipe, it is a response, an invitation, a dance of co-creation. Ted Aoki (2005) explains, “Education that alienates must be considered ‘miseducation,’ and education must be transformed by moving toward a reclaiming of the fullness of body and soul” (p. 359). Education is not merely for skill development; it is for human development, whole humans who live within contexts, in relations with others, who have unique gifts to nurture and pathways to journey. Whole humans with mind, body, heart, spirit—not merely thinking heads to fill with knowledge. If our educational practices do not nurture the development of the whole human living in community with all beings, then it becomes what Aoki (2005) refers to as miseducation.

Our work as educators cannot be to mould consumers to feed an ever-expanding economy. We are in relation with students to help them develop as whole beings. Our intentions and choices matter to the learning opportunities we invite students to enter. Just as every student is unique, so is every educator. Learning spaces for both need to be nourishing places of curiosity, community, and care.

I do not argue against intellectual development; I argue against the common practice of isolating it from the heart, body, spirit and isolating information into discrete subjects

without guiding students to understand the interconnectedness of all ideas and all life (see Orr, 2004). I argue for making learning whole.

As I travel on my journey of learning as an educator and leader, I continue to learn from nature to see particularities and the whole, to feel the interconnectedness of all beings and to do all I can to nurture the connections, the spaces between and among, the energy that draws us together.

Every small step we take reverberates across time, a small turn to the right or left leading us towards the creation of a new path. I don't believe we can wait for the education system as a whole to change before we start to enact new possibilities from within. The intentions and choices I make in every encounter either open or close possibility, reveal humanity or deny it.

Cajete (1994) beautifully describes community in Indigenous societies, living harmoniously in relationship to place. He explains,

each Indigenous community identifies itself as a sacred place, a place of living, learning, teaching, and renewal; a place where the 'People' share the breath of their life and thought. The community is a living, spiritual entity that is supported by every responsible adult. (p. 47).

Imagine our classrooms as communities so thoroughly connected in mutually supportive and life-giving ways, consciously sharing the breath of their life and thought, supported by every responsible adult.

What possibilities are available for action, given who I am, given where I am, and given what I am encountering in a particular situation? This question posed by Moules et al. (2015) began my journey of noticing, seeing, and interpreting. In the next section, I explore my role as a leader and how I can be of service to support the whole development of healthy humans living in healthy relations with all beings.

LEADING

The title of ‘The Spirit of Leadership’ is exactly what we’re doing. We can’t change our systems unless we change our leaders. And our leaders all need to step on board when we go into reconciliation together. If there is any last message that I can say to you is believe in yourself.... Change is difficult, change can be hard, but it’s the people that stand up for what they believe in, that’s when changes are really made. (Pierre, as cited in BCSSA, 2022, 3:56)

Crazy Horse was one of the people ... Lakota society was always there to remind him that being a leader was a position of responsibility and not privilege.... Most significantly, Crazy Horse knew that one of [the] enemies [of leading] was inaction; so he consistently took the lead by setting the right example. (Marshall, 2008, as cited in Cajete, 2016, pp. 368–369)

What does it mean to lead? How do we recognize those who are leaders in our communities? And when do we know to show up as leaders ourselves? What possibilities are available for action for each of us, given who we are, given where we are, and given who and what we are encountering in a particular situation?

I have shared many reflections in previous sections that could also live in a chapter called “Leading.” In writing about self, relations, creation, I was also writing about leading—it is not a title or role separate from the one inhabiting it and devoid of context. In this chapter I share my developing understanding of leadership and systems awareness and my own experiences leading within the education system. I begin by uncovering my images, understandings, and expectations of leaders and then review theoretical frameworks that shape our understanding of leadership. I follow with additional stop moments or reflections of my evolving understandings and practices of leading.

All leading happens within a context and the systems we create or sustain. The paradox of systems is that we are both influenced by the systems we inhabit and we are also the system itself. We cannot ultimately transform systems without understanding, evolving, and growing our selves. And we cannot expect to have compassionate systems if we cannot exercise compassion for our selves and others living within our systems.

Through the process of writing I have come to unearth my own misconceptions, expectations, and limitations to unfurl greater clarity, purpose, and awareness about leading.

I began researching leadership in education during the second class of my doctoral studies in an effort to learn to be better—more decisive, more organized, more efficient... just *more*, somehow. I was certain that would equip me to navigate the confusing system of siloes and hierarchy I was swimming in. I struggled to find my footing despite managing to work on many projects and getting ‘stuff done.’ I recognized my inability to flourish there and saw it as a flaw in my self that needed fixing. I thought by researching and applying the wisdom of others to my self, my work, and my context, I could be more effective.

I held a title at the time that was equated with positional authority, although as district principal I was near the bottom of the district level hierarchy, and perhaps because of that I shied away from the term ‘leader.’ In hindsight, I recognize that I understood ‘leading’ as holding a title of positional authority and having the ability to fulfill that role: to be an effective school principal or district principal, for example, and that meant being decisive, fixing problems, making people happy, figuring things out with minimal information, communicating a vision, getting stuff done. My expectation that leadership comes from certain roles negated my lived experience of being led by, and learning from, students.

Undated – A Dwelling: Learning From Example

I completed my teaching practicum in a Grade 1 classroom and believed I would be a Grade 1 teacher forever. But reality changed my plans. I got bounced around from grade to grade and school to school for the first 3 years of teaching.

I secured my first continuing contract in a Kindergarten classroom at the beginning of my third year of teaching. I purchased Kindergarten materials and spent days setting up my new classroom and excitedly planning with the other Kindergarten teacher. On the first day of school the enrolment was lower than expected and I had to move to another school to teach a combined Grade 4 and 5 class. They didn't have a portable yet so I taught in the library until the end of October. I came to love those children but that year was extremely overwhelming.

Jeff arrived from Korea mid-way through the year. I was upset he was being placed in my class because I already had more students than the other Grade 5 classroom and I was struggling to keep up. He was learning English and would require extra planning and assistance.

He arrived in the morning with his parents and I was immediately struck by his energy. I'm sure he was nervous—new classroom, new school, new country. Yet this 10-year-old boy seemed to radiate calm and quiet confidence. The word that immediately came to my mind was 'grounded.' And everyone who came near him seemed to calm, including me. He seemed to know himself and was fully comfortable with who he was.

He taught me how harmful it is to assume another person equaled another burden. He taught me to step up and to look for the gifts in each of my students.

There are two instances that stand out for me. I recall one day we were working as a class and something struck everyone as funny. I don't remember what made everyone laugh, but I do recall Jeff didn't find it amusing. He listened for a bit, and said in his usual calm way, 'please don't laugh at that.' Everyone obeyed but what was so interesting was that no one was embarrassed or resentful. We all just moved on.

The second incident occurred when we were celebrating Chinese New Year. Our class read a story about the celebration and for an art project we were re-creating a scene from the story. He listened to the lesson and then came to speak with me about his beliefs. He explained his family were practising Jehovah Witnesses and did not celebrate these holidays. He told me his family didn't believe in this so he would not be drawing a scene from the story, but he would draw a dragon. Just matter of fact, certain, confident.

"Change is difficult, change can be hard, but it's the people that stand up for what they believe in, that's when changes are really made." (Pierre, as cited in BCSSA, 2022, 4:19)

He taught me that standing up for what you believe in happens in every quiet decision and choice we make. It's first knowing what you believe and holding with it even when everyone else is following another path. He was a 10-year-old student, newly arrived in a country with a different language and customs and school system. These are seemingly small examples, but signal a larger way of being.



I still think of his quiet confidence and the way I felt in his presence. His presence influenced my desire to be better.

Crazy Horse “consistently took the lead by setting the right example” (Marshall, 2008, as cited in Cajete, 2016, p. 369) and that can be done by any person who chooses to step up when a situation calls for it. Leadership isn’t a title; leadership is living consciously and a way of being in relation.

*“The truth is that we are all called to lead wherever we are planted:
in the family, the workplace, the community”
(Palmer, 2007, p. xxv).*

If I had written my dissertation about leadership in education at the beginning of my doctoral studies, I would have created an outline with chapter titles such as time management, creating a vision, building teams, making decisions (I was perfectly capable of making decisions; I just wanted my decisions to make everyone happy and, I suppose, I thought if I was more of something that could happen). The entire document would have talked about leadership as some thing separate from my self, instead of leading as a way of being.

My preconceived notions of leadership began to fall away the more I searched and noticed, saw and questioned.

As I began my meandering path of learning to notice, see, perceive through postcards, my writings eventually coalesced into chapters about my self, energy, spirit, relations, and creating. I didn’t expect to end my dissertation with a chapter about leading; I expected to begin that way. As I near the end of my writing journey, I see I did actually begin with leading—we lead from who we are and how we are in relation with others. Leadership is not something separate from the one leading, or the context within which some form of leading is called for. By beginning my dissertation with an exploration of my self and relations with others, I unknowingly began with two very important aspects of leading and what it means to be a leader.

I have come to recognize leading is a deeply personal process and practice, in community with and in responsiveness to others.

My personal exploration formed the path I walk in leading. I do not lay out a roadmap for others to follow; I lay out my stories—each one a pebble on my path. Perhaps one or

more of the stories will speak to you on your path-making, not as a recipe but a possible resonance. We do not walk alone.

Re-cognizing the Image of the Leader

In the previous chapter, I explored how our image of the child and of the educator form a frame for the way we interact with, understand, and respond to them as humans and as learners. Our images of children and educators can either create spaces for them to flourish or stifle their possibilities.

I began questioning my image of the child and of the educator when I learned about the concept through the Reggio Emilia approach to learning, saw it in action in The Opal School in Oregon, and read about the image of the child in the ELF (Government of British Columbia, 2019). That led to questions about my, and the broader culture's, image of the leader. What and who do we believe leaders to be? What frame is created through that image for the way we interact with, understand, and respond to leaders as humans and as learners? What expectations do we impose on those in positions considered to be leadership roles? Why do we only ascribe leadership to certain roles or titles?

The ELF (Government of British Columbia, 2019) is silent on the image of the leader specifically, although it states that "children, with their boundless imaginations and sense of adventure, will be the leaders and innovators who will both inherit and re-create our societies in the future" (p. 21). The ELF describes educators (without naming them as leaders) as responsible for educating for reconciliation, cultural sensitivity and diversity, collaboration, inquiry, equity, inclusion. By implication, the document seems to point to leaders (in this case teachers and future adults) as having the power to innovate, to relate, to collaborate and ultimately to change society for the better.

In 2017, the Government of British Columbia, Ministry of Education created a document entitled, *Leadership Development in the BC Education Sector*, where they outline specific roles in leadership, including vice principals, principals, superintendents, secretary-treasurers, and trustees. The collective leadership of those in senior roles and the board of trustees involves:

Setting strategic directions
Leading the organization
Ensuring accountability
Developing people
Building relationships. (p. 4)

In describing leadership in the BC education system, the document states, “Educational leaders in British Columbia are dedicated to increasing student success and well-being, collaborating with system partners, and making decisions that are informed by evidence” (Government of British Columbia, Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 3). In carrying out their work,

high-quality educational leadership aligns goals, programs, and resources with provincial priorities for improvement, fosters collaboration among those who work in the education system and encourages them to address problems; provides direction and support to those who serve students; and holds itself to account for the results achieved. (Government of British Columbia, Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 6)

The document cites research about the important impact of talented leadership (Leithwood et al., 2006), high-impact leaders (Hattie, 2015), and principals who participate as learners with staff to move the school forward (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). Further, “great educational leaders make a contribution to ... students’ success and well-being because they are effective organizational managers, talented instructors, moral leaders, and change agents” (Government of British Columbia, Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 7).

This mixed bag of skills and attributes places leadership on a pedestal of transformation and expectations that make many people believe they are not and cannot be leaders, and it reinforces the false understanding of leadership as title while letting those without titles of positional authority skirt the responsibility we all share.

*Leadership is everyone’s vocation,
and it is an evasion to claim that it is not.
When we live in a close-knit ecosystem called community,
everyone follows and everyone leads.
Leadership, I now understand,
simply comes with the territory called being human.
(Palmer, 2007, p. xxix)*

My own reluctance to call myself a leader (regardless of the roles I inhabited at different times in my career) reveals the image I held of leaders as somehow more important or wiser or ... somehow just more. Parker Palmer (2007) similarly describes still being in the grip of his “youthful notion of a leader as someone who trails pomp, circumstance, and clouds of glory” (p. xxviii). I viewed leadership as occupying a higher rung on a colonizing ladder of hierarchy and was therefore embarrassed to ascribe that perch to myself. The image I held was child-like in my unthinking reliance on the perceived knowledge and expected strength of those with titles.

It was a painful process for me to recognize titles are a false pedestal when I was misled by those I assumed had authority, which I equated with wisdom. I expected if someone was higher than me on the hierarchy they must know more (i.e., principal, director of instruction, superintendent—any title considered higher than my own). It’s interesting to consider how easily I bought into a system of hierarchy; an unquestioned acceptance of power, authority, and dominance. Education has a colonizing effect on the system and those who dwell within it. Perhaps in this way the education system achieved what was implicitly intended.

I recognize that image began to wear thinner each time I encountered someone ‘above’ me who fell short of kindness, or wisdom, or respect—someone who was not the ‘more’ I expected and looked for:

- the teacher who threw candies at us if we answered his pointless questions,
- the priest who lied to my mom about needing money for the church when it was actually used to feed his gambling habit,
- the principal who asked with annoyance if I was pregnant because I was newly married and wearing a bulky sweater and he already had ‘too many’ on maternity leave,
- the female principal who yelled at and insulted me because a male colleague angrily demanded the purchase of textbooks and I happened to be standing beside him when he told her this (she did not raise her voice at or insult him),

I looked to each of these people for guidance, wisdom, truth. Instead I found disillusionment. My over-reliance on those with positions of authority as holding the knowledge I needed and the wisdom I longed for is yet another form of colonization.

Sherri Mitchell (2018) describes the paternalistic power structures that we are trained to accept from an early age.

From the day we are born, we are trained to be obedient to power, and dependent on a higher authority. This training system is embedded into our government structures, education systems, employment policies, and in the tenets of most religions. (p. 108)

The power structures we inhabit are not natural entities, they were created and are maintained by “common agreements and social contracts” (Mitchell, 2018, p. 108). In other words, we buy into them and participate in their perpetuation. We look for heroic, transformative, innovative, and all-knowing leaders so we can remain child-like in the abdication of our individual and collective responsibility. Mitchell (2018) goes on to remind us,

Once we have accepted another as an authority figure, we are automatically conditioned to follow their lead. Operating under blind obedience to authority figures has led humanity into some of the most horrific acts in history.

When we pass our power over to a paternalistic system, we release all responsibility and accountability for our lives [and our work]. This gives us the ability to remain children forever.... When we give away the power to manage our own lives, we also give away the power to change them. (p. 109)

When we give away the power to manage our work as educators (who are also leaders), we give away the power to change and create a new system of education—one that honours and supports the health of whole beings.

In my search for someone to look up to, not only did I give away my own power, I ceased to see and understand the humanity of the one I perceived was leading. I was hurt by the response of some considered to be leaders because I placed too much expectation on their position, without recognizing the human frailty of the one occupying that position.

At one of the Compassionate Systems training sessions, we talked about the pressures many of us were feeling during COVID—the crushing expectations to know an unknowable situation, to keep everyone safe in a vacuum of safety, and to be well ourselves in a blender of demands and fear. It was a difficult time, and the fallout continued as we strove for normalcy while we felt rubbed raw. The ability to absorb the

pain and fear and emotions of others is made harder by the wearing away of whatever buffers we had before.

*“Systems of oppression oppress. They just oppress in different ways for different people. We forget about the suffering of people at the top”
(Senge, Compassionate Systems Master Practitioner Training,
personal communication, July 19, 2022).*

2019.07.28 – A Dwelling: My Role in the Dance of Leading and Being Led

Here was an unknown quantity – a child in breeches with a blue scarf wound around his neck whose job it was to get them out and back alive. This – to Bates – was the greatest terror of war: what you didn't know of the men who told you what to do – where to go and when. What if they were mad – or stupid? What if their fear was greater than yours? (Findlay, 1977, p. 119)

I used to assume those in leadership positions above me, knew more and were trustworthy by the very position they occupied. Slowly my child-like expectations eroded. The teacher who threw candies at us in an attempt to control our behavior and apathy. The principal who needed approval and lashed out at those who questioned the circumstances of the school. The educational leader who spoke of a healthy environment but neglected to see, nurture or value those carrying out the work.

And yet...

They are simply human with all the fears, disappointments, hopes and joys that we all have. I can respond with pity, anger, compassion, understanding, resentment. My response encourages another response from them, and so on. And an ecosystem of interconnected assumptions, understandings, refusals, or openings is born. The patchwork of roots in a garden that begins young with possibility and reaches through iterations of birth and decay, always in process.



The leader of the dance might lead but it is a reflexive and responsive process, one where each dancer has an impact on the next steps.

2019.05.30 – A Dwelling: Position

In the ethos of these times, humans need a soul-place, a renewed connection between humans, the places and the beings that dwell in these places. (Hasebe-Ludt et al. 2009, p. 14)

We stand in an oval outlining the room with the speakers grouped at one end—the 'head' of the circle if you will. These professors and authors from various universities are about to share their writing and to create a live Métissage of woven identity. We begin with everyone introducing themselves and providing a bit of context, the labels that contextualize our place in this room. Some people provide a little story about what they've been doing in their job or what their research interest is. The person who speaks prior to me mentions she has spent the day with kids and is tired. She elicits sympathetic responses from the group and murmurs about the important work she is doing. Then it's my turn. I give my name, the doctoral cohort I'm part of, and explain I've spent the day in meetings and I too am tired. My role is district principal in a large school district.

The seemingly visceral, synchronized response from the panel of speakers stuns me. As one they step back, almost in revulsion. One says, we won't hold that against you. And everyone laughs. There are certainly no words of empathy, shared understanding, or emotional connection as there were when a teacher described her day.

The Métissage begins, weaving identity into a tapestry of community. I stand struck still, in confusion. Physically in the circle of community, energetically not quite fitting in.



I thought they were expressing distaste for those in what is considered to be leadership roles in education, in a similar way the conversation in a staffroom shifts, ever so slightly, the day after you become a vice principal, now on 'the other side.' What has always confused me is why some roles are considered to be on different sides, when every role is an integral and important part of the whole community working together to support the healthy development of people. Perhaps it is the way roles can be abused. Perhaps it is a (mis)understanding (one I participated in) of titles as a higher perch in a colonized, hierarchical system of comparison.

Perhaps the Métissage participants had also been led astray by those in positions of perceived authority who stifled their ability to act in response to their students' circumstances, needs, and possibilities. Perhaps their unified expression of distaste was not surprising given the hierarchical institutions they inhabit. Perhaps it was just a joke, unified by its familiar expression—synchronized because of the universality of distrust for titles.

My image of the leader has evolved from reliance on and expectation from title, to an understanding of the humanness and possibility inherent in any roles we inhabit. Ted Aoki (2005) explains his image of the leader and reveals that all in education participate in leadership:

In my world of education, the notion of 'educational leader' is a redundancy, repeating the same thing twice, for 'to educate' itself means, in the original sense, to lead out (ex-ducere). To lead is to lead others out, from where they now are, to possibilities not yet. (p. 350)

My growing understanding of leadership has been a difficult one. I struggle/d with expectations attached to title in opposition to the yearnings of my heart. When Dr. Kelly asked us to identify '*the rub*' that led us to doctoral studies, I 'othered' the problems I was perceiving in education, unaware the fragmentation in education and in the systems I inhabited mirrored the fragmentation with which I lived my life. I was also unaware of the image I held of leaders and the harmful expectations I imposed on them and on my self as result of that image.

Western culture teaches that certain positions, titles, and personalities denote leadership. All others are deemed followers, less than—paid less, given less access to information, receive less autonomy in their work, have less job security.

A tree appears the mightiest in a forest ecosystem, but it does not survive or thrive alone or direct the life of the whole. It is but one living being in a multi-being system where every life is interconnected and interdependent on the others. No false hierarchy—every being is needed. Which visible being would you say is leading that ecosystem?

Mette Boell (Compassionate Systems Meeting, personal communication, October 7, 2023) offers a different metaphor to describe leadership and systems rather than the hierarchy that has dominated for so long. She suggests mycelium is a more appropriate representation of healthy systems and the leadership that is called for at this time. Mycelium is a network of life-giving fungi that connects trees and other plants. It is invisible above ground but spreads and nourishes below ground, weaving connection among the beings that are visible to us. Occasionally we see evidence of it through the flowering of a mushroom, but the main network of mycelium is hidden, working to support the life and healthy connections among other beings. When we de-centre one being (in this case one who is considered a leader) but instead centre the wholeness of all beings, the entire ecosystem thrives as a healthy, nourished whole.

It is time for our images to evolve.

Uncovering Theoretical Frameworks

Freire (1972, as cited in Aoki, 2005) reminds us that “all educational practice implies a theoretical stance on the educator’s part. This stance in turn implies—sometimes more, sometimes less explicitly—an interpretation of man [*sic*] and the world. It could not be otherwise” (p. 119). Similarly, leadership practices imply a theoretical stance on a leader’s part—an interpretation of what it means to be human (Sloan, 2005) and to live in this world.

The New Shorter Oxford Dictionary (L. Brown, 1993) offers more than a page of small print definitions for ‘lead,’ including “leading, direction, guidance; ...accompany and show the way to (a person); esp. direct or guide by going on in advance” (p. 1550). “Take the principal part in (proceedings of any kind); be at the head of (a party, a movement); have the official initiative in the proceedings of (a deliberative body)” (L. Brown, 1993, p. 1550). A leader is defined as “someone who guides others in action or opinion; a person who takes the lead in a business, enterprise, or movement”

(L. Brown, 1993, p. 1551). Leadership is the “action of leading or influencing; ability to lead or influence” (L. Brown, 1993, p. 1551). The *Ojibwe People’s Dictionary* refers to leading as the one going ahead, at the front (“Leading,” n.d.). In practice, someone recognized as a leader in education is often the person setting direction, creating a vision for a classroom, a school, a department, or a district. Yet I have been led and influenced and taught by many people without any positional title—students, parents, peers. There are many ways of ‘going ahead, at the front.’

Managing and leading are terms that are often used interchangeably, but in fact they denote different characteristics and duties. The *Ojibwe People’s Dictionary* defines manage as “earn (e.g., money); ... overpower, prevail over, conquer.... (“Manage,” n.d., para. 2). The *New Shorter Oxford Dictionary* (L. Brown, 1993) explains that to manage is to “control and direct the affairs of (a household, institution, State, etc.); ... take charge of, attend to.... Cause to submit to one’s rule or direction.... Administer, regulate the use or expenditure of (finances, provisions, etc.)” (p. 1682).

The tasks of managing in education are important, but completing those tasks successfully does not equate to leading. We need someone to take on the duties of managing in schools and districts—ordering supplies, setting schedules, ensuring buses work and buildings are heated, paperwork is submitted, and so forth. A good organizational manager can make a building run smoothly, and still not attend to creation of new outcomes, the possibility of renewed environments, or positive contribution to the long arc of generational change. We need leadership that seeks creation, that builds good soil, as Robin Wall Kimmerer (2021) suggests.

Leadership is not straightforward. It involves nuances of identity, relationship, experience, and context weaving in a braid of ever-changing and growing possibility. At its best, it is a dancing, a combining and coming together, influencing and being influenced by, living within the contextual and collaborative artistry of world-making.

Yet when I read various researchers in the hopes of becoming more effective I was advised what a leader needed to do, divorced from context and from self. I was given steps to follow or traits to embody to be more effective. The articles left me feeling more confused and inadequate. I was told to be reflective and authentic (Begley, 2006), transformative (Looman, 2003, p. 215), and aware of my values and personal code of

ethics (Molina & Klinker, 2012). Eacott (2010) pointed out the “rhetoric of the field ... [that] celebrat[es] the individual leaders and their skills in turning around schools” (p. 267)—those rare heroes we should all aspire to be. Hallinger (2003) explained, “Transformational leadership requires a higher tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty from the principal, and an ability to live with the messy process of change” (p. 340). Who doesn’t want to have reflective capacity, authenticity, and understanding? And being a ‘transformational leader’ has such a lovely, inspiring ring to it but I was no closer to knowing what is true for me.

I began reading *Presence* (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers, 2004) and for the first time, I felt a resonance with a vision of leadership. Otto Scharmer (2004) described a blind spot in our collective understanding of the depths of transformational change. He states,

This blind spot concerns not the what and how—not what leaders do and how they do it—but the who: who we are and the inner place or source from which we operate, both individually and collectively. [Change needed for a healthier future will be] both deeply personal and inherently systemic” (p. 5).

It is not surprising, given my searching for answers, that the question posed by Moules et al. (2015) so deeply resonated: “*What is possible in a situation for me, what concrete possibilities are available for action, given who I am, given where I am, and given what I am encountering in the particular situation?*” (p. 26). I slowly began to recognize the personal and contextual nature of leadership.

Gregory Cajete (2016) describes the development of Indigenous leaders through traditional Indigenous education. Leadership is a deeply relational endeavour, rooted in cultural and community values: “The highest value was placed in being in *resonance* with the dynamic balance of relations between humans, nature, the cosmos, other beings, and spirits of the past, present, and future” (Cajete, 2016, p. 365). He describes leadership that is not individualistic, although the individual’s personal spiritual and relational growth are essential in the formation of leaders. That growth happens within community, where each person “comes to know the nature of relationship, responsibility, and participation in the lifeways of one’s people” (Cajete, 2016, p. 366). Colonized forms of leadership centre on the appointment of specific people based on academic or

institutional credentials, which differs from Indigenous leadership, where “various people performed leadership roles depending on context and need” (Cajete, 2016, p. 368).

No one person can fulfill every need; everyone is needed.

Mitchell (2018) describes the leaders in her community and the various roles they inhabit as they lead towards a better, healthier future for all: those who run the tribal offices, those who teach in schools, those who take care of the sick and the elderly, and protect the children. Leaders are found everywhere, in every role, in every place. Leadership lies in the intention and consciousness with which we live our lives and carry out our work. There are teachers who are leaders, education assistants who are leaders, and conversely, principals and superintendents who are not. It is time to end our child-like reliance on the leadership of others, and step forward collectively to create an education system that values and nurtures the whole person, the whole community, and the whole planet, all living in healthy interconnectedness.

It is now our responsibility to cultivate the warriors [or leaders] of tomorrow. To do that, we have to take responsibility for nourishing the ground where they will grow. We have to get down on that ground and plant the seeds that will give them life. Then, we have to ensure that their environment is capable of providing them with everything that they need, including a set of core cultural values that will guide them on their path. (Mitchell, 2018, p. 161)

In our Western education system, we often talk about preparing students to be the leaders of tomorrow, or we tell them they are leaders because they perform certain tasks within schools or the community. But then we tell them when they can eat, where they can sit, what they will learn and how they will demonstrate their learning, when assignments are due regardless of their individual contexts, and most egregious of all, we tell them when and if they can attend to their bodily functions. We teach students to comply with external demands and judgments and ignore their own bodies and wisdom. When we train compliant followers how can we expect leaders to step in when needs arise?

The development of self-awareness does not flow from a disconnection with our selves. Self-awareness is necessary for living consciously. Parker Palmer (2007) discusses the importance of engaging in self-reflection so we do not lead unconsciously or mindlessly, unaware of our impacts on others, and if we choose not to reflect, perhaps we should

not engage in work that involves other people. He explains that “as long as I am here, doing whatever I am doing, I am leading, for better or for worse” (Palmer, 2007, p. xxx).

Being a leader begins with who one is. Joseph Marshall (2008, as cited in Cajete, 2016) outlined the qualities of character that the leader Crazy Horse embodied and that are also internalized by traditional Indigenous leaders: “selflessness, morality, experience, honesty, and responsibility [as well as] ... compassion, humility, spirituality, and a deep and abiding love for one’s people and land” (p. 368). Leadership is not a position of privilege, but rather one of responsibility. Indigenous leadership as described by Cajete (2016) embodies holism, interconnectedness, relations, and development of self, not for selfish reasons, but for the opportunity to give to others. Leadership is a form of service, not a perch of power.

We are so colonized in a mechanistic and hierarchical worldview that we don’t even see there can be another way of understanding leadership. Attempts to describe the development of leaders in Western culture tend to revert to a reliance on fragmentation. Each tiny part of leading, learning, growing together is codified and quantified, listed and measured for consumption and implementation.

Candis Best (2011) describes a model for holistic leadership that talks about personal development and contribution of everyone, collective learning and leadership, and value and behaviour alignment. And yet, while I read the article I could feel a tightening in my body, a resistance to the very words I had searched for. She describes an organization where the titular leader is not placed higher on a pedestal and is not solely responsible for the organization; everyone is a leader and contributes. So why was my entire body rejecting the words I read, and why was I struggling to keep reading? I don’t disagree with her aims, but I resisted the path. When Best described the present limitations and areas for future research, she explained,

Holistic leadership theory must first be cast in the form of a testable model of leadership. Such a model has been developed by the author and contains the following salient features based on the theory articulated above:

- A framework of thirty-one leadership competencies that support the practice of holistic values and collaborative development strategies in organized settings; and

- Use of the four levels of functional performance as an organizing framework that produces leadership scaffolds to support the development of self-leadership capacity while preparing participating members for the exercise of increasing levels of self-determination and participatory decision-making. (p. 16)

Do these things, be this way, and apparently transform any organization. My visceral response to reading this passage was an embodied one, not a cognitive one. During my graduate class I would have eagerly consumed the list of characteristics or competencies and levels of performance in my quest to be more (effective, decisive, confident, organized, wise... any number of descriptors could be placed here). Now I read the passage and have a full body rejection of it. I am not meant to be everything to everyone; I am not supposed to know every answer. I am meant to show up, consciously, with self-awareness and self-compassion. Only then can I give to others and hope to support the development of wholeness in education. When I isolate parts of my self, I can only arrive with fragments and cannot hope to support wholeness. When we educate children as parts (training them to ignore their bodies, to understand subjects as separate, to set goals individually without reference to collective well-being) we cannot develop wholeness.

Cajete (2016) and Marker (2015) draw parallels between the education of Indigenous children and youth and the development of Indigenous leaders. It begins with being educated with the values and cultural teachings, the connection of language to place, and care for collective well-being. The ability to lead is developed over the arc of a life and begins with the earliest education of a community's values, similar to the arc of the hermeneutic circles described by Schleiermacher (as cited in Zimmerman, 2015). Schleiermacher believed "Every great ... insight provides a partial glimpse into the shared cosmic whole ... [and] expressions of the human spirit could ... be grasped only through the particulars of language and a person's entire life context" (Zimmerman, 2015, p. 27). Education and leadership, experiences and relationships, context and place form the whole that develops leaders.

An education that teaches students to disconnect from their bodies and internal voices, and then expects leadership to emerge from that education by following a prescribed list of actions or expectations disconnected from context will not lead to wholeness.

While Western education tends to emphasize individual achievement and career goals, Indigenous education emphasizes collective well-being, including “aspects of healing and reconnecting people to the language and culture of the land” (Marker, 2015, p. 233). Flowing from the education practices, leadership in Western institutions tends to highlight the individual who is responsible for decisions and ensuring compliance with those decisions. Traditional Indigenous leaders, on the other hand, are in service of the well-being of the community. Different worldviews lead to different educational processes, which in turn lead to different understandings of leadership.

Thus, leadership is not necessarily transferrable. The package of leadership competencies and levels of functional performance created by Best (2011) cannot be replicated in every setting. As Marker (2015) notes, “Leadership is culturally specific. That is, what makes sense and what helps direct the activities of the group in one community frequently do not work in another context” (pp. 233–234). Different people, different circumstances, different needs, different place. Leadership is responsiveness to people, circumstance, needs, and place. And leaders grow from *who* they are, what they value, believe, and live daily.

Compassionate Systems Leadership has three pillars and the first is self-mastery. This is not synonymous with self-discipline or a sort of mastery over bodily desires and functions. It is about knowing oneself, having and holding a vision, engaging in contemplative practices, and being responsible for the way we enter relational spaces. We are all responsible for the energy we bring. Marker (2015) shares teachings from Nisga’a leaders who advise that leaders “must maintain their spiritual vision and use oral traditions of the people to inspire themselves and the community” (p. 237). You cannot separate the self, relations with others, and place from the leadership called for and practised.

The context within which leadership unfolds is as important as the competencies and values and mindsets inherent in the individual leading.

Our colonized systems view achievement as individual and success as economic. Our education system mirrors that worldview, measuring individual success that will lead to the highest paying careers and giving the illusion that systems are transferrable and scalable. Accordingly, we have transferred and scaled up educational models around the

world, despite the needs and uniqueness of individual communities (Senge et al., 2004). However, ultimately the education system is a living system serving whole people in whole communities.

Living systems don't scale, they grow. Scaling is a mechanistic mindset. Education is a complex, multilayered, interconnected, dynamic living system. (Mette Boell, Holding Space session, personal communication, January 13, 2022)

We tend to take something that works in one context with specific people and try to transplant it somewhere else, regardless of what is needed or can flourish there. Isolate, codify, and implement. We call what is expedient imaginative, not recognizing that imagination severed from an ecological origin is unmoored, untethered to place (see Sheridan & Longboat, 2006). Something created from disconnection cannot honour interconnectedness and well-being.

"Fragmentation and isolation' is a belief that understanding lies in studying isolated things and this mindset still dominates everyday affairs" (Senge et al., 2004, pp. 190–191). Our Western scientific method dominates our essential human connection—we tend to trust fragmentation over wholeness, perhaps because it's easier to measure and tinker with parts, giving the illusion of getting stuff done.

Understanding leadership requires an understanding of systems, both how they shape us and are shaped by us. For they are the walls we exist within and the floor we stand upon as we seek to lead for wholeness. Systems can divide or unite; oppress or liberate. Systems also represent a great paradox—we are both shaped by systems and we are the system (Senge & Boell, Compassionate Systems Master Practitioner Training, personal communication, June 29, 2021).

I turn now to an exploration of systems and the interconnected nature of relations, relating.

Shifting Systems

As long as our thinking is governed by habit – notably by industrial, 'machine age' concepts such as control, predictability, standardization, and 'faster is better' – we will continue to re-create institutions as they have been, despite their disharmony with the larger world, and the need of all living systems to evolve. (Senge et al., 2004, p. 9)

The *New Oxford Dictionary* (L. Brown, 1993) defines a system as “a group or set of related or associated material or immaterial things forming a unity or complex whole; ... a body of theory or practice pertaining to or prescribing a particular form of government, religion, philosophy, etc.” (p. 3193). When people speak of ‘the system’ they refer to “the established or prevailing political, economic, or social order, esp. regarded as oppressive ... [or] the whole body of an organism regarded as an organized whole; the sum of an organism’s vital processes or functions” (L. Brown, 1993, p. 3193). System here is defined as a noun, separate from the living beings within it. Robert Fritz (2010) explains, “Structure determines behavior. The way anything is structured determines the behavior within that structure” (p. 20). We are thus shaped by our systems.

But there is another way of understanding systems:

The word ‘system’ in English conveys it as a noun, whereas in *Anishinaabemowin* (Ojibwe) a system would be a verb, dynamic and imbued with spirit. And that spirit is in relationship with other spirits. (Goodchild, 2021, p. 79)

Systems can describe the action of one part moving and causing the movement of other parts. Systems can also describe the action of relating being to being, spirit to spirit, growing, evolving, affecting each other in reciprocal ways—evolving and transforming. Systems as spiritual connections, not mechanical ones—systems as ways of being in relation, interconnected and interdependent. All living beings are interconnected. We are the system.

Humans, as sensory beings, have been regarded by some as instruments that can influence measurements, and by others as an entangled part of the phenomenon that is being measured. From this perspective, we are not distinct from the systems that we are measuring – we are the systems.
(O’Brien, 2021, p. 23)

And therein lies the paradox. We are influenced by the systems we inhabit, while also being an entangled part of the system. Influenced and influencing.

Senge et al. (2004) describe Arie de Geus’s theory that large global corporations represent the emergence of a new species on earth that affects all life on this planet in an unprecedented fashion. The good news is that, like all life forms, “it has the potential to grow, learn, and evolve” (Senge et al., 2004, p. 8). Without that potential being

activated, these institutions will continue to “expand blindly, unaware of their part in a larger whole or of the consequences of their growth, like cells that have lost their social identity and reverted to growth for its own sake” (Senge et al., 2004, p. 8), like a cancer.

Education systems, they argue, have taken on this same blind global growth to the point where a school in China, Brazil, Canada, Switzerland, or India follows the same way of organizing education. Like all living systems, it continues to recreate itself often without our individual and collective awareness. The work each member of a school community does is both influenced by the system as a whole, and influences the system, reciprocally. We are both wholes and parts.

Wholes and Parts

Our world is full of systems of various sizes and kinds: ecosystems such as forests, rivers, deserts, as well as individual body systems, family and community systems, education systems, health care system, justice system, railroad system, and on and on. Senge et al. (2004) discuss the parts and wholes that comprise a system, pointing out the difference between mechanical systems and living systems. In mechanical systems, wholes are often referred to as the sum of their parts and if a part stops functioning you simply fix or replace it. For example, a car (the whole) consists of various parts (steering wheel, engine, chassis, tires, etc.). Assembling the parts correctly creates the whole.

In contrast, living systems cannot be reduced to their parts. Living systems create themselves and continue to grow and change—think of your own body system, or a plant system. Your hand is not a static part separate from your body, easily replaceable the way a tire can be replaced.

Goethe (as cited in Senge et al., 2004) describes the whole as

something dynamic and living that continually comes into being ‘in concrete manifestations.’ A part, in turn, was a manifestation of the whole, rather than just a component of it. Neither exists without the other. The whole exists through continually manifesting in the parts, and the parts exist as embodiments of the whole. (p. 6)

The education system is a living social system, not a mechanistic one. As a growing and changing living system, the parts need to work together—in interdependence and interconnectedness. If your hand develops in competition with your foot, it would affect

the health of the whole body. In education, each classroom is a whole as well as a part of the larger school system; each school is a whole and a part of the larger district system and so on. Classrooms are a manifestation of the larger education system; the larger education system exists through continually manifesting in the parts—classrooms and each person involved there (educators, students, parents).

Any living system that doesn't grow, evolve, learn, and develop will atrophy and die. Cells replicate, divide, grow and without awareness, can cause disease. As Senge et al. (2004) states,

Cells develop a kind of social identity according to their immediate context and what is needed for the health of the larger organism. When a cell's morphic field deteriorates, its awareness of the larger whole deteriorates. A cell that loses its social identity reverts to blind undifferentiated cell division, which can ultimately threaten the life of the larger organism. It is what we know as cancer. (pp. 5–6)

Without consciousness of the health of the whole, we will continue to replicate the system blindly. An industrial model of education that was created to efficiently train factory workers no longer serves the health of a community that needs thoughtful, compassionate citizens of today (see Senge et al., 2004). The way the system recreates itself and the possibilities for educating for the health of the whole will depend on both our individual and collective levels of awareness (Senge et al., 2004) and our willingness to step up and show up. Our intentions and purpose matter if we hope to change education at all.

No living system is static; it is ever evolving, growing, learning. I need to be mindful of my impact. If I try to stay static within a system, without recognizing my impact of either stalling or forcing change, of creating busyness or allowing mindfulness, of expecting compliance or acknowledging contribution, I will become an unhealthy part of the whole.

Systems Awareness

In Dr. Michael Ling's class in January 2016, my eyes were reluctantly opened to the systems surrounding me. Prior to that class I was unaware of the systems I operated within. I accepted the way things were; if I saw the system at all, I saw it as a natural phenomenon, not something we collectively create or perpetuate or transform from our collective imaginations. The thoughts directing our collective imagination are often

dictated by goals of economics, not humanity; fragmentation, not interconnection—guideposts that steer in an unhealthy direction. I chafed against the restrictions of the guideposts without realizing how embedded they were in our collective psyche and how much my frustration with them mirrored an internal frustration about the way I was living my own life. I was disconnected from my body and my spirit, measuring self-worth in achievement.

I slowly and painfully came to understand that just as we can't separate leadership from the one leading and the surrounding context, nor can we separate leadership from the systems within which we operate. In my final paper for that class, I wrote about my dawning awareness of the system I was operating within.

2016.03.31 – Final Course Paper Excerpt

I started my paper with a desire to learn more about reflective leadership. This was born from my quest to be a better leader in order to more effectively support teachers and their professional learning. I thought that if I was more reflective I would be more effective – I would figure out how to be more organized, more on top of things – better, stronger, faster. I would be better equipped to navigate the system that I struggle to understand. I assumed the system is just the system; my inability to thrive within it must mean there is something wrong with my ability; after all, others look like they are keeping up. I take it upon myself to perform better and faster as part of my own sense of self-worth (see Ball, 2012).

To those around me it might appear I'm doing fine; in reality most days I'm drowning in a sea of emails and becoming more and more frustrated at having to make disconnected decisions because of a lack of access to the necessary information to make grounded and connected decisions. I am given just enough agency to have the illusion that I matter and can make a positive difference, but enough uncertainty to feel the need to perform and justify. Ball (2003) describes my feelings exactly:

We become ontologically insecure: unsure whether we are doing enough, doing the right thing, doing as much as others, or as well as others, constantly looking to improve, to be better, to be excellent. And yet it is not always very clear what is expected. (p. 220)

At the same time, Brooksfield (2010) was trying to convince me that just maybe it is the system that needs reflection and change. He explained that "it is quite possible to practice reflectively while focusing solely on the nuts and bolts of process" (p. 216), which is what I intended to do through my research. I wasn't even aware I was "leaving unquestioned the criteria, power dynamics, and wider structures that frame a field of practice" (p. 216). Context and conditions matter.

I chafed against Brooksfeld's dichotomous language of the oppressor and the oppressed because it implies an intentionality that I don't believe is always there. I struggle with the notion that there is a secret 'them' consciously trying to oppress everyone else. Intentionality implies 'awakeness,' which cannot be assumed because "consciousness does not come automatically; it comes through being alive, awake, curious and often furious" (Greene, as cited in Lyons, 2010, p. viii).

The process of waking up can be a painful one – the comfort of the beliefs I have operated within has a powerful pull, even while I am burning myself out trying to meet the demands of an unhealthy system. I conspire in my own destruction.

Brooksfeld (2010) goes on to clarify,

One cannot peel back the layers of oppression and point the finger at an identifiable group or groups of people whom we accuse as the instigators of a conscious conspiracy to keep people silent and disenfranchised. Instead, the ideas and practices of hegemony become part and parcel of everyday life – the stock opinions, conventional wisdoms or commonsense ways of seeing and ordering the world that people take for granted. If there is a conspiracy here, it is the conspiracy of the normal. (p. 222)

That 'conspiracy of the normal' has made it difficult for me to start to question the system I can't keep up with. Maxine Greene (1988, as cited in Lyons, 2010) points out there is "no orientation to bringing something into being if there is no awareness of something lacking in a situation" (p. vii). I am slowly waking up to what is lacking in my situation, instead of trying desperately to wake up to what I thought must be lacking in me.

One Sunday afternoon, I took a break from emails and watched a recording of Rosalind Gill (2015) delivering a speech called "The Quantified Self of Neoliberal Academia." She described what I was experiencing but had labeled as my own shortcomings for not keeping up and not feeling more confident. She spoke of:

- *feelings of precariousness, long hours and anxiety;*
- *a 'do what you love' ethos – that having a passionate connection to your work has become a disciplinary technology and a means of self-exploitation because it is a mechanism that causes you to work harder and harder;*
- *a pervasive sense of crisis;*
- *isolation, stress, shame that you can't keep up, feelings of fear and guilt;*
- *requirements to do more with less;*
- *constant running, availability and responsiveness; anxiety about missing something important.*

I had lumped all this into labels of “ineffective” and “need to improve” for myself. With increased demands and a lack of access to information, “purposes are made contradictory, motivations become blurred and self-worth is uncertain. We are unsure what aspects of work are valued and how to prioritize efforts” (Ball, 2003, p. 221). I attend to everything because I’m not sure which aspects are being judged; I have a lack of information to set a context so I can’t identify priorities—everything becomes (potentially) important, and when something is missed I feel guilty. The need to keep up is expressed “in the lexicons of belief and commitment, service and even love.... The struggles are often internalized and set the care of the self against duty to others” (Ball, 2003, p. 216). Taking the time to exercise, see my family, get my hair cut, are all sources of guilt instead of the natural flow of a lived life – instead of being a ‘given’ they represent time stolen.

Becoming awake to the context and conditions imposed on my professional life, means also being awake to what I impose on others.

We become uncertain about the reasons for actions. Are we doing this because it is important, because we believe in it, because it is worthwhile? Or is it being done ultimately because it will be measured or compared? It will make us look good! (Ball, 2003, p. 221).

What pressure to perform am I imposing on those who report to me? My challenge is to remember the ‘conspiracy of the normal’ applies to the context in which I lead, not just the context in which I am led. It is tempting to push others, to get more done, to perform through others.

I desperately wanted and waited for my circumstances to change so I could thrive within the system I inhabited, without recognizing my contribution to it and the unconscious perpetuation of unhealthy practices. I recall a conversation with my husband, early in my district principal role. I was frustrated by a feeling of isolation and I told him I just want to learn from somebody. His quiet response made me uncomfortable. He said, “Karen, that’s you now. You need to be that person.” Fast forward to 2022 and a meditation practice led by Hanilee during Compassionate Systems Master Practitioner training in 2022. I highlighted in my journal something she said, “A prerequisite for showing up for others, is we need to show up for ourselves.” The way we show up for ourselves determines how we show up in our relationships and the way we show up within the systems we occupy, create, sustain, or transform.

*“When we care more for others than ourselves, we are neglecting
a part of the system – and it affects all other aspects.”
(Aggotstader, Holding Space Training, personal communication, October 30, 2022)*

2019.05.14 – A Dwelling: Revealed Awareness

It is apparent that everything is dynamically interconnected – more than that, the entities comprising the universe interpenetrate. (Lemkow, 2005, p. 18)

This is the time of year to review next year's assignments for the early learning teachers. Most principals contact me to beg for more time allotted to their schools and to request the same person for continuity. Everyone comes to love and appreciate their early learning teacher who has become so integral to student learning and staff development. I was surprised to hear from one principal who called to ask if I could please not place the same person at her school.

This is a teacher who is very strong pedagogically. She knows her stuff and cares about children. However, I had noticed a recent shift, very small at first but in hindsight I recognized a widening gulf from where she started. It was nothing I could really put my finger on, but at our monthly meetings she complained just a little bit about the kids, complained about some of the teachers' practices, was a little less forthcoming with ideas.

The principal told me she appreciates the teacher's knowledge and when she first came she was very enthusiastic and positive. But lately her negativity was impacting staff and teachers were growing more reluctant to have her in their classrooms.

I met with her, as I often do with the early learning teachers at this time of year to find out what is going well, what their plans/hopes are for next year. I asked how she felt about her year and she told me it had been an excellent year; she felt there had been growth in the students and she enjoyed her colleagues. I asked what she wanted for next year and she told me she wanted to stay where she was and continue with the same work.

I paused, unsure where to go next. I had expected her to say she wanted to change schools, given her recent negativity. And I knew it wouldn't be good for her or the school to place her there again.

I shared with her what I had noticed in recent months during our department meetings. I said I know she does really good work but that she seemed a little unhappy, a little more negative, a little less enthusiastic about sharing ideas. She was taken aback. "But I love my job. I work really hard and this is important work."

I paused again, mindful of her spirit and my response-ability and the impact my words could have.

I told her sometimes we evolve beyond where we're at. What we once loved can become a container that no longer fits. There is no shame in celebrating really great work and then moving on if that's what is needed. We still take with us all that we learned and then share it in a new place or position.

The words came from inside me, unplanned but heartfelt. An unfurling of understanding curled into my awareness. I spoke the words aloud while I looked into her eyes and I saw myself instead of her. I needed to have the conversation with her because of a prompt from the principal. But I needed to hear the words for my self because of the unease and frustration I felt in my own role. I spoke to her; I heard my self. I spoke the words at her but to me.

She shared with me that maybe she seemed negative because she was really frustrated with one aspect of her job that did not turn out the way she had been promised by the principal (she had an additional role at the school, separate from the early learning role).

But that frustration seeped into all aspects of her work. Emotional containment is a myth.

My own frustration seeps and weeps visibly. Indivisible. I see it now.

My guilt for wanting to leave a really good job with many aspects I enjoy and people I care for and would miss. There is no shame in learning, offering, and then leaving, giving way for others to step in and offer their gifts.



All living beings evolve; it is the nature of life. Trying to stay the same while the seasons turn and ecosystems develop is futile, and possibly harmful.

'The system' had become visible to me through my research in Dr. Ling's class. My role in the system and my contributions to the perpetuation of it became visible to me through my relations within it. I was both impacted by and impacting within the system. I kept waiting for the system to change so I could be better/more within it. Yet any change process begins with each of us personally. "Add care and kindness back into the equation; change is not an intellectual exercise" (Peter Senge, Compassionate Systems Master Practitioner Training, personal communication, January 13, 2022). We are the system.

How do I contribute? What values and beliefs and intentions guide my decision-making? I turn now to reflections on acts of leadership, both mine and others.

Reflecting on Leading

I began my current role at the end of August 2019 and by March 2020 we were in lockdown because of COVID-19. For years the pandemic coloured the context I had arrived in and shaped the practices we all inhabited. Any reflection on my leadership praxis must include re-viewing where we were at that time, how we stumbled through, and the ways we are impacted as we transition/ed out of it. We have been indelibly marked by the fear, uncertainty, and distrust, as well as the care, compassion, and questioning of status quo that grew out of the experience.

2024.02.02 – A Dwelling: Pandemic Re-View

It is possible to prepare for the future without knowing what it will be. The primary way to prepare for the unknown is to attend to the quality of our relationships, to how well we know and trust one another. (Wheatley, 2003, para. 18)

We keep striving to get back to normal, yet normal has become completely elusive. We no longer wear masks in all public places, we don't practice social distancing or require students to remain inside their small learning cohort. Fieldtrips have resumed. We hold professional learning in person. We no longer receive daily or weekly COVID updates from the Ministry or Fraser Health. We are back to normal, aren't we?

I wanted to write about how we led through the pandemic in our district, so I re-read some of the documentation and emails we sent at the beginning of the shutdown. I immediately felt tightening in my throat, heaviness in my chest, clenching of my stomach. I was transported to that time of uncertainty and fear and exhaustion.

I read emails I wrote during long hours in my home office, trying so desperately to provide answers and direction without any certainty. The one thing I was sure of was the need for everyone to take care of themselves, to be healthy, to care for their loved ones, and to maintain strong relationships with their students. We needed to be healthy and connected. We did not need to jump in with busyness, but with thoughtfulness.

We were consistent with messages of care, health, connection. Go slowly, be mindful, intentional, well. The first day back to work after spring break was so uncertain, and not only did we not know what to prepare, we didn't know how long we were preparing for. I remember thinking it would be a few weeks, and then thinking we just need to get to June, and then everything would be back to normal. Those mental and emotional gymnastics lasted years, not weeks. That first day after spring break, staff were to begin the daunting task of re-imagining and re-learning to teach in a completely new format. I wrote to teachers:

As we begin the process of planning for continued learning, remember to reach out to colleagues (including mentor teachers, non-enrolling teachers, Indigenous liaisons, etc.) so you are supported and so we can work together to support our learners. The most important work we can do with students and families is to ensure caring relationships and a sense of belonging are nurtured. It is very important that we maintain connection with each student. Your work can provide a sense of normalcy and calm.

...

What learning do you need in order to carry out this plan? Who will you reach out to for support? Our mentor teachers are here to support you.

...

You do not need to have everything figured out right away. Start small – establish communication with your students and focus on one or two elements as you and your students get used to this new learning format.

We are not just planning for students. What plan do you have for your own wellness?

At the first meeting I attended after we learned of the closing of in-person learning, I heard district leaders from around the province brainstorming what to do first, what to pay attention to, how to lead through uncertainty. The focus was mostly on care and safety, but there were also a few expressing concerns about accountability for staff and academic learning for students. We give in so easily to the pull of status quo, even in the face of life altering (and tragically in some cases, life-ending) circumstances.

I also recall the nightly banging of pots in support of health care workers giving way to harassment as they entered and left hospitals. We similarly dealt with families who demanded to know the vaccine status of all employees and others who protested the need to wear masks or socially distance. We went from 'we're all in this together' to us versus them. Our communities and our relationships and our well-being have been, in some cases, devastatingly impacted. My embodied reaction to reading emails and documents from that time speaks to the fact the stress is still in my cell tissue.

The importance of responsive and response-able leaders that recognize the needs of their particular community, and act with the intention of health, wholeness, and wellness cannot be overstated. We made it through that time with the mutual support of the entire team, from the board of trustees, to senior team, to principals and vice principals, managers, educators, support workers, custodians, facilities workers. We all led from where we were, as we could.

And yet, as I write this and reflect on that time, I can't help but wonder if the foundation of care was really as solid as I thought. When I re-read the emails and documents my body reacted viscerally. An involuntary tightening that revealed an unhealed experience. I told everyone to take care of their wellness and I truly believed it. But I woke up every morning, walked straight to my home office and didn't move until I came down for lunch and answered phone calls while I sporadically ate. I trudged back upstairs and remained working until about 8:00 when my husband pulled me downstairs for dinner, often returning to my computer afterwards. And the next day, and the next day. I wasn't the only one. Did I really lead if I let myself and others around me exhaust ourselves in our quest to 'help'? The foundation is first built within – a lesson I continue to learn and relearn.

What do natural kin teach us about leading? How do we each do our parts to connect the whole in healthy ways?



As this mushroom begins a slow process of decay above ground, the mycelium network below ground continues to work and nourish, silently and invisibly connecting the whole.

*"We are interconnected beings born in and for community"
(Palmer, 2007, p. xxix).*

Just because the pandemic restrictions are no longer in place, we all still need the same care and connection. The health of a community easily erodes without it. Lack of connection leaves gaps, where distrust or anger or fear can seep in and fill spaces left by severed connection.

My lesson is to remember that tending to my own health is not selfish; I can only effectively tend to others if I am well.

I used to think leaders are decisive, making quick decisions that make everyone else happy. I used to think leaders are fearless, confident, and knowledgeable. The pandemic stripped that away from all of us. All that was left was who we are and that was all we could draw upon to lead from. We lead from who we are, not from the positions we hold.

I recall those who have led me, going ahead and giving me a path to follow until I was able to create my own. Leading is often found in the nudges instead of the pushes, the modeling instead of the directive. I was fortunate to experience the nudges and modeling from a leader when I did my teaching practicum. She helped to bring my image of the child, and leading, into focus.

Undated – A Dwelling: The Dignity of Leading

The second bell rang and the noise in the hallways slowly began to subside as students gathered in their classrooms, ready to begin the day. The Grade 1 students go about the routines they have been taught – removing their jackets and donning their inside shoes, getting their chairs, putting their book bags on their desks, doing small jobs for the teacher. Many of them circle around me, my school associate Denise, or the EA Jill to tell us stories and show us treasures found on the way to school or brought from home. Denise reminds everyone it is circle time and they sit down, forming a somewhat circular shape. They become quiet as I begin taking attendance.

A loud angry voice elbows into our awareness as the classroom door flies open, banging forcefully against the wall. An unkempt man smelling of alcohol storms in, pulling his granddaughter behind him. He proceeds to yell at Denise, fury and spittle flying from his mouth because the outside doors were locked and he had to walk around to the front door. Every young body swivels to stare open-mouthed at this stranger being unkind to their teacher.

His granddaughter is a member of our classroom community and she cowers in embarrassment behind him, her little face awash in red. She makes eye contact with no one. She is expressionless. And fragile.

I take all of this in as I turn towards Denise. She smiles and escorts the angry man out into the hallway. Jill gets the young girl settled in the circle and I continue with attendance.

Denise returns and I fully expect her to make eye contact with me, roll her eyes, indicate some frustration or disbelief. Instead, she looks only at the children and greets them with a huge smile and cheerful voice.

The girl's shoulders leave her ears. She softens with relief. The other students quickly refocus on their teacher.

Denise's message is received by all of us. The little girl knows she is still welcome, the rest of the class knows their teacher is fine and in control, and I learn the dignity of leading well by example, not by command.

Leadership can be found in the reliable presence of a parent, the outstretched hand of a friend, the extra effort of a teacher, and the determination by any of us not only to ask the best of ourselves but also to encourage others to live lives rich in accomplishment and love. (Albright, 2007, pp. xvi–xvii)



Denise modeled what it means to lead in community with others. If some are excluded there isn't a community.

Denise's lesson of leading early in my teaching career was a gift. It helped me to recognize the impact of my gestures, voice, words, and actions and how quickly they are interpreted by children and adults alike. There is no possibility of an impact-less leader, just one who is unaware.

When working with adults, I want to ensure everyone has a voice and recognizes their intentions and impacts. I want to nudge them to go deeper, to engage fully. I am frustrated by simple professional learning that provides scripts or easy to follow lessons—that ask nothing of us as we prepare to engage with children and youth in what I believe are sacred learning spaces. And yet, I sometimes feel the pull of conformity and the resistance of those who appear unwilling to dance with new ideas. It requires of me a deeper commitment to be my honest and full self when showing up to relational spaces.

2018.09.28 – A Dwelling: Don't Make Me Dance

True leadership comes not from the sound of a commanding voice but from the nudging of an inner voice – from our own realization that the time has come to go beyond dreaming to doing. (Albright, 2007, p. xvi)

Every planning meeting in preparation for a department meeting feels like there are five or six in the room, instead of the three of us. Those who are cynical, bored, or too smart, hover at the periphery of our awareness. How many lost opportunities have slipped away, just out of the reach of connection, because we were too afraid of boring those who might roll their eyes?

We had two days with the team, and little time to prepare for it. The words of one of the helping teachers echoes in the room. She informed the director that under no circumstances was she going to jump around—“Don't make me dance!” The words hover over every idea, dampening our enthusiasm.

Dance is more than a choreographed physical movement. There are emotional dances, intellectual dances, spiritual dances – and I suspect she was talking about all of them.



I want to invite them into a dance of ideas, connection, and spirit instead of engaging in a physical dance with weighted feet and inflexible limbs.

So we embark on the first meeting of the year, the echoes of what some will refuse to do still reverberating in my ears. The director and the other district principal have a meeting they must attend so I lead the first section of the day.

I begin with the land acknowledgement and talk about the importance of place and how it shapes who we become, what and how we learn. I talk about the place of our work and our department community. I explain that a community is not a static entity that we move in and out of without influence. A community begins anew because we arrive; every time someone joins or leaves the community it is a new entity. Every person matters and is essential to the whole. I referenced a TED talk where Mel Robbins (2018) said there is a 1:400 trillion chance of each of us being born in this time and this place. Then when you factor in the endless synchronicities and chances that had to occur for each of us to be in this room together on this day... it matters that you are here. When you engage we are all enriched. If you don't engage, we all lose. It's important to know our context, to honour the voices of those who have come before, but it's equally important to add our voices and to really listen to each other when we speak.

I could feel an energy shift in the room.

Then I had them do some individual, reflective writing about their purposes for the year. I gave them several questions as prompts and asked them to put themselves in groups of three or four. I was going to give them about 15 minutes in their groups. Some stayed in the room and others found a different space throughout the 4th floor. When time was up, I checked in on the groups and they weren't nearly finished so I gave them another 10 minutes. When that time elapsed I visited them again, still not ready. What was going to be a 15-minute exercise became 45. We debriefed as a whole group and it felt like people really connected and had meaningful discussions.

I could tell there was an energy in the room—productive, engaged, tender. We were holding each other, and ourselves, with tenderness, hope and a sense of purpose.

The director and district principal returned and we moved on to the next segment of the day. At lunch the same person who issued the directive that she wouldn't dance, strode across the room and told me how much she enjoyed the morning. It was really purposeful and meaningful for her. Go figure! I almost didn't say my opening 'speech' in case she or others thought it was flakey. But a few others also made a point of telling me how much it meant to them; it made them feel valued and opened a space for their voices.

Authenticity is a much better dance partner. It invites an easy rhythm with no forced steps; a natural beat with no need for counting.

I am learning that if I am not prepared to fully show up, with all of my beliefs and hopes and fears and dreams, I cannot expect that of others. When we show up with fear and fragments that is what we create. When we show up with wholeness we create connection. This postcard is a tiny example, but if I had allowed myself to be afraid of what others might think, I would not have spoken my beliefs about place, and wholeness, and voice, and community. Who, besides me, might have been silenced that day?

2024.01.26 – A Dwelling: Reaching Beyond Expectations

The vice principal looked at me with wide eyes, exhaustion in the slump of his shoulders. His stature and expression seemed to beg me to give him an answer, to alleviate the feeling of inadequacy in the onslaught of demands. He explains quietly that he never imagined the kinds of things so many of the kids are facing. He doesn't know how to help them all. And it's not just the students, it's also the families and the staff members that he is supporting.

He echoed my own first experience of administration in a school—the shock at the depth of need on a scale that I had not realized when I was in my own classroom. And the expectation that I should be able to fix it because I had a new title. I didn't feel like I knew enough, or was strong enough, or wise enough. Inadequacy marked my first years as someone trying to lead and fulfill what I perceived were the expectations of title.

I tell him he is not expected to bear all the responsibility alone. We are part of a team and we work together. No one can possibly know all the answers; we can't even anticipate all the questions. All we can do is draw from our own ethical and moral core and make decisions from that place. When I'm hiring someone to a position of leadership I'm not looking for someone who knows all the answers; I'm looking for someone who will listen deeply to the questions. I'm looking for someone who has an ethical and moral core, a sense of integrity and alignment. And he does.

We reach out to this particular student's elementary school and begin to shape a plan of support for him. We draw on all the adults who can support this child: his previous vice principal, classroom teacher, youth care worker, as well as the counsellor, safe schools and substance use liaison, and vice principal at his current school. We lead—and support—together. We don't fix; we connect in an effort to hold this child—and each other—up.



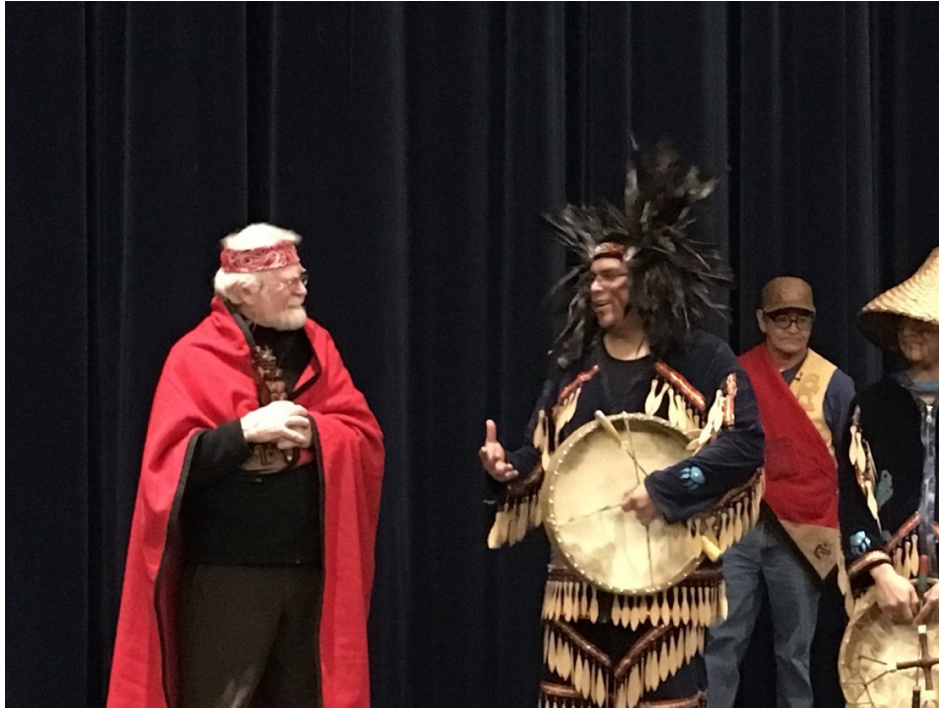
Leadership is a concept with as many facets as life itself. ...

The question of course is, What to do? The answer must be determined by each of us in accordance with our own circumstances and values. (Albright, 2007, p. xvi)

We lead collectively, connectedly. When I strive to be the answer-holder or to fix the problems others are facing, I cease to be leading. I'm not going ahead, I'm pushing aside, usually in search of my own comfort. My discomfort with the emotions someone is feeling and expressing leads me to fix instead of explore, to deny instead of recognize. Peter Senge (Compassionate Systems Master Practitioner Training, personal communication, July 19, 2022) describes the importance of recognizing and holding space for the legitimate other. Allow someone to be a legitimate other, not mine to fix, but perhaps to hold up and walk alongside.

We sometimes tend to measure our worth, or success, in the tasks completed, the problems solved, the heights achieved. But we all value being seen and heard and understood by our communities, not dismissed by being 'fixed.'

2016.11.30 – A Dwelling: 0/26, Measuring Success



Note. Photo taken by K. Alvarez, November 3, 2016, SFU President's Dream Colloquium.

"I had zero success effecting lasting change in 26 years of being a Crown prosecutor" (Class Discussion with Rupert Ross, personal communication, November 3, 2016).

How do we measure success? How do we measure leadership and contribution? How do we measure a life?

One of the students tells him she is hurt by his words. She first read his books in Native College and he changed her life. He inspired her to go into law enforcement because now she sees a better way. He also opened minds and hearts in the Dream Colloquium speech and in our class discussion – the results of which will unfold over time. He changed the lives of people he did not incarcerate because he chose alternative sentencing methods that honour community and Indigenous ways. He lived different choices. He set an example. He led.

Rupert Ross has been fighting for a different paradigm for our legal system and our health system. He says he has had zero success changing those institutional paradigms. He wants a new paradigm, one that incorporates a relational way of being, an Indigenous worldview. The western paradigms have resulted in rules, institutions, bureaucracies, silos that don't heal, bring together, or raise consciousness.

Knowledge that does not heal, bring together, challenge, surprise, encourage, or expand our awareness is not part of the consciousness this world needs now. (Meyer, 2008, p. 221)

Rupert Ross has certainly been successful in effecting significant change for the people in his courtroom. He lived a relational way of being within the justice system.

And yet he measures success by western paradigms—transforming laws and institutions instead of greater relationality and cultural understanding.

How do you measure the success of a leader? Change happens relationally too. It's time for new paradigms, new measures.

Doesn't that have a lovely ring to it? And yet. I still sometimes find myself chafing against another's disapproval, still try to accomplish – striving towards completion and, like Rupert Ross, still looking for system-wide change. Perhaps we both need to recognize that change happens internally first, then relationally, then systemically, recursively. Change beyond us also encompasses us and reflects us. We are schooled to only see now, not generationally. Mark Nepo (2016) muses about the impact of our actions:

Consider the butterfly effect, where the slight movement of a butterfly's wing in South America can become a mammoth wind after building for a thousand miles. ... Likewise, our slightest turning away from life can create tides of separation after crossing the ocean of time. But our slightest leaning toward life can begin a golden age of cooperation, waiting to happen a thousand years after we're gone. What we do matters, when it arises from the essence of our being. Our deepest leanings join with the tides of life to set great confluences in motion. When we show up with who we are, we join with other life, the way atoms form molecules. This joining of aliveness is at the heart of all creation. (pp. 19–20)

How do we come to measure the impact of our work, whatever form that work takes?

The work of leadership takes place in a world driven by outcomes and rational flow charts: profits to be reaped, elections to be won, test scores to be raised.... The metrics of the bottom line—often precise and narrow—can become the measure of what it means to lead. ... Yet some outcomes elude counting and have to do with what is right, what is just, and what is decent. (Intrator & Scribner, 2007, p. 105)

We measure what we value, and we value what we measure. Our need to systematize, codify, transfer, and scale up leadership practices in order to transform educational settings reflects an (often) unconscious acceptance of a consumerist and capitalist worldview that discounts the importance of context, human interactions and interdependence, and the often messy world of teaching and learning and the relationships which create the foundation for that teaching and learning to be effective.

It is in the connections—between, among, within mind, body, heart, spirit, as well as between, among, within humans and more than human beings—that life and living and leading unfolds. The isolated facets of any whole do not actually exist in isolation; they exist as a manifestation of the whole. Each ‘part’ is both whole and part but only in relation. Leadership occurs in relation, in interconnection. How am I stepping into relation with consciousness and awareness, wide awake?

I began my doctoral work in search of leadership strategies that would help me fulfill my role in a way that would please others. That search gave way to learning to live in wholeness, to relate in wholeness, and only then can I hope to lead in wholeness. We are ever evolving, transforming, relating, being. No three facets or steps of leadership will help me arrive at a destination because there is no destination. There is only my self, in community with others. How do I enter those spaces? What is possible for me, given who I am, given where I am, and given who I am with?

Amba Sepie (2021) speaks of the importance of place, of Mother Earth and our connection to her, and Sepie’s description mirrors what I believe leadership calls of us:

It matters not if my name is known, or that I was named at all, but it matters profoundly that I live in a manner that honors Earth as my origin, that I accept whatever identity is bestowed upon me in a specific place, at a specific time, and then show up for the work that accompanies it. (p. 29)

Leadership cannot be reduced to a formula or program, despite the efforts of many to do so (including me when I searched for a formula to be better). It is singular, unique to the evolving humanity of the person exercising it and the idiosyncratic requirements of particular situations and communities. And at its best, it is not separate from the Earth, but in symbiotic relation to it.

Leaders emerge in response to circumstance, time, need and the ability to engage with that need when it arises. Leadership is not synonymous with title, or pay, or status. I have been led by children, peers, parents, and also those in positions of authority. I have also been led astray at times, when I expected those in authority to be someone I should follow.

Leaders—usually assumed to be those with positional authority—are usually described in individualistic terms: a heroic, transformative, courageous person who leads us to better situations. Or conversely, a despotic, self-centred, aggressive person who towers over us, demanding conformity. However, leadership can also be found in the collective. Our traditional (colonized) understanding of leadership and our expectations of leaders are evolving from the search for a strong heroic leader who inspires and transforms—one who leads *over*—towards a vision of leading *from within* (both personally and collectively). Betty Sue Flowers (as cited in Senge et al., 2004) claims, “Leadership of the future will not be provided simply by individuals but by groups, institutions, communities, and networks” (p. 185).

We can all lead from who we are and where we are, in response to the people and contexts we encounter. O'Brien (2021) explains that leadership, character, and intentions matter and “leaders can redirect the course of action, quantum social change recognizes that everyone has the capacity to shift systems and cultures, no matter what their position” (p. 94). Why, then, do we only ascribe ‘leadership’ to those with certain titles?

Leadership is found in small gestures as much as grand ones. Clarissa Pinkola Estes (as cited in Wheatley, 2010) writes,

Ours is not the task of fixing the entire world all at once, but of stretching out to mend the part of the world that is within our reach. Any small, calm thing that one soul can do to help another soul, to assist some portion of this poor suffering world, will help immensely. (p. 12)

I have come to understand that leadership is how we lead our lives, with purpose, consciousness, and care. It is the way we interact with our communities in life-giving ways, the way we understand and are care-full of our impact on the world around us. It is the way we respond to the times we live in and heed the call for what is needed for a healthier planet, communities, relationships, and selves. Leadership is the willingness to become self-aware so we can enter relational spaces in a good way. Leadership is an aspirational stance of openness, willingness, and engagement. It is a stance of internal knowing and outward giving. Less a position of title, it is the positioning of our lives in relation to the place and context we unfold within.

By calling myself a leader, I am not claiming a perch; I am claiming a voice. I am claiming my consciousness. I am stepping in and showing up.

A leader asks what they can contribute, and contributes with consciousness—wide awake as Maxine Greene (1978) urges. A manager maintains, a leader awakens. We must all take responsibility for waking up, and leading lives of purpose, on purpose.

TRANSITIONING

Knowledge is not a tool but rather it is a spirit. It transforms the holder. It also reminds us that we have responsibilities to the spirit of that knowledge. We must pass it on. (Hatcher et al., 2009, p. 146)

True intelligence, it ends up, *is* self knowledge. (Meyer, 2008, p. 224)

It seems strange to have reached the bend in the path that is typically labelled “conclusion,” signifying an end, a wrapping up or mopping up (Richardson, 1994). I have more accurately arrived at a transition, another stream of connection, unbroken. The continuation of the hermeneutic circle and the journey of learning continuing seamlessly into the future despite preparing to part paths with you, generous Reader.

I originally explained how my path became visible in hindsight, a winding path that emerged into view...



“...no longer separate grains of sand, small rough-hewn pebbles, the occasional wobbly shoot poking gingerly through the earth.”

Now, with the gift of seeing my in-query journey in hindsight, my winding path is revealed as cyclical. Ever-widening circles, a journey of wholeness and a developing understanding of the widening ripples of my life.



My journey revealed a fluidity I had not detected as I embarked on finding my path. I have arrived here, for now. The next cycles of learning and becoming reverberating in ripples I receive and those I send.

2024.03.28 – A Dwelling: The Path Revisited

I have been noticing circular patterns in nature during my most recent trip to Ucluelet. I have learned to extend attention to what draws me because it always has something to teach me.

Choose what your heart draws you to, not what your mind decides. (Wagamese, 2016, p. 129)





These natural circular patterns awaken my understanding of the circular flow of my learning, sometimes spiraling, sometimes rippling outwards in concentric rings of connectivity, flowing backwards and forwards through time.

In my Openings section, I wrote,

The writing that follows mirrors my circuitous journey of learning and unlearning and relearning. The process is where life unfolds, and it is not a linear, well-defined path. There is simply no destination, just continual movement, adjustment, growth, and unfurling.

As I transition now, I'm more aware than ever that my journey has been circular, cycling through seasons and spaces, beginning long before my fingers began to click my thoughts through the keyboard and onto the page. Learning and growing and becoming will continue long after my last sentence here, a spiral of unfurling growth and emergence. The seeds I followed were planted in me from birth—my curiosity about spirit, my enthrallment with and comfort in nature, my awareness of the energy we emit and receive. These were schooled out of me over time, as I reached forward into the future, expecting paths to lead to finite destinations.

I had learned to think of growth as a linear path, an advancement forward towards a destination. But if we think in terms of cycles it more accurately reflects our lives. Movement, adjustment, growth, and unfurling. New movement, adjustment, growth, and unfurling.

In Openings I also said,

Mine was a yearning and stretching and hiding and emerging process of discovery and a constant questioning of what is possible for me in this context, at this time, with these living beings.

Every time I thought I had arrived, I learned I was beginning. A new cycle of learning and leading begins anew with each bend in the path and each encounter. The exploration to find what is possible in a particular situation for me, the concrete possibilities that are available for action, given who I am, given where I am, and given the particularities and relations I am encountering (Moules et al., 2015) is, itself, an ongoing process, without finitude.



I continue to unfurl in new seasons, the cycle of living and becoming, learning and leading in constant motion. Cycles of growth never look the same twice because of what has come before. We are impacted by and impact through our experiences and our relation to those experiences.

There is no there there, just expanding cycles of relational being and renewal.

As I re-view my writing and exploring I recognize the teachings from land were present before I became reacquainted with them. My search for wholeness and spirit began in childhood, not in a doctoral program. My questioning of systems emerged while it was simultaneously being schooled out of me as a young student. The spirals of unending seeking and questioning and learning were always present, but severed from consciousness as I severed mind, body, spirit within my life. In arriving at this transition, I better understand and recognize my beginnings—a cycling continuum instead of a linear path.

2024.03.18 – A Dwelling: Earth Embodiment

I remembered today. As I walked up the trail from the beach that leads back to my writing perch I paused next to bushes with a small flowing creek. I remembered the smells of earth from my childhood as I played in the bushes next to my house.

I felt my childhood hands digging in the wet earth, making new paths for the water to flow. I remember digging through bushes to small clearings where I would sit and imagine, the smells and textures conversing with thoughts.



*The light as I passed
somehow illuminated
memories of similar bushes
of past play. The sounds,
smell, and thick textures of
the inter-woven branches led
me back.*

*In-sight emerges in
layers of context.*

I remember that I am from land, the seeds of my heritage rooted in earth. My ancestors farmed for generations. They learned to live on, within, among the land and received nourishment and livelihood from it.

I remembered my ancestors who planted roots in this land we call Canada, after the uncertainty of travelling seas from another land. I am from land... and the ocean that connects my ancestral homes to my birth home. Threads inseparable, unbroken.

I am grateful for Indigenous teachings that re-awakened my kinship with the land I dwell on, the connection that lay dormant, only flickering into awareness as pretty scenery while I devoured steps, completed lists, achieved titles. I have been schooled to understand land as a backdrop instead of land as “coevolutionary” (Sheridan & Longboat, 2006, p. 369) and relation.



I am re-awakened to in-sight through sight/site.

The great forgotten truth of our reality as a human species is that we all came from somewhere. We all began our cultural journeys somewhere on the planet and because of that we are all Indigenous to her. Everyone. (Wagamese, 2019, p. 87)

I am coming to know and respect the kinship with land and living beings that lay dormant within my consciousness as I walked human-made trails and followed well-worn paths of colonial and economic achievement. The rub I experienced was born from the whispers of remembrance that chafed against the whirling busyness I came to inhabit.

Leading is living well with and on this land.

My constant striving and busyness and task completion and people pleasing filled all the spaces until I began to squeeze my self out. I slipped so easily into predetermined roles from my earliest memories—the obedient good girl moulded from the earliest Croatian family dinners and reinforced through the education system I began to inhabit at 6 years old and remain within decades later. In learning to slow I find myself moving in the direction I need to move; in learning to see I find myself learning to discern. In rushing I find tasks; in pauses I find self. It is in the pauses that life dwells. It is in the space between, among, within that wholeness emerges. Spaces become a connective tissue instead of an empty hole.

The Uses of Not

Thirty spokes
meet in the hub.
Where the wheel isn't
is where it's useful.

Hollowed out,
Clay makes a pot.
Where the pot's not
Is where it's useful

Cut doors and windows
to make a room.
Where the room isn't,
there's room for you.

So the profit in what is
is in the use of what isn't.

Lao Tzu (as cited in Schneider, 2007, p. 197)

I recently met with a group of principals and vice principals who had attended Compassionate Systems Introductory Training. We began meeting to simply check in with each other, with no agenda to accomplish. We open with a meditation and check-in and see where the conversation takes us. At our most recent gathering, one of the

principals spoke about how frustrating it is that kids are absolutely uninterested in being in school. I have heard her speak of this many times in different contexts. She also speaks a little angrily about the volume of needs we face in schools. I could feel my body tighten with the desire to fix, even though I know there isn't a quick tip to ease exhaustion or feelings of inadequacy, and certainly no soundbite to alleviate the needs and suffering of the children and families she works with. In that moment I felt my own inadequacy. And yet... in the same instant when I felt myself reach to fix, I also felt a deep knowing that my job is not to fix someone or their problems, but to see them. Compassionate leadership is not fixing; it is caring enough to be in relation and walk alongside.

2024.03.13 – A Dwelling: Space for Curiosity

A couple of peers shared a story about the global call they led yesterday for Compassionate Systems Leadership. While the participants were in breakout rooms, they (as presenters) were with Peter, Mette, and the other facilitators. They were wondering about the time allotted and trying to decide if they would have time for questions. They worried that if they opened it up for questions, they wouldn't have enough time for answers. Peter apparently said something to the effect that just because people ask a question doesn't mean they want your answer. Just let them be curious. Open the space up for their curiosities.

I continue to expect of myself the need to fix, to answer, to make okay, to earn my keep here on this earth. Possibilities expand when I allow myself and others to just sit in the curiosities of being. To allow space for each person's wisdom to emerge. When I jump in to fix I cut short the life cycle of an idea or a feeling, or an emerging perception. The cycle disappears as wisps of smoke blending into the atmosphere, indistinguishable. Rendered invisible by my dismissal of the sharer as a legitimate other in my need to soothe.



The life cycle of an idea, a story, a challenge—like the life cycle of a plant—requires nourishment, not abandonment; space, not containment.

Shawn Wilson's (2008) colleague, Cora, in dialogue with him shares,

Teaching is a sacred responsibility ... and if my soul is not in there and I'm not establishing relationships, I'm not teaching. I'm giving information or setting curriculum or doing something outside of myself. I am outside of the whole experience. I may be unknowingly destroying myself. (p. 102)

I see leading in the same way. It, too, "is a sacred responsibility and if my soul is not in there and I'm not establishing relationships [with my self, with other people, with nature, with ideas] ... [I'm] doing something outside of myself" (Cora, as cited in Wilson, 2008, p. 102). I may be setting budgets, writing policy, directing actions, but I'm not *leading* in a manner that leads to health and wholeness. In trying to fulfill the tasks of leadership as I saw them (now I call those management tasks), I did begin to "unknowingly destroy myself" (Cora, as cited in Wilson, 2008, p. 102).

My self-location helped me to recognize the anchor of ancestral tradition as well as the replication of both helpful and harmful ways of being. The fragmentation of cultural knowing paralleled the fragmentation that characterized my life. The hard work ethic that was passed to me became habitual busyness—a well-worn mantle of aspirational worthiness and barrier to wholeness. Doing overcame being. Instead of the beauty of hard work, I am coming to appreciate the beauty of right work; instead of the beauty of responsibility, I am coming to re-cognize the beauty of discerning my response-ability. Instead of being a granddaughter of possibility, I am living into simply being. Endless productivity is a path of choice, one that will never be finished because there is always more 'stuff' to do. Healing means breaking habitual (and through habit, comfortable) patterns. It is necessary for us to participate in our own healing unless we want to perpetuate harmful patterns. When we don't heal, we harm.

Manulani Meyer (2013a) and Shawn Wilson (2001, 2008) offered an opportunity for me to rethink what it means to do research and to measure its validity. As I transition from this part of my learning journey Meyer's questions guide my understanding: "Are the ideas learned by doing research something I practiced today? Truly, why do research if it doesn't guide us into enlightened action? Is the vision I hold in my heart something I extend in all directions?" (Meyer, 2013a, p. 254). I know this in-query will continue, but I am ready to press send on my writing because I know I have coherence. I know I have grown, shifted, transformed in my life. This is not an awakening of answers for the world; it is an awakening of self, and it is my self I share in relation with the world. When we

heal and reconnect our selves into whole beings, we extend that in our relations with the world. My research is more than a story; it is an embodied sense of being. Coherence, attunement, wholeness—all in practice and always in process. Meyer (2013a) goes on to explain that coherence:

isn't just the idea that your summary matches your introduction which reflects your findings, which folds out from your methods.... Coherence is the integrity of your life expressing itself in all facets of it. It is found in your work, writing, speaking, dreaming, pedagogy, assessment practices, vision, and everything that your mind/body touches. (p. 254)

Wilson (2001, 2008) shares that “For research it is important to think about our relationship with the ideas and concepts that we are explaining. Because this relationship is shared and mutual, ideas or knowledge cannot be owned or discovered” (Wilson, 2001, p. 177) but ideas or knowledge can change us. I believe they must if we are to have what Meyer refers to as coherence. Everything depends on our relation to the ideas we learn through research (Wilson, 2001).

Thus, this Transitions chapter is not a reiteration of my introduction and the final argument to convince you of my findings and methods, restating my journey to bolster validity and value and generalizability. It is a reflection on my own coherence that has emerged within my journey of learning to be present, to notice, perceive, see, and to bring together the wholeness of my self. I do not offer the stories of my journey as the path everyone must follow. I offer it as an example of possibility that may resonate with others who have not seen themselves within traditional models of leadership and who recognize the myth of the individual heroic leader is not what the world needs now. We need collective leadership; we need coherence; we need wholeness. And it only and always begins with each of us. There is a reason Compassionate Systems Leadership begins with self-mastery; we impact and are impacted by all we encounter.

A re-visioning of education based in wholeness is the aim I reach for. That doesn't happen simply by policy or theory or rules and steps, but by changing how we view and understand and contribute to the world we educate for. Representation of knowing, therefore, should encompass different ways of knowing, making space for arts and life-writing as research.

Traditional research paradigms rely on the scientific method and analyzing the parts in minute detail, severing relationships among the whole in the process. Shawn Wilson (2008) explains, “The researcher then attempts to put it all back together in a logical order, you know, hoping to discover any rules or laws that may be applied to the whole” (p. 119) so we can trust the validity of the data. An Indigenous methodology looks first at the relations (Wilson, 2008). Breaking things down without understanding the relationships that form the whole perpetuates fragmentation and a loss of understanding. My in-query was a process of re-relating, strengthening the interconnections between/among/within mind, body, and spirit, and between/among/within beings.

Hermeneutics is the “practice and theory of interpretation and understanding in human contexts” (Moules, et al., 2015, p. 3) and requires cultivating the art of discernment to recognize “the singularity of the situation, ... the unexpected demands of the singular, seeing what the situation is calling for, hearing what calls to us in this situation” (p. xiii). This practice of discernment, of seeing and perceiving, and becoming response-able to all my relations, has been a process of learning, unlearning, relearning that develops over time and through engagement and experience. My search had to be an experiential one in a reflexive, reflective, recursive process of deepening awareness and knowing. I do not seek to provide you, generous Reader, with explanations, but to invite you to develop your own understandings. What I offered is a window into my developing understanding and ongoing journey in the hopes that it may serve as an invitation to you to embark on your own journey.

As I wrote and noticed and questioned I developed the capacity to become useful to my context and to the relations I engaged with (Wilson, 2001, 2008). Through writing and photography I explored and questioned and saw; I reached for understanding, not explanations. I had been given many explanations of leadership and none led me to understanding.

Hermeneutics is a practice (Caputo, foreword to Moules, et al. 2015), an orientation to the world that says I am curious; I wonder. It asks, how can I be of use to the particularities that I encounter in situations and relational spaces?

My in-query led me to understandings rather than explanations as I sought to make meaning from my experiences and to re-cognize my role in relations and situations. I do

not stand outside of the stories I shared throughout my dissertation; I am central to the living and telling and therefore framing and shaping of the stories. They exist within and around me; they exist because I exist and I exist because they exist.

The context, relationships, interconnectedness inherent in wholeness itself lends itself to a hermeneutic study. In the hermeneutic circle we are bound by our past and extend into the future. We join the circle of existence that began before our arrival and continues after our departure. We are indelibly linked to the flow of time and existence and relationships. My in-query is concerned with making sense of the contexts and relationships I inhabit, and in so interpreting, coming to understand and respond and be useful. The hermeneutic circle is also “a mutual movement between part and whole” (p. 14).

An example of the hermeneutic circle is found in the parts represented by seemingly separate stories and whole that is woven together among and between the stories. They form an arc of developing understanding when held together. I do not suggest they build upon one another in a linear fashion, showing steady growth over time. I do suggest they form a whole when connected together relationally, forming a recursive deepening of understanding. Each Dwelling informing and reforming my understanding of the experience of another Dwelling.

I recall reading a passage years ago in *Research is Ceremony* (Wilson, 2008) where Wilson’s colleague describes his disappointment when graduate students crossed the stage unchanged from where they began. My now-self has grown into someone non-recognizable to my beginning self. So many things outside of my view now are my view, and so many ways I hid myself from view I no longer allow to happen. I no longer unsee, or refuse to see, or willfully blind myself to what is within and around me. And I no longer edit myself so extensively—what is okay to say, how much space is safe to take up, how visible I allow myself to be.

In my third graduate class we were tasked with publicly sharing our work. We were all going to present at a graduate conference and I was nervous—not because of public speaking, which I had lots of experience doing, but to talk about spirit in public education. What if someone from my district heard me after I had been chastised for including spirit in reference to educating the whole child? In hindsight it was ridiculous

but it was so inflamed in me—my obedience to perceived rules, and my frustration with following them. I co-presented with two peers and of course the world kept turning on its axis. If I had not talked that day about the importance of educating and nurturing the whole child —body, mind, heart, and spirit—I wonder if I would have walked this same path.

In another graduate class the professors invited us to go outside during our seminar in solidarity for women's rights after President Trump took office in 2016. They gave us signs they had prepared and I hid behind mine. I was so worried someone from work would see me as we stood at the side of the highway. I wanted to be there but I didn't want to be seen to be there. I literally hid behind someone else's sign with someone else's words, even though I fully agreed with the action and meaning. I am shocked now by my conscientious diligence to authority, but also grateful for my conscientious diligence to my own growth. I did what was uncomfortable for me but was right for me. I slowly built muscle, tissue by tissue. When I describe my process of unfurling it really was a slow, gradual process of standing in what I believe instead of what I'm told to believe.

I learned to stand in quiet presence, building the muscle of my presence. We all must do that in service of what can become. If we wait for permission, nothing will ever change.

*"It's not about how well you can quote theory;
it's whether those ideas affect how you act"*
(Meyer, 2008, p. 221).

My in-query began by asking myself "what is possible in a situation *for me*, what concrete possibilities are available for action, given who I am, given where I am, and given what I am encountering in the particular situation" (Moules et al., 2015, p. 26). Rather than learning to be better, faster, more organized, more quickly decisive, the growth for me was to learn to lead from where I am, given who I am, where I am, and what and who I am encountering in a particular situation. Leading is a daily choice and practice within context and relation. Exploring what is possible for me is a question of infinite exploration and interpretation as needs and contexts and people change. The capacity to lead is ever-evolving, in response to what is and in service of what can be.

A colleague recently mused about retirement and spoke of her legacy. She was worried those lessons she modeled or the knowledge she shared will not grow because she won't be there. I can understand her angst, as my own retirement beckons. Will it matter that I was here? Did I make a positive difference?

It occurs to me I have little control if the programs I implemented continue, or if the policies I put in place change, or the practices evolve. In fact, they should shift and transform in response to evolving needs. My legacy as a leader is not to stand majestically above the forest floor; it is to weave invisibly beneath, nourishing and encouraging, nudging and supporting. It matters little if others recall my accomplishments but I do hope they feel sturdier on the ground they stand.

Mycelium spreads nourishment underground, unseen and unheralded yet powerful and sustaining. Rather than one specific destination, it reaches everywhere. Our energies reach everywhere too, flowing into spaces, and cracks, and rivulets, joining with streams of others' energy. Which streams of life force will I join? How will I contribute? Tyson Yunkaporta (2020) shares that we are here for the purpose of "looking after things on the earth and in the sky and the places in between" (p. 96). How can we possibly do that unless we understand the interconnectedness with all beings that we are either nourishing or harming with the energy we release and accept? It's not just stuff we do, accomplishments reached, to do lists completed. Everything is in process of becoming, not just a process to completion. We join the stream, not the finish line. The hermeneutic circle continues beyond our deeds and lives.

I recently re-read "Presence" by Senge et al. (2004) and, as is often the case, read with new eyes. Passages I highlighted the first time I read it had blurred into the recesses of my memory, absent from my immediate awareness. One such passage says,

If we can simply observe without forming conclusions as to what our observations mean and allow ourselves to sit with all the seemingly unrelated bits and pieces of information we see, fresh ways to understand a situation can eventually emerge. (Senge et al., 2004, p. 31)

I have come to recognize the value in sitting with seemingly unrelated bits and pieces of information and experiences through the methodology that unfolded naturally over time. I noticed moments that stopped me in some way, and simply wrote about them in a brief

format. My effort to capture moments that I hoped would eventually form a theory for leading, actually formed a method for researching and living and leading.

At the beginning of my journey I understood leadership (noun) as a thing to attain. I have come to re-cognize this term as objectifying the ethical way of being in relation that is called for. The capacity to lead does not occur outside of us; it comes from within, from a relational way of being in response to needs arising in context .

I lament my learnings took me so long to uncover. Yet ironically one of my learnings is that life unfolds in right time, not linear time. Trees mark time in centuries, the expansion of their rings a celebration and a cause for reverence, yet the markers of time on humans is something to be hidden and reversed in our quest to move time backwards to the youth we revere. The wisdom gained with age and the unfolding of experiences in right time seems too slow and its markers too invasive. I find comfort in the words of novelist Michael Christie (2019). Jake, the main character in Christie's novel *Greenwood*, remarks on the parallels of growth among different living beings. She is struck by the similarity between the salmon's ruby flesh and the wood grain in the Douglas fir. "How tenaciously organisms build tissue, layer by layer, year by year," (Christie, 2019, p. 27) she muses. I wish the layers of learning had already been formed while also recognizing the years of noticing, questioning, writing, were necessary for unfolding learning to occur. I, too, tenaciously built tissue, layer by layer, year by year. Margaret Wheatley (2010) seemed to be speaking directly to me when she wrote,

We experience surprise, sometimes delight, sometimes despair that we didn't notice things earlier. But the end result is that we become more open, more engaged, and more intelligent.

We learn where we are. From *here*, much more is possible. (p. 41)

Gregory Cajete (2016) speaks of the process of growth and why it can be painful and transformative: "The exploration of self and relationships to inner and outer entities, requires a tearing apart in order to create a new order and higher level of consciousness" (p. 370). The learning and questioning, noticing and emerging that unfolded over time, was often a painful process. Learning requires stretching growing expanding, shedding comforting habits, removing comfortable assumptions.

I recall the beginning of my journey, when I was so afraid to speak of spirituality in education, and shied away from discussing wholism and leadership, too concerned with the opinions of others who may think it wasn't important, or weighty, or scholarly enough for a dissertation. I learned to value my life experiences for they are unique to me—I don't need to find recognition in the opinions of others, for

there is a vitality, a life force, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and it will be lost. (Graham, as cited in Wheatley, 2010, p. 22)

Wagamese (2019) describes himself as someone on the “path of the seeker, called forward by a yearning [he has] not always understood” (p. 28). His description, together with Meyer's (2013) “choice/no choice” (p. 251) aptly describes the yearning, stretching, seeking I felt as I could not let go of my journey of learning, unlearning, relearning. Something burned within me—a yearning for wholeness and the courage to hold wholeness at the centre of my work and my life despite the continual attempts at fragmentation that surround me.

The truth is that there is a fire that burns at the invisible center of all of us. It is lit by the embers of those tribal fires where we used to sit and feel yearning deep within us. That yearning is another gift. It is a calling. It is our intuition. It is our most ancient voice speaking to us. (Wagamese, 2019, p. 17)

Like the beauty of a tenacious root that grows despite attempts to remove it, I clung to my choice/no choice until it unfurled into wholeness.



2024.04.06 – A Dwelling: The Circularity of Teachings

*I am always surprised at the timing of teachings—they emerge in right time, even if I have been exposed to them before without absorption. They return, when I am ready to receive them. I reread Richard Wagamese's (2019) *One Drum*, drawn there by feedback from Dr. Kelly, who asked me to provide more context to one of the quotes I included from that book. One of the turns of my circle of learning was there waiting as I turned an earlier page, teachings I had already read, but didn't feel or recall. I could only absorb these teachings of leading after journeying.*

I had to travel the path just as the animals in the story he described had to traverse the landscape. Wagamese (2019) describes a teaching story where the animals come together and decide they need a leader but they struggle to decide who that should be. Squirrel suggests holding a race that would require important qualities of leadership: "perseverance, fortitude, strength and a powerful will" (p. 48). Horse, buffalo, wolverine, and cougar immediately come forward to participate in the contest, each one extolling their unique gifts that would allow them to win the race. Then Wabooz the rabbit quietly and humbly hops forward and offers to join, not because she wants to be the leader, but she wants to learn along the way.

When they begin the race, Wabooz trails behind the other animals, taking her time, becoming familiar with the landscape around her, 'reading' the context and relating to beings, and using teachings of the land to find her path. The others try to conquer the landscape and fight their way to the finish line. Those teachings mirror what I learned on my own journey. I share some of Wabooz's teachings (as described by Wagamese, 2019) here as a way of lifting up what I learned as I traveled:

"You discover much when you learn to look at things," Wabooz said (p. 59).

When I learned to settle into presence and be in relation with all beings, my understanding awakened. Like Wabooz, my hermeneutic engagement was one of noticing, of travelling, of curiosity and openness to what is so that I can develop the capacity to respond to situations and to beings in unpredictable circumstances. The next moment is never knowable; we can only read the patterns and respond to needs in relation with our kin.

"It is not honouring the challenge if I should stop," she said. "It is a noble pursuit and it asks everything I have. So I will continue if that's all right with you." (p. 52)

My in-query became my choice/no choice (Meyer, 2013a). It took time to discern my question and live into the teachings I received. It is an ongoing process without clear starting and ending points. Even the frames of our individual lives are not finite. We remain connected to the stream of past and future, the ripples of our lives extending backwards and forwards in the continuum of the

hermeneutic circle. Living our lives consciously in relation is indeed a noble pursuit and it does ask everything of us. Honouring our challenges is honouring our lives.

“The branches are individual,” she said to Horse. “If you pass through them one at a time there is less resistance. Taken together, they are too strong a barrier. ... When I hopped through them I learned to be patient and push against one piece at a time.” (p. 55)

I had to learn patience and truly understand that learning takes patience and time (First Nations Education Steering Committee, 2008). Life unfolds in right time, right seasons. I also came to understand that change happens in personal relations, not grand gestures or task completion. Building a network of mycelium will nourish the ecosystem and provide strength for challenges more than confident pronouncements and rules and policies will. Leading happens in each interaction, each choice, each action, one opening of relation at a time.

“I am not certain,” Wabooz said. “But Trust does not require certainty.” (p. 57).

My initial search for certainty gave way to a curiosity for possibility. We can still trust in our individual and collective capacities without the need for predictability and certainty. I learned that through developing trust in the process of learning and noticing and questioning and trust in the relations and their teachings.

“I entered to learn what I did not know.... I understand that when all our energies are directed toward the same goal there is no need for one to lead. We all help each other complete the journey.” (p. 61)

I too entered this journey to learn what I did not know, coming to understand there is no finish line. I also learned that we lead in relation, recognizing the interconnectedness of all beings. Sheri Mitchell (2018) suggests it is time to let go of our child-like need for certainty and for heroic leaders. We are all responsible; how do we nurture our own wellness so we are response-able to needs in our communities?

“It is in the journey that one comes to understand the territory. It is in the journey that one becomes wise, and I have one more lap to go” (p. 61).

Wabooz comes to be in relation with the land and from that relational space, becomes wise. She develops the capacity to lead, in response to the needs of her relations but there is more learning to engage in—one more lap to travel. In walking my learning path I slowly woke up to the possibilities of another

worldview I was being invited into (through teachings from Indigenous Elders, scholars, and friends, and natural kin) to imagine differently. I am still (and will always be) in process of becoming but I am learning to recognize the possibilities inherent in more than one worldview. I spoke earlier about finding my self on shifting land as I struggled to describe a methodology amidst my transitioning ontology, epistemology, and axiology. Two-eyed seeing (Marshall in Bartlett et al., 2012) offers an opportunity to imagine from both Indigenous and Western worldviews.



The tangle of a journey is travelled one step at a time, one branch at a time, one noticing at a time. In honouring the challenge presented we honour our selves and each other.

I entered this journey to learn what I did not know, trusting in the process of noticing and perceiving. Such it is with the praxis of living and leading—learning to notice and perceive, and showing up in a good way. There is always one more lap to go.

We all have to embark on the journey, despite our colonized expectation of quick fixes, fast solutions, and easy to follow recipes; our yearning for someone heroic to follow, someone who will share the secret to leading. I understand that desire; I originally searched for it myself. But there are no shortcuts; the whole journey awaits us all. Read the patterns of the landscape and attune to the beings there.

Like Wabooz, I came to develop capacities along my journey from being in relation with the land I traversed. By experiencing relation with the land I began to understand that knowledge is relational. Wilson (2001) shares that

[Indigenous] systems of knowledge are built on the relationships that we have, not just with people or objects, but relationships that we have with the cosmos, with ideas, concepts, and everything around us. (p. 177)

My ontology and epistemology began to shift away from knowledge as something individually discovered and owned towards an understanding that knowledge is relational and we are in relation with all beings. I had heard the words many times but the lived experience of being in relation with natural kin moved this from a cognitive knowing towards an embodied one. This shifting understanding is important for my scholarship and also for my capacity to lead. Leading is a relational capacity.

Because leading is a relational capacity there is no set of rules that will guide how one responds in the moment. As Eisner (2008) points out,

Perhaps the function of educational research is not to draw near-certain conclusions about the states of affairs that generalize, but rather to secure technologies of mind that will enable us to peer more deeply into situations that might not be the same as the one that we study. In short we might say that useful research enlarges our intelligence.” (p. 21)

There is a comfort in predictability and certainty; the principles to apply to school or district leadership positions, but it is a false blanket, removing us from actually relating and responding. No one, and certainly no one in relation, offers a certain outcome. What is to come is deeply unknowable. What possibilities offered in a relational space are unknown by being cut off with the scissors of certainty?

I invite everyone to explore their own selves in relation with all beings so they come to respond in thoughtful, conscious, intentional, and intelligent ways to relations in particular contexts. I invite educators and leaders to tend to their own wellness so they can enter relationships and relational spaces in healthy and nourishing ways. Heal, so we don't harm.

When we don't own our own story within our lives and the leadership we embody, we deepen depersonalization and dehumanization; we perpetuate the harms of colonization. Knowing who we are through our own stories allows us to deepen our

understandings of others because we relate through story. Leading is personal and relational; all our stories matter.

As an educator and emerging leader I have always loved looking at the big picture, sometimes missing the details. As I meandered along my doctoral journey, taking photographs of natural kin, I began noticing what already is there—the ‘details’ or smaller beings within the whole. I often looked for a big picture ah-ha but it wasn’t until I focused on and saw the small beings, heard the smaller quieter voices (including those of natural kin as well as my own voice), that my learning really unfolded.

Richard Wagamese’s (2019) words help to reinforce the importance of the small. He uses the image of ripples from a stone thrown in water to describe how small changes, where you are, can ripple far and wide:

We think we need to change it all at once. We’re convinced that solutions are instantaneous because that’s what we’ve come to expect of ourselves. ... if I were to concentrate my energy on the things that were achievable right now within my circle of influence, change would happen. If I determined to act differently toward the people and situations in my stream of life, change would happen. Then, if I chose to believe, if I gave my thought energy to the process, it would stimulate and attract like energy. Small circles of influence would develop everywhere and more change would happen. That humble energy, the kind that says, ‘I will do what I can do right now in my own small way,’ creates a ripple effect on the world. (p. 81)

What ripples do I create? What ripples are you sending? How will we receive?

2020.07.20 – A Dwelling: Capturing

I was walking in the forest today, and I came upon what I call the ‘Emily Carr’ trees, for their resemblance to her paintings. Perhaps because it’s been so long since I’ve been able to walk among the trees in Ucluelet, I was particularly struck by the full experience of being in that place—the gratitude, the feel of the ocean breeze on my skin, the touch of the shade, the intermingled smells of wet earth, salt air, mossy carpet, what I saw just before this view, the sounds surrounding me. I was going to take a picture—I literally have hundreds of pictures of trees—but I realized I wanted to capture and maintain the full spectrum of the experience, something a photograph can never do. The photos may be beautiful, and they may stir memories or inspire ideas, but they don’t allow me to truly share the moment with someone else. They don’t capture the fullness of a moment, only a small slice of what I perceive.

My experience is threaded together through every tiny particle of being around me. The smells, the sounds I hear, the touch of air on my skin, the full spectrum of my sight—all of it coalesces into a moment, an experience of life. So I take a picture to try to capture it and it can only capture one dimension of it in a very limited way. It can never capture the entire scope of what I see and it completely misses what I feel. They say a picture is worth 1,000 words, but I think a picture is only a portal into imagining 1,000 words. As a viewer of the photograph, it is your experience, your knowledge, your feelings in that moment as you see it, that creates 1,000 words; the picture itself does not. Just as I take the threads of the moments of my experiences and try to weave them together into something tangible and understandable and useful, it’s only through the generosity of the imagination of the reader that those words take on dimensionality.

Thus it is with the monumental task of writing a dissertation. How far back do I go to try to capture the scope and fullness of my learning, to demonstrate how I have transformed? How can I explain the emergence of understandings that unfolded and enfolded over time, as a result of multiple teachings and experiences, and wonderings, and failings, and joy all coalescing in emerging understanding, a place I stand now. A place that will have shifted again by the time I finish writing and again by the time you, curious Reader, read my words. What I write can never fully represent who or where I am when the document is finished. My writing won’t capture the fullness of the journey, only a small slice of what I am capable of rendering to words. Hopefully my rendering will touch someone else on their unfolding path.

Finitude provides one of the compositional principles of hermeneutic work. As a researcher, one has to start somewhere and one has to finish somewhere, while the life of the topic [or the photograph] – already present before the researcher [or photographer] arrived – continues on beyond each interpretation. (Moules et al., 2015, p. 36)

In a dissertation we are asked to explain how our research will benefit others. It feels presumptuous to determine that from the perch of writing; it can only be determined by the one reading. My hope is that our relational space (reader and writer) creates new knowledge for us both.



It is enough that I am here, now. I will have to trust that my words and photographs render some representation of the lived experiences and teachings I attempt to share as we, in relation, co-create together.

I did not write as I have in the past—research and gather information and then nail it down on the page, encased in words, solidified. Learn, then write. Mop up, done (Richardson, 1994). Instead, the writing itself was my place of in-query and learning and the site of my unfurling voice and self. I became as the words emerged. Small stories wove together as old friends finding each other anew. My becoming emerged through the writing. I noticed, wrote, questioned, the words and photos allowing me to see, to review from different angles. And the learning emerged within the words and photos and unfolding stories. The words and photographs allowed me to engage and explore and interpret; they were the conduits to allow me to perceive natural kin. The slow process of writing led me to dwell in ideas; the process of photographing led me to dwell in place. The process of natural immersion led me to see, to feel, to be, to relate – to dwell in and with life.

I began by taking hundreds of photos of trees—bent trees, tenacious and tiny trees windblown by the west coast elements, huge trees, stewards of this place, sentinels

greeting visitors to their forest community, signalling solidity in the power of place. In my introduction I explained why I was drawn to trees and the parallels I drew between the nature of trees and the nature of my life. During later visits to Ucluelet I began to notice a tugging towards other elements of this place. The ocean and other water bodies began to lure my attention and as I reflected on that noticing, I realized I am living my life in a more fluid way. I moved my job and my home, leading my life through what drew me. I began to notice a little less rigidity and caution in my life.

During my visit to Ucluelet during the summer of 2022 a new noticing evolved. I was less drawn to the sweeping views of forest or ocean, less pulled to the majesty of trees, I became enthralled by the tiniest beauties that became accessible to me. The ecology is not whole when we only see the easily accessible. A life is not whole when we only notice major events.

I recall one of my mindful walks on the beach and the flowers that revealed themselves to me when I slowed enough to notice. I placed my shoes carefully on the rocks, the importance of not disturbing their delicate ecology foremost in my mind. Prior walks I clomped along, climbing mindlessly while I strove for access to the vast ocean beyond the wall of rock. Now I walk softly, looking in front of me at the beauty that tenderly, tenaciously flourishes in an unlikely ecology. The rock, and its inhabitants, are here. Not laying in wait for me to plough through on my way to somewhere else. They are not posing for tourists' photographs; they are living, and relating, in community.

And so it is in leading. Clomping along towards a pre-determined destination, striving to reach for some markers that signal success of some sort, negates the beauty and fragility of life already unfolding there, in community and interconnectedness. I am learning to attend deeply and pay attention. I am becoming attuned to the living natural world around me, one with its own soul and spirit (Lyle and Snowber, 2021).

2022.08.31 – A Dwelling: Walking Softly, In Reverence

My perspectives have changed during these years—expanded, exploded, enfolded. I became obsessed with perspective, with how something looks to my eyes from different standpoints, with what I couldn't see when I focused on this one perspective or view. I wondered what I missed by looking over my left shoulder instead of my right.

My perspectives shifted, my senses attuned. My stimuli sensors (sight, sound, taste, touch, smell, spirit) attune to different stimuli and I make sense of that stimuli differently, both because of the attunement of my senses to an increased awareness, and the resonance with that which I receive.

I saw rocks and I saw flowers growing out of rocks the first time I went to Ucluelet. I saw, walked past. I didn't sense the life force within the plant or the rock; I was unaware of the energetic space that existed beyond my reach when I rushed past the view before me.





A pretty sight, without insight. A site of beauty, cited with words instead of feeling. In slow increments, in-sight grew from the sight of the intertwined reciprocal life force of rock and flower; the site was no longer a static view but living, breathing, spiritual energetic force. Citations no longer suffice; I reach for words in a futile attempt to render energy visible through explanation.

What do we see and perceive and even notice about the children we work with? How do we ready ourselves to enter relational spaces with them? How do we notice, see, and perceive the adults? Leading in the context of working with children or with adults requires that we understand them, not as students and workers, but as humans, being and becoming. What gifts do they offer, what worldviews do they hold, what wisdom do they embody? What do our interactions, expectations, assumptions, re-cognitions reveal about what we believe it is to be human (see Sloan, 2005)? Who can they become in our presence?

How will you perceive us? How will we, in the temporal haste and elusiveness of this moment, receive you? Who are you in our presence? Who might you become? Who do we seek to become in the presence of others? (Fels, 2010, p. 6)

Our perceptions of others, and theirs of us, influence who we can become in a relational space. We limit or expand possibilities depending on how we receive each other.

Through the photographs I took, my awareness and perception expanded to include the small, easily missed beings living in the forest and the beach. At the same time, my self-location expanded my understanding of cultural teachings. One way of seeing expanded to multiple perspectives, views, understandings—multiple ways of seeing and perceiving, a multi-layered sensory experience.

Outside my window I watch as the seagulls congregate for the herring spawn. I've never been here at the same time this happens. There are hundreds of gulls perched on the rocks, flying in groups to land in unison on another rock, swooping across the water towards the beach and then gliding to another rock. They keep a constant vigil, drawn together by the life cycle of another being. The cycles of all our lives overlap and converge across all others, in a wildly complicated Venn diagram of sorts. None of us live solitary lives, our movements energizing and influencing movements all around us, an endless and immeasurable series of ripples cascading outwards through time and space. Leading is being conscious of our ripples and mindful of what we create with the movements of our lives.

I have reached the bend signifying time to transition. I open my eyes, and see that I arrive where I began, recognizing it a(k)new.

I transition now, to life without a dissertation to write. The movement of the current in the bay gently beckons, their rolling rhythm coaxing me forward. Cycles continuing.



Invitations and openings....

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