

OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS

The Incandescent Child: Could the Tools of the Naturalist Help Us to See Our Children and Classrooms in a New Light?

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Look around you.

The classroom is rectangular with a single row of windows. Tables with pine effect surfaces are arranged into small groups standing upon worn carpet. Plastic backed chairs face a whiteboard with the smudges of a previous lesson still visible. Plug sockets and cables line the room and a buzz can be heard from the high frequency pitch of electronics. Two large television screens

OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS *The Incandescent Child*

are fixed across one whole wall underneath the metal grills of air conditioning units. White walls pick up the green cast of fluorescent overhead lighting strips. Cupboards line the edges of the room and a variety of book covers face out into the centre, just out of reach. Children fidget at the desks awaiting instructions from the teacher. The hum and life of the world is just audible beyond the walls.

The classroom is barren. There is very little that is natural, or self-willed in the room. It is a hyper controlled, domesticated environment. Things that you may recognise from the family home are not present. There are no plants. There are no cobwebs. There are no spiders, no flies. There is no atmosphere. All of the windows are closed. There are one or two signs on the walls, instructional aides. There is a tangible lack of dynamic energy in this room. Save for the children themselves.

It is of course easier not to see these things, to overlook what is absent, what has been excluded and shut out. We have become too accustomed to these places. We know that these rooms have been specifically constructed like this; yet these absences should, and do, hold meaning for us. The environmental educator and wild teaching advocate Anthony Weston (2004) argues that it is intentional that “school cuts us off from the experience of the larger world” (Weston 2004: p. 31). In some cases we may find ourselves considering these spaces to be positive in their neutrality, believing that they fulfil a democratic need, just as we might on occasion claim that a school uniform code might. However if we are not able to look closely at the conditions of the room, to see not only what is there, but also what is not, how are we going to be able to look closely

at what is happening there? How are we going to be able to truly help those that are incarcerated there?

Now take a moment to picture the children within the sterility of this room.

The child in contrast is brimming over with life and energy.



Or they should be.

In *The Great Work* (1999) the cultural historian Thomas Berry advocates for a re-visioning of the human presence on Earth and for a reimagining of how education might permit us to ‘understand where we are, and how we got here’ in an attempt to move toward a ‘mutually enhancing mode of human dwelling on the planet’ (Berry 1999, p. ix). That we need to ‘enhance our mode of human dwelling on the planet’ is now *beyond* dispute. In a chapter focusing on the role of the university as an agent of this potential transformation Berry asks why the aesthetic appreciation of nature writers such as Aldo Leopold, Gary Snyder, Annie Dillard and Barry Lopez have had “no role in forming the basic orientation of the contemporary university?” (Berry 1999, p. 73)

What if we were to take Berry's proposal seriously? Although there may be philosophical issues with nature and environmental writing (Morton 2013), the work of the naturalist continues to take its cue from acute observation of the natural world—the wild world (Haupt, 2009). What if we were able to extend and incorporate the outlook and sensitivities of the naturalist when we try and pay attention to the child, when we enter into a school or classroom?

In a recent article titled *The Invitation* (2015), one of these writers, the naturalist Barry Lopez, recalls how the depth of his perception was sharpened by an encounter with a grizzly bear in the wild. He describes how the encounter, and his true awareness, was at first limited in its scope, because the bear, in its majesty, suddenly became the exclusive focus of his attention. Questioning the limitations of his awareness Lopez looked to his indigenous companions to understand why it was, in his view, that they saw and heard more than he did. He reports they showed him that:

when an observer doesn't immediately turn what his senses convey to him into language—into the vocabulary and syntactical framework we all employ when trying to define our experiences—there's much greater opportunity for minor details which might at first seem unimportant, to remain alive in the foreground of an impression. Later, these might deepen the meaning of an experience (Lopez, 2015, p.13).

Offering an explanation for the revelation of this insight he recounts how he was shown another way of seeing that had not occurred to him:

I would tend to focus almost exclusively on the bear. My companions would focus on the part of the world of which, at that moment, the bear was only a fragment. The bear here might be compared with a bonfire, a kind of incandescence that throws light on everything around it. My companions would glance off into the outer reaches of that light, then look back to the fire, back and forth. They would repeatedly situate the smaller thing within the larger thing, back and forth. (Lopez, 2015, p.13)

Lopez talks about a deepening of perception and more urgently for us, of meaning. He offers two lessons that he claims to have learnt over years of travelling with indigenous peoples:

First, I needed to understand that I was entering the event as it was unfolding. It started before I arrived and would continue unfolding after I departed. Second, the event itself, could not be completely defined by referring solely to the physical geography around us in those moments. The lesson to be learned here was not just for me to pay closer attention to what was going on around me, if I hoped to have a deeper understanding of the event, but to remain in a state of suspended mental analysis while observing all that was happening—resisting the

OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS *The Incandescent Child*

urge to define or summarize. (Lopez, 2015, p. 14)

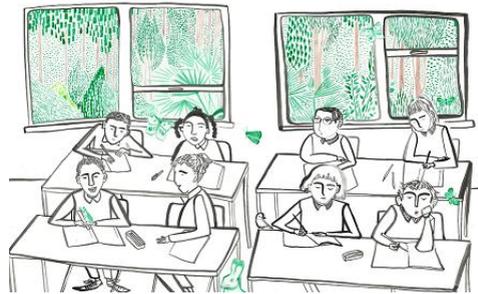
Marie Brennan (2015) from Victoria University in Australia urges modern education systems to overcome, what she perceives as a “foundational split between human and nature.” The continued “pursuit of knowledge as abstraction, that is decontextualized from place, from relationships and action, of knowledge as past rather than prospective, and of knowledge as private and individually ‘owned’ rather than understood as co-constructed in action” is a terminal trajectory (Brennan, 2015, p. 12). She quotes Vygotsky to underpin her point:

That the school has been locked away and walled in as if by a tall fence from life itself has been its greatest failing. Education is just as meaningless outside the...life world as is a fire without oxygen, or as breathing in a vacuum. (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 345 in Brennan, 2015, p.16)

Recounting Barry Lopez’s experience with the bear may at first seem to sit uneasily with our training as professionals, as teachers, as educators. It is this sense of unease that I would like to explore, and expose a little further. It has been stated by several educators tackling the emergence of the Anthropocene that we need to “go wild,” de-centre our experience and seek a way of moving from our own narcissistic concerns towards a deeper consideration of the interplay and interconnection between the human and the more-than-human world (Jensen, 2014; Jickling, 2015; Weston, 2004).

When we shift our attention to all the elements surrounding the child, and tune in to the hiss and crackle of the illumination that the child offers us then we may begin to perceive more about what is, and what is not present. Lopez asks those committed to extending our awareness to “pay attention, be patient and be attentive to what the body knows.” (Lopez, 2015, p. 17)

Lopez talks about how he absorbed these lessons in being more fully present during an encounter with a wild animal but what if we, like Lopez, also sought to be more fully present in our classrooms.



What if we looked on the child as a wild creature, one that was truly deserving of our respect and especially deserving of our unfolding attention?

The child perceived in this way is a continuously unfolding dynamic event.

Picture the children in the room now.

They are ablaze with energy, with life.

Or they should be.

They are casting light on the classroom even if this light has little to fall on. It may be this very thing that is vital for us to witness, that the light that these children provide has nothing substantial to

illuminate. Here we may be brought into closer contact with what the conditions of the classroom, the school actually are.

Unless you are in a very different classroom to me, which is of course a possibility, you may find on closer inspection that you are actually in a vacuum, a place that should not have such fires burning within them.

Lopez concludes his reflection by taking another look at his meeting with the bear

A grizzly bear stripping fruit from blackberry vines in a thicket is more than a bear stripping vines in a thicket. It is a point of entry into a world most of us have turned our backs on in an effort to go somewhere else, believing we'll be better off just thinking about a grizzly bear stripping fruit from blackberry vines in a thicket. (Lopez, 2015, p. 17)

If we look attentively and anew—wildly—at the classrooms that we find our children occupying, we may be surprised by how we start to feel about these spaces. We may begin to ask ourselves difficult questions about such environments. We might start to feel that these spaces could dampen and even damage the spirits of those compelled to be in them for many hours of the day. We must then ensure that we do not “turn our backs in an effort to go somewhere else.” (Berry 1999)

This way of looking, of seeing the child as an illumination, is one that casts light on how things are really working, maybe closer in kin to our own original, native, indigenous knowing (Diamond, 2012). This is a way of knowing that could be said to be intuitive, to be tacitly

available but seldom heeded and certainly not promoted as a way of robustly knowing in our current culture, focused as it is on criteria, objectives and outcomes. It is a culture that refuses to see our children as the incandescent beings they most certainly are.

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OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS *The Incandescent Child*

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