
Art and Spirit in Nature

Reactions, Critical Learning, and Transformation

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"I learned this, at least, by my experiment: that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours."

from Walden - by Henry David Thoreau

Art and Spirit in Nature was a course that simply “emerged” through sheer experience and circumstance. From the connections made through an Animal Mask Making class, I was led to be a part of a chorus of nine “pollenators” for the Eloise Butler Wildflower Garden and Bird Sanctuary’s 100th anniversary celebration. I created art that “brought to life” animal spirit guides, as well as my “Soul Image” of Water, and “The River Between.” Because of an unexpected 2-3 week period between homes, I allowed myself the time to travel to remote places to experience nature. This independent study has been woven together from these experiences, where I trusted my curiosity to lead me on a path, where I simply “Let Nature Be My Guide.”

Trusting the trails and paths I walked

Originally, instead of this independent study, I had planned to travel numerous times to Madison, WI to study voice more extensively with my teacher, Wendy Roe. Despite my best efforts at planning trips to Wisconsin, I found my schedule filling up with a mask making class, a workshop

at Starwalkers in Northfield, MN and a fast approaching move from Minneapolis to Northfield. Life was happening, regardless of what I had originally “planned” as the next progression in my graduate program. It was not until the dress rehearsal and performance of our “Pollen Nation” chorus, at the Eloise Butler Wildflower Garden, that I began to realize the beauty of art, music, spirit, and nature - that was falling metaphorically - like rain, all around me. The pivotal moment came when leaving the Eloise Butler gardens after the performances of its 100th anniversary celebration. I looked back at the gates of the gardens, to finally notice and absorb the message hanging atop the entrance.

Let Nature be your Teacher



As I have believed and have stated to others numerous times, “Sometimes metaphors, meanings, and curiosities need time to incubate before they reveal themselves to us.” Once I allowed the messages and meanings of my experience to communicate with me, this entire course and learning fell gracefully and naturally into place. I could look back and see the very serendipitous events in action bringing me to this organic culmination.

During the Animal Mask Making class, we had a substitute teacher facilitate for our second session. Laurie Witzkowski began telling us about a song cycle she had written “about Bees, Birds, Flowers, and Pollenators.” She was looking for another singer for the performance, especially a tenor, and I found myself volunteering to sing with this chorus.

While living in Minneapolis, I had rented out my home in Northfield, and had planned to move back at the end of my renter's lease. He had called in late July, asking if he could extend his lease by 3 weeks. My apartment lease was ending August 31, and I would have been effectively "homeless" for the first three weeks of September. After discussing options with my partner, we decided to use the three weeks between homes to travel to Sandstone, MN, Tettegouche State Park, and Boulder, Colorado. We rented a cabin at Tettegouche State Park, where we would hike 2 miles to a secluded cabin community, then explore Mic Mac Lake and the many miles of trails in the park.

The time spent from July to late September, was a time of simply letting go of my own prescribed plans, and allowing myself to be led down a path in Nature. It was the most beautiful transition between homes. The dark woods of uncertainty were mirrored with the wooded trails I hiked. The goodbyes of a previous home were comforted by scenic and healing places in nature that took my breath away. The very meanings in the art I created would develop and transform in my heart and mind throughout this journey.

Allowing Art to Emerge

Throughout the course, I feel as if the art, drawings, photographs, sculptures, and poetry I created were simply born out of a state of "surrender" to the essence of nature. I did not meticulously plan any of the art pieces created. My albatross mask simply emerged from under my hands. The Soul Image sculpture fell into place between my walks in nature, berry picking (and eating), and dreaming. The drawings and poetry inspired from my experiences at Tettegouche State Park simply flowed onto the page. I had never drawn a loon before, but the image came through.

I am now beginning to see my "artistic body of work" as a LIVING and breathing entity. Meanings and metaphors emerge out of place from my linear experience of time. My artwork has served as a point of "visioning" future connections and synthesis - that sometimes have yet to be born.

An interesting photographic experience emerged when I took a photograph of my partner holding a tree at Tettegouche State Park. A week later, Michael and I participated in the Intro to Shamanic Earth Healing workshop at Starwalkers. Within the four-day workshop, Michael had a very intense experience with an exercise in plant communication. The photo captured previ-

ously at Tettegouche State Park now seems to capture the essence of his newly developing plant communication endeavors.

Experiences like this seem to be happening constantly now with regard to my art and the transformative journey I seem to have placed myself. Spirit guides and power animals emerge in a time before their meanings and metaphors unravel upon me. Drawings transform themselves, and experiences seem to hold a space that defy the constructs of time and place. They are often archetypal. I now look forward to the meanings that may emerge from my art and photography in the future. For now, much my art is in its infancy, just like a caterpillar, it wraps itself into a cocoon, and someday may emerge a new creature with wings.



Nature as Teacher and Guide

One of the residual learning effects of singing Laurie Witzkowski's memorable songs, is that I began listening to bird calls. One of our songs was an improvisation on bird calls. The humorous calls of the Bard Owl ("Who cooks for you cooks for yooooou?"), the Common Bittern ("Glunk glunk GA-lunk!"), and the Nuthatch ("Nyat! Nyat! Nyat! Nyat!"), stuck with me and with others who came to see the performance. My partner and his family seemed to go "bird crazy" for months after the event - buying bird identification books, bird feeders, bird seed, and binoculars. Throughout the many hikes on the trails of Tettegouche Park, we noticed many more familiar bird calls than we would have before the Eloise Butler performance. Even as months have passed from our Pollen Nation gathering, the songs and melodies have stayed with me.

Once this started happening, I began to reflect back on my own schooling, growing up, and through my undergraduate years. There has always been a classroom ripe and ready for all of my curiosities in Nature. One could spend their entire lifetime cataloging the natural world around them, learning the patterns of nature, and forging a direct relationship to Planet Earth. I felt a small sense of loss that I might have wasted years of my life not coming in contact with Nature. I

truly wonder if we would have as many of the problems of global climate change, peak oil, or violence in our neighborhoods if we moved children out of corralled classrooms with desks and books, to the outside world - to experience nature directly.

I do however, feel that the time period of this course has been one of a deeper commitment to my own learning in Nature. I am still taking time to “dip my hands in rivers and streams” to maintain my connection with the Earth. I’ve amassed many more photographs of my hands touching rocks, trees, water, sand, and other natural places. Nature is fast becoming my muse - my creative resource - a resource that seems to never deplete.

Transcendentalists - Henry David Thoreau and Julia Butterfly Hill

First, I must admit the challenge and near possibility it was for me to write an annotation for Henry David Thoreau’s Walden. Many reviewers and scholars call Walden “A great American classic.” This characterization of Thoreau’s writing always seemed to trouble me. How could a man so enraptured with his direct experience with nature be characterized and encumbered with a nationalistic label? How can any review of Walden give a reader or evaluator an accurate and concise “snapshot” of this work? The tears I experienced while hanging on his words could not be captured in an annotation, nor could the goose bumps on my skin be deconstructed into a scholarly format for evaluation.

I remember having to read Walden for my eighth grade American Literature class, and struggling to focus my mind on the imagery and analyses of Thoreau. At the same time, growing up in a small town, my father constructed solar panels for our home. We gardened every year, and I picked apples for seven summers from our five apple trees. We raised chickens and rabbits, and my dog, Taffy, had three litters of puppies. Perhaps Thoreau’s words did not reach me then because I had very little longing for a natural world. I was living that natural world, and may not have needed a book to illustrate it for me. Today, in my adult life, Thoreau’s words touch me deeply, for I no longer have the innocence of my childhood. Today I long for the deep connection to Nature that Thoreau experienced near Walden Pond. I long for a world once again in love with the Earth.

Julia Butterfly Hill has long been one of my “heroes.” While I had read The Legacy of Luna some years ago, I thought it appropriate to re-read her book within the context of this course. Of all of the events described in her over 700-day tree sit, one experience has always stood out for

me. When Julia was faced with a storm filled with lightning and winds that threatened to snap the very tree where she was dwelling, she seemed to hear a message, coming deep from within the tree. Luna, the very tree she lived upon, was speaking to her, telling her that she must be flexible and bend in the wind, just like a tall tree should bend and sway to survive. Her account of being flailed about her tree stand, laughing one moment, crying the next, yet feeling more alive than ever before, is one of the most exciting metaphors I have encountered for the life of an activist, artist, or healer interested in deep and lasting transformation. We all must bend in the wind, allowing ourselves to surrender to storms at times, and to risk our very attitudes and strongly held beliefs as we weather change. If we stand so firm and so stiff that we fight the winds beating against us, we could easily break in half under the energy of our own rigidity.

Shedding Skin, Transforming, Flinging Off our Very Faces

In introducing one of the pieces in her song cycle of pollinators, Laurie Witzkowski spoke to the crowd of children and adults about the metamorphic transformation a monarch caterpillar undergoes to become a monarch butterfly. The monarch caterpillar must shed its skin five times throughout its larval stage.

“I have seen a monarch caterpillar literally fling its face off to rid itself of an old skin. It knows when structures no longer serve him, and it is time to transform.”



Each time, hearing these words throughout the day when we performed her song cycle, I could see the children and adults in the audience hanging on these very words. My heart to this day still hangs upon this metaphor.

If a caterpillar can instinctively shed his skin and embrace a transformation so dramatic in his life, why not all of us? Nature is crying out to us - crying out to ME. All of the pain, desecration, damage, and devastation we as humans have inflicted upon the Earth, is echoing back to us in Nature. From the decline in the bee population, to the rapid extinction of many animal species,

to the declining ocean fish population, to the melting of our polar ice caps, the call is loud and clear.

As humans, will we continue to stand rigid and unyielding to our over-consumption of the Earth's natural resources - to the bitter end when the last drop of oil is spewed out our exhaust pipes? Or, will we learn to bend and sway in the winds of change. Will we allow Nature to become our teacher once again? Will we have the courage and audacity to embrace a miraculous change in ourselves? When it is time to make the choice between holding on to the past and embracing a new world; one where we may soar farther than we ever have; more in harmony with Nature than ever before - will we stand to fling our very faces off when our failing structures can no longer be clung to?