
“You are my other me”: Honoring and Learning from the Land

~ Aimee de Ney

Editor’s note: *This article shares prominent passages from a much longer original article, which has been edited with the goal of highlighting the deeply caring perspective the author carries toward the land. The article begins by describing the many ways the land has been misused and abused. The land has been unjustly taken from the Indigenous first stewards and protectors of the land for possession and profit to benefit a few. Peoples have been displaced, resources exploited for economic gain, care for the land ignored, and so on. The list is long and the consequences to climate, vitality of the earth, and repercussions in social life are serious and deeply concerning. The earth is suffering and human beings are suffering. Aimee states directly, “Our culture is harmful and in need of collective transformation. We are at a turning point in time, when the repercussions of colonial, racialized capitalism are making life untenable for the global majority, human and more-than-human—all of life—Land, waters, soil, fire, trees, plants, animals, fungi, rocks, and so on. We are all a part of Mother Earth.”*

The term “colonization” is used throughout the article. This word’s short definition is: the action or process of settling among and establishing control over the indigenous people (usually by force) and appropriating their place or domain for one’s own use.

In the months leading up to the pandemic, we teachers had been asking what transformation the next hundred years of Waldorf education is calling for. Now is our chance to hear that call. Working with young children and families in Waldorf schools, we have the freedom and opportunity to meet what is coming to us from the future, as witnessed through our young children.

At a regional gathering of Waldorf early childhood teachers in February 2023, many teachers voiced concern over the development of the children and their challenges in terms of social relationships and participation in the curriculum, along with the stress parents are carrying. Positive news came, however,

from a handful of teachers who shared that their classes were healthier than ever before. These were classes that had moved outside at the start of the pandemic and continued as outdoor programs. Additionally, the adults were actively working to uphold the principles of DEI—Diversity, Equity, Inclusivity, and Justice. Why has this seemed to make a difference?

The land has much to teach us about what it is to be human, what it is to be a living being in the living world. Colonization has separated us one from the other—races, ethnicities, genders, species, and so on. It has given access to the few and separated us from remembering that we are a part of the land. Our children know this and sense the pain of the land and its creatures and want to protect and heal the earth. There is suffering and injustice in all parts of life; there is no real shelter from this awareness. Healing can arise for all if we look around us and meet the needs of the land and the “other.” If we center the land and ourselves as a part of land, our children’s needs will be better met than by focusing on them to the exclusion of the land and all the “others” around us.

Practically speaking, what does this look like? It will look different, depending upon the land in which we live and the peoples (human and all beings) and stories that have lived there from time immemorial. A deeply land-based pedagogy is a trauma-informed pedagogy. None of us are free from the traumas of colonization, whether we fall on the side of the oppressed, the side of domination, or in the grey areas between. Being separated from the land, our ancestors, our humanity, and the truth of life is our collective trauma.

For years, I have been working to form a land-centered pedagogy. Through my research, I discovered Land Education, a framework being used primarily in Indigenous communities in Canada with the explicit goal of decolonization, which means the rematriation—“a return to a spiritual way of life with respect for Mother Earth”—of Indigenous lands to Indigenous peoples (Land Back). Since then, I have been working with three tenets: turning to the land

as first teacher, turning to Indigenous leadership, and dismantling settler colonialism.

I offer a few ideas to start working in this way of land-based culturally-relevant trauma-informed pedagogy, but please understand this work is not only external. It is also about critical self-reflection, questioning all we hold to be true, and actively listening to voices that have been silenced for far too long—human voices and the voices of more-than-human beings.

Turning to the land as first teacher—investing in reciprocal and loving relationships

- * Introduce yourself to the land out loud and often; be open to hearing what she has to say.
- * Ask permission from the land to be there and listen to the answer. Offer her gifts.
- * Practice reciprocity—make sure we are giving and receiving in equal measure (or giving more than receiving, considering our histories).
- * Get to know the names of the plants. Are they Indigenous, naturalized, or invasive? What are their gifts? Their stories? How do they change over the seasons? What can they teach us?

Turning to Indigenous leadership

- * Seek out opportunities to learn and participate with Indigenous communities, always remembering how colonizing actions have affected these communities, and act respectfully to not perpetuate colonization and cause further harm.
- * Learn the stories of the land, and practice proper protocol in telling these stories.
- * Only tell stories you have permission to tell (stories in public domain have been offered).
- * Check your sources and make sure they are authentic.
- * Before the telling, share which peoples this story belongs to.
- * Tell the lineage of who you learned the story from.
- * Do not profit from the telling (financially or with enrollment, status, etc.).
- * Check your intention: are you honoring the land and bringing the children into reciprocal relationship? Are there other motives? Be clear before telling these stories.

Dismantling settler colonialism

- * This includes the work of antiracism. Learn the truth of our collective and individual histories, no matter how unsettling and disturbing it may be.
- * If we are going to bring forth change and new culture, we must begin by telling the truth with ourselves and with our children. Experiment with age-appropriate truth telling.

Being out-of-doors with young children offers an opportunity to help them find right relation within the context of all of life. We meet the plants, birds, and fungus networks as friends and relatives who care for us as we care for them. We practice being guests in the homes of the plants and animals. We strive to do no harm thorough erosion and trampling, by staying on the paths. We practice listening and observing. We witness the transformation of our friends (plants and animals) throughout the seasons, learning their ways, gifts, and stories. We acknowledge the Indigenous peoples whose land we are on and understand that we are settlers who have a responsibility to the land and her peoples. This is a practice of finding ourselves and remembering who we are within the whole, learning to practice cultural humility.

Our children are our mirrors, and we all are reflections of our collective, dominant culture. But we are also the hope that the future holds. We can stand up and refuse to continue the way things have been and transform both individually and collectively. This is what our children are demanding of us.

This past June, I closed my little school to focus on this work of centering the land and remembering our interconnection more broadly. To honor the beauty of our school community, about 200 people attended our final circle time, the focal point of the celebration. We shared a familiar song with adjusted words to acknowledge new friends from the plant world—Cedar and Rose. We closed our school with a giant spiral dance, each of us beholding the other as we danced joyfully together, singing:

Make new friends and keep the old;

some are Cedar and others are Rose.

*A circle is round, it has no end,
that's how long I want to be your friend.*

Let us take an example from Rose and see the beauty and heart-medicine in the thorny difficulties before us. And may Cedar guide us with benevolent wisdom, generosity, and steadfastness as we navigate these times of change. Transformation is afoot. We can rise up and be part of the change that is required, hard as that change may be. Our children are counting on us, as is the land that grants us all life. ♦

Note on the title:

In Lak'esh there is a Mayan greeting that translates to "You are my other me" or "I am another yourself." It was perhaps made famous by Luis Valdez's 1972 poem.

References:

- Kendi, I. X. (2019). *How to be an antiracist*. One World.

Aimee de Ney is a long-time Waldorf early childhood teacher committed to developing reciprocal and loving relationships with the land and her inhabitants and supporting others in doing the same. A puppeteer, storyteller, and student of the land, Aimee is a doctoral candidate whose research centers on developing pedagogy that prioritizes generating loving and healing relationships with the land, other, and self through decolonial Land education toward land (climate) and social justice. Aimee is currently serving as a regional representative to WECAN and on the WECAN I.D.E.A. committee.