
Land-Based Literacy: Learning to Read the Land

~ Aimee de Ney

We are living through complex times, not as mere observers, but as those who are shaping the future through our work with young children. It behooves us to ask what our children need from us to be prepared for a future that leaves behind the hyper-individualism of these times and moves (again) towards reciprocal collectivity. How do we step out of the centuries that have separated us from each other and from being a part of the Lands (a relative with all life)? How do we become 'right-sized,'¹ and once again become a collective, standing in our innate power to uplift those around us, and to be reciprocally uplifted?

Paulo Freire was a Brazilian educator and scholar who, like Rudolf Steiner, wrote extensively about education for freedom. His seminal book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, spoke to the necessity of considering social conditions if we are to educate towards equity and liberation, much as Steiner did. Freire wrote that "reading the world precedes reading the word." We educators have the responsibility to teach students to come to know and understand the world and their place in it. Teaching children to read the world is very much the task of Waldorf early childhood educators, with our emphasis on encouraging and supporting the children's interest in the world through modeling our own. Through our authentic interest and active wondering, love, humility, and gratitude emerge. Through gratitude, joy emerges.

Anishinaabe scholar Megan Bang (along with many co-authors over the years) writes and speaks of reading Lands and Waters, much in the way Freire wrote of reading the world. By learning the patterns, relationships, colors, seasons, needs and gifts of our more-than-human relatives, these open to us and welcome us into relationship. Our true wonder builds kinship with those beings. And as we learn and wonder, we can actively bring the children along with us as we articulate what we are seeing, hearing, smelling, noticing, sensing. With us the children

engage in reading the world, the Lands and Waters, and all beings with us. The children carry wisdom and knowledge that can help us to better know the Lands and all beings. In knowing our more-than-human kin—not from a head-centered way but through embodied relational knowing—we begin to remember that we are relatives with all life. We can strive to live in reciprocity with other living beings, as reflected through our emerging pedagogy and day-to-day choices.

From the point of view of the development of the human child, we understand our brains develop through new and repeated experiences. By sharing our interest in and commitment to learning to read the Land, we are strengthening the pathways of relationship and belonging with life, of kinship. And having a foundation of reading the world, of understanding the context of the time and place where we are, and the context of the Land herself, we build pathways of responsibility, respect, and the call to humility and service that have long been ignored by the dominant culture. Our children are brilliant, and it is our responsibility as educators to uplift their brilliance and support them in bringing it into the service of the collective, into reciprocal relations with all life that do not hold the individual as the most important, but as an integral part of the whole.

How do we, as teachers, respond with an active, sincere, "I wonder?" when children bring us their curiosities about the world? This past winter we witnessed two hummingbirds joining us for snack outside. These hummingbirds had become regular guests at the snack table, eager to be in relationship with the children and teachers. They were clearly inviting the children into relationship. How, then, could we reciprocate this kind offering?

When we observe them coming for regular visits, we greet them and offer them welcome. By introducing ourselves to them, and offering them safe

¹ This is a term I have heard my teachers Daniel Foor and Shannon Willis at Ancestral Medicine speak many times. It essentially means having humility and understanding our own smallness while standing in our innate power, which comes to us from the earth and cosmos, noting that all of life holds this power, not just humans. In fact, humans are known to be the youngest siblings here on earth.

and respectful company, we open ourselves to a more intimate relationship with them. When we met them, I wondered why they were coming this snack visit every day in the *winter*? What do they eat this time of year? Do they overwinter here, or are they traveling? What is their common name? What are hummingbird's stories here in our land and beyond? What are hummingbird's gifts, their magic? The more we invest in knowing our neighbors, the more generously they will reveal themselves to us. Relationships require effort.

By learning to read the Lands we support the children in their neural development by actively wondering, relating, and learning, and we also support their coming into relationship with the Lands, waters, and all beings, learning to remember that we, too, are relatives, no more or less important than all other beings, just a younger sibling. As the younger siblings, we have much to learn from our older siblings!

An ideal way to begin the path of reading the Land is to know the names of the plants. I live on the lands of the Squaxin Island people. A few years ago, I asked Squaxin Knowledge Keeper and elder Charlene Krise what she would want settler (non-Indigenous) teachers to know or do, and she said to learn the names of the plants, because when we know each other by name, we treat each other with respect. I have been told by Waldorf teachers that teaching the children the names of plants is over-intellectualizing with them. Is teaching them their classmates' names, then, over-intellectualizing? We must trust the intelligence of our young children and support them in awakening it, not try to dull it by putting it to sleep. It is our responsibility to guide where their intelligence is turned, where they build connections. There are entire industries committed to capturing our children's attention and interest. But all of life is better served when we instead bring them into relationship with life by learning to

read the Land alongside the children. The plants are willing and ready to become new friends.

When I was teaching, I began each year by introducing the children to the plants in the garden, eventually describing which could be eaten without permission (raspberries, kale, and lemon balm), and showing them how to pick those plants in ways that help the plant grow strong. I also showed them the flowers they were allowed to pick (Dandelions, Buttercups, common clover, Periwinkle, for instance), and I made clear that they should always ask to pick anything else.

October brought our first days in the forest. As visitors in the home of the plants and animals, we would be respectful guests in their home. We introduced ourselves to them and asked permission to be there. We stayed on trails and did not pick random leaves or harm any living being. Staying aware of our impact, we sought ways to offer reciprocity to the Lands. Then we met the plants by their common English names and then their Indigenous names. Sharing our human names and then learning theirs is an act of reciprocity. As the year progressed, when guests would join us on our forest days, I would have a few children introduce our guest to our plant relatives, which they happily and readily did.

In knowing their names, we can then learn the gifts of the plants. Who are they? Where do they grow? What is their vibrant time of year? What are their gifts? Are they edible? Are they a traditional food source? Do they offer us medicine? What do they need and want from us? I have experienced that learning and sharing their traditional stories—using proper protocols of acknowledging the Indigenous peoples from whom this story came—is received as an act of reciprocity. In return, my understanding and relationships with these beings has blossomed.

When the children know the plants by name, know their gifts and stories, they build their own relationships with them and learn to listen to the plants. When harvesting anything, from a leaf, to a nibble, or a basket of berries, we introduce ourselves, offer a gift, state our intention, and ask permission. And then we listen for an answer. While the answer is often “Yes,” sometimes it is “No.” If “No” comes, the plants are teaching the children impulse control, empathy, and consent...and so much more! They are incredible teachers, generous, open and available.

As we discuss literacy in our movement, let us remember there are many kinds of literacy. For instance, as early childhood teachers, we learn to read the children: their movement patterns (senses and reflexes), physical/social/emotional/sensory needs, early signs of distress, and so on. While in Waldorf early childhood classrooms we are not formally teaching reading and writing, it is our responsibility to introduce the children to the beauty and complexity of the world.

We have the children in our care when their brains are growing exponentially. Pathways that will shape their futures are myelinating, becoming strong, secure, and flexible, much like cattails in fresh water. Our children’s futures will shape the world, just as we are shaping it now through our daily choices, which are dictated by the values we prioritize and act on. Following the lead of Indigenous educators, Knowledge Keepers, and scholars, I have chosen a path of inviting children to learn to read the Lands and Waters, inspired by the values of reciprocity, respect, and responsibility, relevant to the lands where the children are growing. In doing so, it is my intent to remember, together, that we are a part of the Land. May we uphold our responsibility to all our relatives by bringing our children into reciprocal and literate relations with Lands, Waters, and all beings.. ♦

References

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