

For the Love of Frogs

Promoting Ecological Sensitivity Through the Arts

Kathleen Kesson

**The arts can be an effective
bridge to reunite us with the
natural world in which we live.**

Every year on May Day, citizens of Montpelier, the capital city of Vermont, come together for a ritual celebration called All Species Day. First, people of all ages gather in Hubbard Park, a scenic nature preserve overlooking the charming Victorian houses of the town. The sage is burned, the invocation is chanted. This is the day when the folks of this northern bioregion come together to honor the non-human species they share the land with and to celebrate the return of the sun, warmth, and long light days. Children and adults have labored to create the giant puppets and costumes that will represent the multitude of species at this long awaited ritual event.

The traditional Raven appears and her huge black wings stir the air and call the spirits. Drummers call the creatures forth, and they emerge from the woods: the two-leggeds, the four-leggeds, the many-leggeds, the ones who crawl close to the earth, the ones who swim, the ones who fly. White geese, soaring on high poles carried by humans, return from their winter voyages. The ancient mythic archetypes are present: Old Woman Winter lights the ritual torches and the fierce and frightening Dragon lumbers forth from the trees, spewing forth a bellyful of maiden dancers, who dance the dance of Eros on the spring grass. Plays are enacted, including the traditional myth of Persephone and more postmodern "rites of spring."



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Soon the parade begins, and everyone—children, adults, creatures—assemble to march down the mountainside into the town. The streets are filled with drummers, dancers, and chanters as the crowd makes its way across the river to the very center of power in Montpelier, the golden-domed Statehouse, which is crowned, appropriately enough, with a wooden statue of Ceres, the Roman Goddess of Agriculture. Excitement builds as Bread and Puppet's Earth Mother, a towering puppet that reaches nearly to the top of the Doric portico, appears on the steps of the Capitol Building in all her glory to bless the congregation and sanctify the gathering. From her skirts emerge a seemingly endless number of dancers, moving to African/Caribbean rhythms. Tiny maidens, garlanded in flowers and strewing petals, prepare the way for the Queen of Spring. And then here, on the steps of the Capitol itself, is reenacted the ancient marriage of the Stag King and the Queen of Spring, a European tradition older than the nation state, older than Christianity, older than patriarchy itself. Submerged for millennia, this pre-modern ritual emerges in postmodern times, as we begin to recreate a culture that reveres and respects all of the living beings of the Earth.

I open with this story because for me the All Species Day parade represents the integration of art, ritual, politics, and celebration in a way that deepens our empathy for the Earth and her creatures and points the way toward actions we can take to preserve our environment. It is a premise of this paper that an ecologically sustainable future depends on such cultural creativity—a new synthesis of politics, art, and social commitment that will help develop ecologically responsive habits of mind and heart. In this paper, I suggest a rethinking of the arts in education and illustrate, in a hypothetical curriculum unit about “lowly” frogs, how schools might promote ecologically responsive habits of mind.

Education and the Ecological Crisis

The work of such education scholars as Gregory Smith (1992), David Orr (1994), and C. A. Bowers (1993a; 1993b; 1993c; 1995), who are concerned with

the impact of multiple and worsening environmental crises, has convinced me that the content, form, indeed, the very aims and purposes of modern education, are deeply implicated in the creation and the perpetuation of these crises. Smith points out that the rhetoric of educational reform, which concerns itself primarily with the need to create workers who will maintain the United States' edge in global economic competition, fails to acknowledge that the marketplace itself “may be threatened with limitations imposed by the planet” (1992, 12)—a possibility with which we have not yet begun to come to terms. David Orr, in a compelling essay entitled “The Dangers of Education” (1993) argues that conventional education imparts a disconnected, amoral curriculum that alienates us from the moral lessons in the natural world. C. A. Bowers has shown how ecologically destructive beliefs and values are embedded in the language patterns and social interactions of the textbook and the classroom.

My own study of the philosophy and history of science awakened me to the excruciating depth and complexity of the epistemological problem that lies at the core of the environmental crisis. In complicated ways, we seem to have “thought ourselves into” these interlocking crises with our conditioned acceptance of a dualistic worldview that has split mind from matter, reason from emotion, subject from object, spirit from flesh, and that privileges the abstract over the concrete. We have marshaled our conceptual resources over the past few hundred years, not only to understand but also to control and manipulate nature in ways that have disrupted the biological, social, and cultural patterns established over centuries of human interaction with the environment. We have only begun to appreciate the extent of our folly.

Bowers (1993c, 398) reminds us that we are nearing “overshoot,” a condition in which the demands of an increasingly worldwide consumer culture will exhaust essential resources. In its 1990 edition, *Worldwatch* concluded that we had approximately forty more years before we begin a long planetary slide into decline (in Gablick 1991). Since 1990, the frightening specter of conflict over diminishing non-renewable resources has become even more apparent (Remer 2002). Gablick (1991, 6-7) suggests

that it is crucial to transform individual and collective priorities and values: "Materialism," according to her analysis, "simply cannot survive the transition to a sustainable world."

Ecological Responsiveness and the Arts

William Pinar and C. A. Bowers, in a 1992 survey of the curriculum field, ask, "How do we as educators, begin to develop the languages of dance, painting, music and narrative that primal peoples used as a means of encoding the moral templates for living in ecologically sustainable relationships?" I want to explore this question by beginning with a poem by Abenaki-Czech poet Joseph Bruchac entitled "Prayer":

Let my words
be bright with animals,
images the flash of a gull's wing.
If we pretend
that we are at the center,
that moles and kingfishers,
eels and coyotes
are at the edge of grace
Then we circle dead moons
about a cold sun
This morning I ask only
the blessing of crayfish,
the beatitude of the birds;
to wear the skin of the bear
in my songs:
to work like a man with my hands.

Bruchac's poem points to the "anthropocentrism" of modern culture—the view that we are the center of the world and everything else is at the periphery—and reveals not only the resulting impoverishment of the human spirit, but the peril to existence itself ("we circle dead moons around a cold sun"). Matthew Fox, the contemporary Christian theologian, says, "the disease of anthropocentrism is, in my opinion, what most haunts the one-sided and therefore violent psyche of the West" (in Richards 1962, ix). In our separation from rock, sea, cloud, tree, and animal, we have become profoundly alienated. If we continue to think of the world as separated from ourselves, says physicist David Bohm, "constituted of disjoint parts to be manipulated with the aid of calculations" we become separate, alienated beings whose main moti-

vation toward each other is control and manipulation. But, he goes on, if we can begin to perceive

an intuitive and imaginative feeling of the whole world as constituting an implicate order that is also enfolded in us, we will sense ourselves to be one with the world ... we will feel genuine love for it. (in Griffin 1988, 57-68)

To sense ourselves to be "one with the world"—surely, awakening that realization should be a central task for an education that might enable us to begin to heal the ecological wounds inflicted on our tiny planet as a result of our disassociation from other life forms. In Matthew Fox's creation-centered spirituality (1983), art offers up the possibility of reconnection:

With art as meditation, we truly listen to the cosmos within us and around us and give birth to the ongoing cosmogenesis of our world and worlds...by turning to art as meditation we ensure our continual greening (p. 198) ... by letting go of our overdependence on words we allow images, symbols, pictures to emerge, and we express them by drawing, painting, body movement, music and poetry.... Art as meditation takes one on deeper more communal journeys than words can ever do" (p. 194).

In the concentration demanded by various artistic disciplines, the subject/object dualism is overcome. The dancer becomes the dance, the potter becomes the pot, and life is lived in the interpenetration of shaper and shaped.

Let me share another poem, this one by an Iglulik Eskimo woman named Uvavnuq, entitled "Moved":

The great sea stirs me.
The great sea sets me adrift,
it sways me like the weed
on a river-stone.
The sky's height stirs me.
The strong wind blows through my mind.
It carries me with it,
so I shake with joy.

In simple and profound ways, the arts (rhythmic body movement, singing alone or in unison, listening to or reciting poetry) *feel good*—they are physi-

cally and emotionally pleasurable. Most aesthetic theorists, who are more interested in the purely conceptual response, have long ignored this factor. The split between formal, commodified art and human experience was well articulated by John Dewey (1934, 3), who decried the fact that art had been “isolated from the human condition under which it was brought into being, and from the human consequences it engenders in actual life experience.”

Ellen Dissanayake extends Dewey’s ideas further with her extensive interdisciplinary investigations into the nature of aesthetic experience, suggesting that human beings have a universal, biologically based need for art (1992; 1988). From her evolutionary perspective, art is something humans do *because it helps them to survive*. Consider the early connections between art, ritual and ceremony in many societies, as well as contemporary artistic expressions in cultures such as those of the Southwestern Hopi Indian or traditional Balinese, which have not yet lost their traditional bonds to the biotic community. The role of participatory aesthetic ritual in such cultures is multi-faceted: rituals affirm life processes and re-inscribe positive social values; confirm the human interdependence with the surrounding natural world; unify the social order; facilitate individual and communal healing; mark transitions (rites of passage); make common or ordinary experiences “special”; and perhaps most important for understanding the evolutionary purposes of art, aesthetic rituals nourish the capacity *to experience transformative or transcendent emotional states and extraordinary states of consciousness* (Dissanayake 1988).

Communal aesthetic participation, as in the making of music or song, offers us the opportunity to enter a state that transcends individuality “in which we are not (as is usual) separate and sequential but seem to partake of a timeless unity: tones remove the barriers between persons and things” (Dissanayake 1992, 71). Songs, stories shared, sand paintings, contemporary urban murals, rhythmic processions and sacred circle dances construct vital bridges between separate lives and community experiences.

In much the same way as we are stirred to emotion by the arts, humans derive aesthetic pleasure and emotional enticement from an association with nature. Some researchers are now arguing for the bio-

logical basis of such responses, and these ideas are loosely affiliated under the framework of the “biophilia hypothesis,” a term coined by the noted scientist Edward O. Wilson (Kellert and Wilson 1995). Biophilia is “the innate need to relate deeply and intimately with the vast spectrum of life around us” (p. 42). Proponents claim an evolutionary necessity for such capacities: “Human genetic needs for natural pattern, for natural beauty, for natural harmony are all the results of natural selection over the illimitable vistas of evolutionary time” (p. 51). Further, “studies of the relationship between environment and human response suggest that nature has a more powerful impact on our emotional and physical health than has been appreciated to date” (p. 166). Both the aesthetic and the emotional response to nature are captured in Uvavnu’s poem—*The great sea stirs me / the sky’s height stirs me / I shake with joy*.

These two streams of evolutionary theory—that of biophilia and that of art—come together for me in the idea that the integration of communal aesthetic experiences with environmental education is one important way to facilitate behaviors that are ultimately *adaptable*, that is, that orient us toward sustainability. Delores LaChapelle, in speaking of the historic process of such integrative practices, notes the

wisdom of these other cultures who knew that their relationship to the land and to the natural world required the whole of their being. What we call their “ritual and ceremony” was a sophisticated social and spiritual technology, refined through many thousands of years of experience, that maintained their relationship much more successfully than we are. (in Devall and Sessions 1985, 248)

Getting There From Here

Rediscovering the deep sense of connection with and reverence for nature is a tall order, given the alienating conditions of modern schooling and society. Many teachers bring environmental awareness, education, and action into their classrooms, including rich and varied nature experiences in the curriculum: river watches, bird counts, animal tracking, and weather observation, as well as gardening, composting, and harvesting projects. As well, many teachers,

influenced by Howard Gardner's (1983) *Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, are making efforts to integrate the arts more effectively into their curricula. Students are offered more choices about how to express their learning, through dance performances, song writing, art making, or play writing. These latter developments are promising, but not unproblematic.

Bowers (1995) challenges some of the core assumptions of individualistic forms of creativity, and suggests that we need to re-conceive more ecologically responsive forms that stress interdependence and interconnectedness rather than individual, subjective expression. I would suggest that in the intersection of existing classroom practices (environmental education and integrative arts), we might begin to develop a pedagogy that could, as Pinar and Bowers (1992) asked of us,

develop the languages of dance, painting, music and narrative that primal peoples used as a means of encoding the moral templates for living in ecologically sustainable relationships....

Study Unit on Frogs

In order to make my theoretical proposition more concrete and bring it into the realm of practice, in the remainder of this article I'll depict a hypothetical unit of study that shows how a common topic might be enacted in a holistic/aesthetic/ecological curriculum framework. Let's take the topic of frogs, a common enough topic, with information dispersed throughout the grades in science and biology textbooks. Some of us may have been lucky enough to raise tadpoles into frogs at some point in our academic careers. The less fortunate among us may remember an inevitable scientific rite of passage: the dismemberment and dissection of the creatures. A better example of non-empathetic, reductionist science is hard to find!

In my fictional frog curriculum narrative, designed for older elementary children, the study of frogs is initiated by the insistent question of a student: Why are the frogs disappearing? What a fruitful question for inquiry! In small groups and as individuals, we pursue topics of special interest, and research as many different frogs as we can discover: land dwelling frogs, water dwelling frogs, tree dwelling frogs, poisonous frogs. We ask ourselves:

Where do they live? What do they eat? How do they grow? How do they mate? In what ways do humans depend on them? How do they depend on us? What are some myths, stories, and superstitions about them? What are we humans doing that might be causing their disappearance? How do scientists solve such mysteries? Have other animals disappeared? Why?

As a culminating event, parents and friends are invited to our presentation, "The Case of the Missing Frogs." When the guests enter the room, they see that it has been transformed into a multitude of ecosystems represented by murals on every wall and large dioramas. Colorful clay and paper scale models of frogs of every kind are located within their appropriate environment, with information cards beside each one. The students have taken weeks to create these artistic life science murals and environments and are very proud of them.

Much work has gone into this presentation, as students and their teacher have researched many different aspects of the lives of frogs. They have discovered that frogs are amphibians and that there are thousands of species of amphibians. They learned about the importance of "habitat" and that many amphibians live in habitats that are not protected from destruction by human activity. They were shocked to find out that of the 825 species of amphibian that have no protection over any part of their ranges, almost half of them are threatened with extinction. Learning to say the name of a favorite frog species recently discovered in Papua, Indonesia, *Litoria wapogaenisi*, was great fun, and really impressed their friends! Unfortunately, the students discovered that this favorite is one of hundreds of animal species that have no protected habitat. It made them sad to learn that scientists believe many of these populations will disappear in the next 10 or 20 years. After many weeks of research and discussion, they think they have found one of the main reasons why the frogs are disappearing: Their habitat is being destroyed at an alarming rate. And amphibians are in more danger than other animals, because their ranges are smaller, and they don't receive as much conservation attention. Perhaps people just do not love frogs.

After viewing all of the tableaux, the guests are seated in a circle around the room. The lights go out and specially placed green bulbs are lit, casting a swamp-like, otherworldly glow. Frog songs, taped by two students on an evening at a local pond, fill the air of the room. A few younger siblings giggle, but the audience quiets as the class begins to tell the 180 million year story of the frogs through music, movement, storytelling, and harmonic chanting. A lot of work has gone into this performance. Aside from the research writing and the charts and graphs of every kind, they have also written and rewritten this information into a form suitable for a staged reading. They have created the murals that serve as backdrop for the presentation, learned about audio taping and lighting effects, written poems about frogs, and worked with the creative movement teacher to perfect their movements depicting different events in the lives of frogs. A special piece has been choreographed for the end of the presentation.

At a given moment in the script, a large group of students move into the center of the circle and take "frog-like" positions. In this green light and with the frog sounds in the background, the children almost feel like frogs! Classmates on the periphery of the circle begin to read poems that the class has written that express eloquently how they feel about the disappearance of the frogs. As each poem is read, one frog hops away and disappears. The green light bulbs go out, one by one. The songs of the frogs grow dim. Gradually, the frogs are diminished until the last frog remains, alone. She looks around, discovers she is alone, and hops away. The lights are all out. There is silence. One of the students begins a drumbeat, then other percussion instruments join in, and they sing the song of the frogs that they have composed as a group.

When the lights come up, students answer questions from the audience about what they have learned. Many of the adults have learned things that they didn't know. The students share with their parents all the things they have thought of that they and their families might do to save the frogs from disappearing.

Perhaps this hypothetical example stimulates your thinking about the many ways in which ecologically centered, integrated arts can be brought into

the curriculum in a way which, as Bowers suggests, encodes the moral information we need for survival, and which heightens our emotional response to both nature and experience. In this culminating experience, all of the elements of ritual were present: an altered environment (light and sound), chanting in unison, synchronized movement, and emotionally appealing subject matter. Yet, the ritual was not "religious" in any sense that might be threatening. It was, rather, "theatrical" in the sense of the early connections between theater and participatory ritual. The hoped-for effect of the event was a heightened moral sensitivity to the issues, the development of empathy toward creatures of the natural world, and a sense of purpose and commitment to save the frogs from extinction. In a small way, the experience was analogous to the larger, community wide experience of the All Species Day.

Let us not underestimate the difficulties of transforming a paradigm of fragmentation to a paradigm of interconnection and interdependence; to move, as Donald Oliver (1990) suggests, from the technical, knowledge-as-separate-subject approach to the grounded knowledge-as-intimate-relationship approach. Historian Morris Berman (1989) reminds us that the shift from distanced consciousness to an ecstatic, kinesthetic awareness in which "everything is alive, quivering, embodied" (p. 38) is a movement that our somatically alienated culture both longs for and fears. Difficult as this may be, we must find ways to reconnect in a deep and empathic way with the rest of creation. It is not just frogs that are endangered. I am convinced that the human-constructed breach between self and world, the product of centuries of wrong thinking, must be bridged if we too are to continue to participate, as a species, in this wonderful unfolding cosmic drama.

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