

“Put Your Ear Close to the Whispering Branch...”: Deep Listening in the English Classroom

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“Unless you are careful and deliberate, our society, with its blaring media and relentless marketing of entertainment, will dull you with its noise and pull you away from yourself. Unless you work deliberately to save yourself, you can easily just keep turning the volume up a little louder, watching another show...”

(G. Lynn Nelson, *Writing and Being* 50)

We live in a society of excessive noise. Coffee grinders screech at Starbucks. Hand dryers scream in our ears at Target. Traffic, TV, radio ads, cell phones, and the relentless stream of emails, Facebook, and Twitter plague us with their chugging, ringing, buzzing, and humming. In many places, even a hike comes with the distant drone of some highway or airplane. According to Scott Russell Sanders, by age 21 the average American has seen over 30 million ads and has spent more hours watching TV than attending school (*Conservationist Manifesto* 35). G. Lynn Nelson writes, “In a society filled with ‘words by the millions’— the I-It words of advertising and information and entertainment— we learn not to listen. We grow deaf as well as blind, sinking further into isolation and alienation. Perishing ‘by the word’” (“Warriors” 44). Contemporary life leaves little room for quiet unless we seek it out.

During the academic year 2007 and 2008, I was invited to serve as Writer in Residence for Cuyahoga Valley National Park (CVNP) in Peninsula, Ohio. As the visiting writer, I was to dwell for a year in a historic farmhouse a mile from the Cuyahoga Valley Environmental Education Center (CVEEC), and spend my teaching days on the trails with the upper elementary and middle school students who attended the CVEEC’s weeklong camp programs with their teachers. Each year, the park’s non-profit partner, the Conservancy for CVNP, raises need-based scholarship funds for children whom they believe would benefit from hands-on outdoor learning at the CVEEC.¹ Many of these students are reluctant readers and writers, struggle with behavioral problems, and/or live in urban areas. During their stay, they participate in an integrative curriculum called “All the Rivers Run,” which focuses on watershed ecology and draws upon concepts and processes from science, social studies, language arts, math, the arts, and technology. I was assigned to teach nature poetry to a new group of about 20 students four times a day, one to two days a week, which meant I would have one shot at reaching them during my one and a half hour workshop.

Before I arrived at the CVEEC, I had been driving 120 miles a week to serve as adjunct faculty in an English department, proofread for an advertising firm, and direct

1. In 2013-2014, 44% of the schools attending CVEEC were from low-income areas including Cleveland, Akron, and inner-ring suburbs of both cities, as well as low-income areas in Lorain and Summit Counties where 60% or more students qualify for federal lunch programs. Of the students attending CVEEC, 36% received financial support, with a total given for the year of \$96,129.50.

an after-school creative writing program. Like the children David Sobel describes, I “suffer[ed] from the time sickness of trying to do too much too quickly” (37). Infected with impatience, the noise of my exterior world penetrated my inner shell so that I could not hear myself think. I wondered if the students’ lives were as clamorous as mine.

At the time I had not yet heard of the pedagogies surrounding mindfulness or nature education. But having grown up out-of-doors, I possessed the instinct to turn to the natural world when I needed quiet. I wanted the students in my workshops at the CVEEC to experience this kind of listening as well, not merely to catch a few moments of birds and then move on, but to let thoughts circle and circle until thinking subsided, to let surface sounds give way to ears-wide-open, ego-aside listening. Deep listening.

A few days before the first school arrived at the CVEEC, feeling a bit panicky about my lack of lesson plans, I walked to a meadow to think. Butterflies flitted over the switchgrass—pearl crescent, European cabbage white, little wood satyr. Late evening sun cast pink light behind Queen Anne’s lace so that round edges glowed gold-white. The tall meadow grass beneath me was warm with afternoon heat, and the chink and whir of cicadas swelled from the woods behind me. Stillness was so full here. A quote from Guy Murchie’s *Song of the Sky* floated into my mind— “Put your ear close to the whispering branch and you may catch what it is saying...” (171). There were layers of sound around me.

I jotted notes:

purr purr purr thwip thwick bark rattle
swooooshhhhh. A fly. Crickets and
crickets in every direction. The birds gather and
swoop and disappear. My breathing
is absorbed by the air. You can’t force something
out of nothing. Andrea’s card never came.
nor my book.
A frog belches; I wait for the thing that I
cannot hear.

I listened and wrote, listened and wrote, sinking into almost dreamlike rest between jottings until the sun was nearly gone and the seat of my jeans had grown damp from dew. I could hear my own pulse, soft and low. I could hear the gravel churning down the side of the mountain as park staff left. I saw three deer wandering, long-legged, to the edge of the meadow. I felt quiet. Murchie’s invitation had worked for me. The prompt was open, perhaps too open for young writers. But I thought it worth trying with the CVEEC students. I could always rework the lesson if it failed.

Ten months later, having repeated the lesson with over 3,000 students, I emerged from the park with a spirited collection of their nature poetry and the sense that English students—and English teachers—have much to gain from deep listening in nature. In this essay I will explore what I believe to be the primary benefits of this practice—that deep listening 1) allows for stillness, 2) permits self-knowledge, 3) nurtures a sense of wonder, 4) invites playfulness and humor and 5) heightens awareness of interconnectedness.

Stillness

“We have forgotten what rocks, plants, and animals still know. We have forgotten how to be—to be still, to be ourselves, to be where life is: Here and Now.”

(Eckhart Tolle 93)

I held my first workshop at a pond behind the Cuyahoga Valley Environmental Education Center. The students arrived noisily, shoving each other and talking over my welcome. They shouted out haphazard answers to my quick review of poetic devices (metaphor, simile, imagery) and poked each other during my one-sided discussion on sensory details in nature poems. (That day’s selection included Theodore Roethke’s “Moss-Gathering,” Mary Oliver’s “The Kingfisher,” and Robert Morgan’s “Honey.”) When I asked students to spread out so they could write their own nature poems, most of them scooted a few feet away from me in tandem with their buddies. The general response to my request that they close their eyes was one of skepticism, some making a show of peeping sideways to see who else was cheating, others tilting their heads to exaggerate the act of listening.

But when I read Murchie’s lines and instructed them to spend five minutes just *listening*, they gradually fell into silence. Once they had done this, they were allowed to open their eyes, and were urged to use their other senses as they paid deep attention to a chosen object, creature, or entity. To my utter surprise (and the surprise of their teachers) within ten minutes, nearly every student was listening, looking, touching, sniffing, and occasionally even tasting their immediate environment. Throughout the workshop, I crouched beside them, helping with grammar or prodding for synonyms, but otherwise letting each writer sink into his or her own detailed worlds, the eye of their imaginations having opened via the initial sensory prompt to listen.

What they read aloud at the end of our workshop was striking. Their attention to language and use of metaphor was, according to their classroom teachers, unprecedented. Interestingly, several of students wrote about the relationship between surface sounds or movement and underlying calm, such as this sixth grade girl in her poem, “Pond”:

In front of me lies a pond,
Lily pads calm on their green bed;
Reflections of trees glowing on the water...
Around the pond are growing buds.
Under the lily pads, frogs jump-
But the water stays still.

In the first few weeks of delivering this lesson, I was surprised by how often teachers commented on the atypical focus of certain students or the fact that the entire group was being quiet at once. Many teachers confessed that back at school they strove to fill every moment of classroom time with discussion or activities so that there was no time for misbehavior. I admitted I did the same in my college level English classes to “keep them engaged.” But as my CVEEC residency progressed, I realized that I had been denying my college students important opportunities for reflection, assimilation, and thoughtful

language choice. By filling my lessons with talk, nervously avoiding awkward spaces, I had been inadvertently perpetuating the superficial consciousness that can breed meaningless, even destructive communication. I had failed to trust that silence is not necessarily dichotomous from speech, and silence, especially in the English classroom, can be laden with communal meaning in the form of acknowledgement, validation, encouragement, or simply a space for more carefully chosen words to emerge. By being willing to pause, I was giving my students permission to let the right words come.

“Silence,” writes G. Lynn Nelson, who regularly integrates meditation into his college composition classes, “is an important part of my lesson plans. Not ‘Sit down and shut up!’ silence, but dynamic silence—outer stillness so that we can enter into the inner stillness and learn from it. Just as the space between notes is necessary for the music, so silence around our words is necessary if our words are to be meaningful” (“Bringing Language” 17).

Each week, I grew a little braver in embracing the silence with my students. I began class by having students stand and breathe deeply, closing their eyes to set the tone for listening. I told them ahead of time that it was okay to take time to absorb their surroundings and to absorb what I was about to read and offered that they could keep their eyes closed during the reading if they wished. Sacrificing breadth for depth, I sometimes read only one poem but read it two or three times, careful to allow ample space for line breaks and pauses. Afterward, rather than asking prescriptive questions, I invited the students to share what they heard. By slowing down our pace, opening a space for listening, I created a gateway to the prompt for their own pieces.

After reading Guy Murchie’s quote, I encouraged them to take a few moments to simply listen before choosing a topic. They didn’t have to include what they noticed in their poems, and once they had listened they could depart into the other senses. But if they got lost or frustrated, they could return to just listening for a little mental break. Similar to mindfulness meditation, in which participants focus on the breath (and the spaces between breaths), this approach allowed students to follow interlacing patterns and rhythms and enter empty spaces between sounds in the natural world. As I honed the scaffolding for my lesson, I was able to draw in more students early on and to keep them engaged for longer. But much of the lesson’s enduring success (and the success I experienced that first day) was, I believed with increasing certainty, due to the impact of nature itself.

Over the last two decades there has been an increasing interest in the benefits of time spent in nature on both children and adults. Richard Louv asserts that regular exposure to the natural world is linked to a decrease in mental health problems and a reduction of ADHD, depression and cognitive disabilities (32-34.) The students in my workshops exhibited this potential as well. They expressed their own observations emphatically, gesturing at how “*si-lent*” the woods were, how they felt “*so calm*” and that Cuyahoga Valley National Park was nothing like their city field trips. “The quiet wisdom of nature,” writes one of Louv’s students, “does not try to mislead you like the landscape of the city does, with billboards and ads everywhere” (83).

During my residency at the CVEEC, I often saw students sidestep social interaction to go off by a rock or cattail marsh or anthill—alone. One afternoon, a fifth-grade girl, whom I’ll call Mary, arrived at my workshop with tearstains down both cheeks. Though

she shyly turned her head when I asked if she was all right, one of her regular classroom teachers informed me that Mary was homesick and freshly bullied by peers. Her tears were a fairly typical display. As I began the introduction to my workshop, I noticed that Mary was listening intently. Though she did not speak up during the pre-writing discussion of other authors' poetry, her eyes were wide and she sat straight, listening. When the group dispersed to listen to what the surrounding natural world might be saying, I found Mary curled up by a line of red maples. In heavy print, with irregularly dotted i's and multiple misspellings, she had written the following poem:

Trees a Sometimes Silent Beauty

Trees a sometimes silent beauty, that come in various,
radiant colors of a fall rainbow. Waving at us as the
wind goes by, and leaning by each other as if they were
whispering each other a secret in their shimmering dew.
The homes of animals, and the one thing that helps us live.
Dancing in the wind, just waiting, watching us, the
mysterious beauty, Trees.

As I quietly read Mary's poem, she watched my face intently and, when I finished, reclaimed her paper saying simply, "I want to be an artist and a writer when I grow up." When I saw her at lunch, she was eating at a table with peers, quiet, but engaged, with no sign of tears.

Her abruptly recovered poise expresses a common theme. Louv recounts the story of a "little girl poet" who, having recently lost her special place in nature, describes the woods as "so peaceful out there" (13). In the natural world writes Louv, "a child finds freedom, fantasy, and privacy: a place distant from the adult world, a separate peace" (7). This child's world is a rich place for writing, and an opportunity that we English teachers often miss. And for those who, as Sanders says, "[sense] depths beyond the self," writing can become "a centering down, an inward listening for openings in the stillness, through which authentic words may come"—a rare and sometimes startling occurrence in many students' lives (*Writing from the Center* 167).

Moreover, Jane Dobisz writes, "When you sit for a long time and don't speak, stuff comes out of the closet in your mind that you forgot was ever in there" (64). For troubled students especially, this can be a slippery slope. What I witnessed at the CVEEC, however, suggested that nature can provide a focus, a ready set of metaphors, a grounding sensory experience, as well as a physical space where negative memories can be temporarily left behind if need be. In this space, I (and the other teachers) observed that students were more willing to approach difficult feelings, identities, and mental-emotional pain than they would in the typical classroom setting.

One sixth-grade student, whom I'll call Will, arrived at my poetry workshop with headphones trailing into the pocket of his baggy pants, his chin rhythmically jutting out to the sound of a beat even after he "un-plugged." Throughout pre-writing discussion, he appeared to be utterly bored. But when I delivered the prompt, he walked directly to a log overlooking a bog, sat down, and wrote. And wrote, and wrote. At the end of class, he was the first to stand up and read:

Out in the Wind

Some days just out enjoying the cold, cold wind
that whispers in my ear like a hummingbird,
I just sit there to think about the world
the things I've done, the bad things and things,
Just to think, think, and think.
I want to think about what I want to do in my life,
Or if I want a calm, cool wife,
I just have to think, think, and think.
I want to think about the bad things I've done to people
In the past, or will do in the future
Because we all know time goes fast.
I want to do right again
I want to just Think, Think, Think.
Have you ever had that feeling
That you did something wrong or right
You just couldn't figure out if it was wrong or right
Because you couldn't think, think, think?
— If you have a trouble,
or if you are going down
you can just sit in the wind
and Think, Think, Think.

When I nodded to Will after class dispersed, he said toughly, “That was cool. I think I might do that again.” In Will’s case, the spiral of thoughts toward stillness *is* the subject of the poem. The structure of the piece evidences the writer’s culture and simultaneously enfolds his inner and outer worlds. Through deep listening—to the wind that “whispers in my ear like a hummingbird”—the writer edges nearer to discovering an authentic self. For the students that enter our classrooms unable to focus, struggling to make sense of the world around them, or reluctant to write, deep listening in nature can provide a means to much-needed stillness.

Self-knowledge

*“The tradesman, the attorney comes out of the din and craft of the street, and sees the sky
and the woods, and is a man again. In their eternal calm, he finds himself”*

(Ralph Waldo Emerson “Nature” 196).

Today’s students face a myriad of distractions and obstacles on their journey to self-discovery. The cacophony of materialism, peer pressure, bullying, labeling, and social networking can easily drown out fledgling voices, particularly the one third to one half of our population that Susan Cain claims are introverts (255). In his article, “Bringing Language Back to Life,” Nelson discusses his attempts to counter the world’s blaring distractions by introducing his students to the concept of internal knowledge. “Early on,” he writes, “I introduce my students to their cerebral cortex, so they are aware that there are many ways to learn and that one way is to ‘be still and know.’ They begin to under-

stand that we humans know more than we know we know, so it is legitimate pedagogy to learn from ourselves” (17).

Nelson’s efforts are not singular. Though Western philosophy generally discredits intuitive and sensory ways of knowing, indigenous peoples have long taught their children to call upon self-knowledge, particularly what is felt in the natural world. As Western education scholars turn to nature-based pedagogy, more and more research suggests that nature-focused reflection provides a “path for self-development” (Sobel 17). In his anecdote, “Tiger, Tiger Burning Bright,” for example, Sobel relays a story about his six-year-old daughter, who taps into courage by imagining her “inner tiger” (15-17).

The students at the CVEEC frequently exhibited self-exploration through identification with plants and animals. In the poem below, for example, a sixth-grade boy transparently expresses his concerns about adolescence:

A Tadpole’s Future

I walk by the pond one day and see a tadpole,
its appearance incredibly different from the frog it will become.
I wonder if it is aware of the changes that it will endure,
and how it will accept them.

By using a metaphor that allows him to approach an otherwise taboo topic, the boy was able to explore his own fears, even allowing me to read his finished piece anonymously to the group (in which many responded with nods and pensive lip biting).

Some students’ work revealed painful attempts at naming themselves amid the pressures of gangs, racism and urban violence. Another sixth-grade boy, who labored over selection of details, turned to similes from the pond to help him construct a positive, unified self-portrait:

My Name

My name is Tre.
My eyes are like brown wood
My shoes are like black rocks
My skin is like this smooth water.

Another day I worked with a boy who at first resisted writing then became fascinated by the autumn phase of a thistle plant. He had never been in the woods before, or seen a bog, and when I asked him what drew his attention, he pointed to a thistle.

“What does it feel like?” I asked.

His eyes grew wide and his fingers curled back from the sharp points.

I sat with him, quietly, while he teased out its cottony center, examined its structure.

“How would you describe its outside?” I prodded.

“Spikey.”

“What about the inside?”

“Soft...” he looked up at me with uncertain excitement.

I suggested that he write down these ideas while I checked on other kids. When I returned, he had responded with this extended metaphor:

Teasel

I am like teasel
Soft on the inside, rough and spikey on the outside.
Unless I'm cracked open,
I'll never show my inside.

Merrilyne Lundahl writes that metaphor “is one vehicle for exploring inner and outer landscapes” that can “connect the personal with environmental” (46). Barry Lopez elaborates: “The interior landscape responds to the character and subtlety of an exterior landscape”—a phenomenon I witnessed repeatedly at the CVEEC (65). In the following poem, for example, a sixth-grade girl grapples with the theme of death, working her way around big ideas with thoughtful metaphors and careful rhyme schemes:

Untitled

The cold, bitter wind blew against the open field
For all the grass was then killed.
The flowers were no longer in bloom;
They were locked up, like in a tomb.

Though some students gave background information for their pieces during the group read-aloud, most simply read their work then stepped shyly (gratefully) back into the cover of the circle, as this sixth-grade boy who draws a parallel between autumn and the temporal condition of life:

White Leaves

White leaves are drooping in the sorrow that winter brings;
They are as delicate as an old man's bones.
Their rustling sings a long, sad song.

Week after week, the teachers, students, and I were moved by the depth and authenticity of these unprecedented expressions, many of which were authored by the least likely candidates. Increasingly, it struck me that when we teach writing, we need strategies to help students overcome doubt, conformity, confusion.

In *Radical Presence*, Mary O'Reilly urges that we “need someone to listen to our stuttering, stammering plea to be heard. [We] need deep listening” (26). The natural world, I would argue, provides neutral space and fosters empathy among young audiences, which can be difficult to accomplish amid the pressures of classroom culture. Through deep listening in nature, English teachers can provide rich opportunities for students to tap into self-knowledge and develop self-expression in writing.

A Sense of Wonder

“A sense of wonder and joy in nature should be at the very center of ecological literacy”

(Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods* 221).

“Given the pressures on children in schools to factualize the world, to maintain a homogenized standard of thought,” Lewis writes, “a poetic way of perceiving experience

is simply ignored as an indulgence” (6). But the students who come to our classrooms void of curiosity, disassociated, apathetic, are precisely the students that need to recover a sense of incredulity. David E. Purpel suggests that one way we can “nourish critical and creative consciousness” is by inviting our students to “an examination and contemplation of the awe, mystery and wonder of the universe” (28, 113).

At the CVEEC, I witnessed the power of wonder as resistant students became risk takers. The source of this wonder might be the translucent gills of a tadpole, the curious wiggle of a larva buried at the center of a gall or grass that stood “blade by blade, shocked into separateness by an ice that held for days” (Toni Morrison, *Sula* 152). But more typically, wonder was incited by events as simple as snow flurries or carpenter ants. Written expressions of these observations took on impressive depth of language and unexpected attention to structure, such as the poem below by a sixth grade girl who builds familiar suspense:

One Leaf

One leaf stood out to me—
Red as an apple,
Better than the rest.
The only leaf
red as an apple,
One leaf blowing in the wind.

It finally broke off and I ran to catch it
so it wouldn't fall to the ground;
But when I did
My brain over-flooded
and I set it back down,
My heart beating in too much excitement.

In this poem, the girl describes, from a child's perspective, the wonderment of Martin Buber's claim: “All real living is meeting”: an initial noticing, building excitement at the inevitability of coming into relation, and finally, awed respect (24-25).

In the following poem, a sixth grade boy relays equivalent delight, rendering the drab down of a flock of geese then eloquently mimicking their hidden color by saving it for the last line:

Geese

Geese have white chins
that look like old men's beards
and brown feathers that end in black points.

They have no exotic colors,
yet when they open their mouths,
vibrant red fills their throats.

Of course, not every student at the CVEEC stumbled into wonder on her own. I encountered some challenging cases of boredom, shyness, writer's block, and fear. As I explored ways to coax and comfort, I found that equally important to asking questions

was listening—really listening—to students’ answers. Listening sometimes meant long, awkward pauses, allowing students to move beyond objectification of their chosen topic and into what Arthur Zajonc terms “subjectification and intimacy.” Zajonc asserts, this is a “patient, contemplative method that seeks ‘to hear what the material has to say to you’” (94).

Other times being a listener meant risking finding out what was beneath the surface a single line, or, in Georgia Heard’s words, “What’s not yet written?” (42.) I’ll never forget one fragile looking student, probably nine years old and meek in her speaking. Her spelling was atrocious, and she could only utter that she liked the daisies, shrugging when I asked what she liked about them. Finally she said, “I like them ‘cause they’re little,” fondling a few petals with impossibly slender brown fingers.

“They are, aren’t they?” I agreed. We looked at the petals. She smiled at me timidly.

“How little do you think they are?” I cocked my head.

She silently measured one against her hand. I nodded and asked, “Can you find some words to describe that?”

When I returned she had written, with great pride, a three line-poem:

So tiny
Baby daisies
So big as my thumb nail.

In this little girl’s case, *much* was not yet written, but she had victoriously found a point of relation, which was a start.

When children are exposed to the natural world, Mary Oliver writes, “Attention is the beginning of devotion” (56). Each day that I taught at the CVEEC, this seemed apparent as I watched urban children gain first (or rare) exposures to the natural world—tentative, then with increasing intrigue. Sometimes the beginnings of wonder even showed up as disgust. I recall one sixth grade girl who recoiled from touching a salamander but chose to write about him, describing his belly as “really smelly” and elaborating on his “little eyes,” “big toes,” and “stumpy nose,” only to expose her curiosity in the final line: “I wonder where he goes?”

To study nature is such a way, Marilyn Singer tells us, is “to become fascinated with the beauty and complexity of the world and to be filled with a sense of wonder. Wonder is an antidote not only to cynicism, but also to complacency, narcissism, and greed. It helps put things in their proper perspective. When we see ourselves as a small part of the whole, we become larger in intellect and in spirit” (42). But to hear the invitation to study—this is where we come in as teachers. “If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder,” writes Rachel Carson, “he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in” (45). For this reason, we must cultivate our own sense of wonder. During my time in the park, I watched as my own senses slowly came into focus. I recall one of the coldest nights that winter, hearing ice break in the creek below the farmhouse, then a few weeks later, my thrill at hearing birds, feeling like Thoreau when he celebrated robins, “the first I had heard for many a thousand years” (257). Away from the clamor of modern life, I could *hear* the natural world around me, and felt, not unlike the fourth grader in the poem below, that I was increasingly a part of its joyful expression:

The Sky and Me

I see the sky and it is blue,
I see the clouds, they are too.
The wind is blurry
The clouds are moving
I see me and I am blooming.

Playfulness and Humor

“Our challenge is to see with new eyes, to look at the familiar as though we’re seeing it for the first time. When we look closely and allow ourselves to be surprised by unexpected details and new insights, we develop an authenticity and humility in our experience of place, and wake up to its mysteries and delights”

(Ann Pelo)

Often, the journey toward deep listening at the CVEEC involved unexpected humor. I recall laughing with classroom teachers as students gawked at the bloated body of a dead salamander while we adults gawked at the writhing, mating, intertwined bodies of two live ones. I also recall an autumn morning trying to keep my students on task while a trail guide fled down an adjoining trail with gaggle of upset geese chasing him. One afternoon, I stood helpless and grinning as kids spontaneously walloped in snow banks. Another day the wind howled so strongly that we cupped hands over our ears and eventually moved indoors to “look deeply” through glass windows. When the weather turned, students struggled to listen to anything but their own physical malaise, and that distraction became part of our practice, as in this response by a sixth grade boy:

Untitled

The day is cold, frozen and wet;
Water and ice have met.

It is muddy, oh, so muddy...
The day is very cruddy.

Water is flowing and rain keeps on going
Until it’s VERY muddy, oh so VERY muddy!
And the day is now more cruddy.

One snowy afternoon I found myself ill-equipped to console a sixth grader who had fallen in the snow and was, more than anything, suffering from a bruised ego. He wanted to know if he could use bad words in his poem.

“What word are you thinking of?” I whispered as we huddled in the lodge to get warm.

“It rhymes with thump.”

“Ummm... I’m not sure what word you mean...”

Lowering his head and looking around, he hissed, “*Rump!*”

His final draft exhibited a decision to excise this “bad” word (its rhyming pair remains), but the poem maintains its frustrated tone:

Ice and Snow

I see a doe, fawn and snow—
Now which way do I go, do I go in the snow?
But as I jump I feel a thump;
Now I know,
It's ICE not snow—
I should have gone after the doe!

More than once throughout the year, I was reminded of a tale Jane Dobisz tells about a little brown mouse that wallows in her “outhouse” bucket for warmth, causing Dobisz to burst out laughing at the irony in her serious Buddhist meditations (98-100). As with any meditation, my attempts to engage students in deep listening were, at the moments I least expected it, met with humbling but funny roadblocks, such as the fourth-grade boy who could not settle in to listening because a bee was plaguing his head:

Yellow Bee

Yellow bee, Yellow bee buzzing by my ear:
Please, oh please get away from me there.
I know you like nectar but I am not a flower—
So please, oh please, Yellow bee
Get away from my ear!

Ironically (or perhaps not), these moments furthered the students’ and my sense of deep listening because they forced us to become open to humility and play. John Stark writes about “regression in the service of the ego,” or the ability to “let go and play, to be childlike” (80). Crucial to this perspective, he says, is a light heart. Raisuyah Bhagwan adds that adults may have lost this capacity but “children are pregnant with a special attentiveness to life’s precious miracles” (230). What medicine for writer’s block! When children respond spontaneously, “play can be an expression of soul and Creative Spirit” (Derezotes 155). Free play on the page through deep listening can dissolve performance anxiety, overcome perfectionism, cultivate the ability to laugh at oneself and allow for whimsical adventures, as in the poem below, by a sixth grade boy:

Cattails

I sit here on the grass watching the cattails.
They are so furry you could use them as a jacket;
They dance with the wind like they are having a party,
Bowing at me as if I am their king.
They talk to me,
Asking me to join and dance,
but I say I must go
and I will visit again.

Or this spirited piece by a fifth grade girl:

Cattails

The cattails
are scared cats

sticking up their tails
from a meadow.

Playfulness and humor are built into deep listening. When English teachers help students pay attention to these moments, we—and they—gain an opportunity to disengage our egos so that we might open to our awareness to a larger world and smile.

Awareness of Interconnectedness

“Because I am quiet, I can feel my connections to this tilting planet.”

(G. Lynn Nelson, *Writing and Being* 37)

One day, after a particularly successful workshop, I was tramping through the woods and fell in behind three boys. They were discussing the poetry they’d just written.

“No, no, man. That one wasn’t mine. Mine was the flower,” I heard one of them say.

“Who wrote about the wind?”

“I don’t know, she didn’t say.”

“Mine was the button.”

“The bachelor button?”

“Yeah.”

“Read it again, man, I didn’t hear it.”

The boy unrolled the paper in his fist and read as he scuffed through the leaves:

Bachelor buttons are beautiful,
I think you would agree,
The puddles of their centers, staring up at me
The middle of this flower looks like a cat’s claw,
Open and pointed inward, like a shark’s jaw.

“That’s sweet, man, that’s tight.”

In this scenario, the young author of “Bachelor Buttons” had concentrated on the flowers so intently that he saw a connection with other living things and wanted to share this discovery with his peers. “In the development of a consciousness which is attentive, awake and aware,” writes Sandra Finney, “concentrating on one flower or one worm can be enough to startle us into recognizing some aspect of our human selves or focusing upon the ultimately mysterious and deeply spiritual nature of all being. Such experiences also draw us into more deeply respectful relations” (42). Sanders describes this experience as our “birthright,” asserting that “a sense of communion with other organisms, with the energies and patterns of nature, is instinctive in children” (*Manifesto* 214).

At the CVEEC, it was not uncommon to watch students undergo transformation during the course of a single hour. Sometimes the experience was so personal that they would come to me and ask that I share their poem anonymously during our read-around, such as this fourth grade boy who, when I read his piece, moved twenty feet away from our circle and turned his back:

Family of Ducks

A family of ducks is in the pond
They're shaking their heads and twisting their necks
They swim together in a circle of love.
Now they're flying high above

Other students studied the patterns of raindrops on water or grooves in stones, searching, in the words of Gretel Ehrlich, “the history of the soul, the history of the mind descending and arising in the body,” seeking “to stumble on divinity” (31). One sixth-grade boy illustrates this profound observation of interconnectivity in a poem about the glassy surface of a pond:

Untitled

What are we but a ripple,
A shallow ripple, at that—
Seeking to touch another.
Each of our ripples is small,
Barely stirring the ocean of time,
Yet here we are.

In his essay, “Pedagogy of the Poetic: Nurturing Ecological Sensibility through Language and Literature,” Patrick Howard urges that “we must educate so we see ourselves as part of the web of life, as implicated in the world, not simply isolated, self-maximizing individuals” (191). Our methods, therefore, must be those that seek a *Gestalt*. “If we attend to separate parts,” writes Zajonc, “that is what we see. If we are interested in wholes and devise an experimental method to that interest, then wholes show themselves” (80). This phenomena, he says, arises in economics, physics, or medicine—and education. Zajonc suggests that we could heal the disparateness of our education system by teaching what Desmond Tutu calls *Ubuntu*: “I exist because of you” (78).

Deep listening in nature is inherently inter-connective. Because it is physical, it allows students to discover new knowledge with all five senses. Because it is both interdisciplinary and reflective, it invites students to explore this new knowledge in relation to already existing data and experience. And because it encourages reaching beyond the self to encounter other living beings, it can provide a gateway for budding compassion—which is a foundation for fostering responsible, caring citizens.

Conclusion

“‘Trees breathe,’ he told me. ‘Listen.’”

(Scott Russell Sanders, *Writing from the Center* 3)

As teachers in the 21st century, we are forced to grapple with a clamorous, headlong world. The nightly news parades through our living rooms with the echo of bombs and one-dollar cheeseburgers. Our students come to class with smartphones and iPods. Words flood onto their papers without much thought. It becomes easy to forget Thomas Newkirk’s important questions, “What kind of ‘self’ are we inviting students to become? What kinds of ‘selves’ do we subtly dismiss?” (6). If we examine our pedagogies from

an environmental standpoint, deep listening may be our only salvation. “The remaining, and most important, frontier . . .” argues Patricia Mische, “now may be the frontier of mind and spirit, the realm where ethics are shaped and responsibility is taken for the state of our lives and our world” (sect. 12 para. 4). Deep listening may not be an explicit bullet point in our current lists of “best practices,” but if we find ways to explore its impacts, it will prove itself. In his essay, “Sanctuaries,” Scott Russell Sanders urges that “We must find the desire, the courage, the vision to live sanely, to live considerately, and we can only do that together, calling out and listening, listening and calling out” (*Writing* 64).

For those who live away from wild places, locating nature for deep listening can present challenges. Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “Frost at Midnight” laments his childhood, “In the great city, pent ‘mid cloisters dim,” where his only connection to nature was “sky and stars.” For many children today, pollution may eliminate even this possibility. At the CVEEC, I often heard classroom teachers brainstorming ways to bring nature to their students once they were back at school. One teacher helped his students raise (and write about) orchids. Another scheduled trips to the planetarium to observe star patterns, followed up by a mini-unit on native astronomy. Others encouraged poems about city pigeons, got involved in garden-to-plate cafeteria initiatives, or took their classes on Friday walks around the building to write about shifts in wind, weather, light.

Sometimes, it is worth simply asking students, “Where do you find nature?” During a recent “place-based poetry” assignment with Upward-Bound students from Browning, Montana, (an astonishingly gray, littered, reservation town), I posed this question and one boy wrote an entire poem about kicking dust and gravel down back alleys where wild dogs scapped for food. Mary Rose O’Reilley relays an anecdote about an inner city Milwaukee teen who “wrote as precisely and enchantedly about grass and bugs as does Annie Dillard” (79). When O’Reilley asked him how he’d come to know these, he answered, “Oh, there was a freeway overpass near my house, with this little patch of grass . . . I would lie there day after day.”

However we can get them there, deep listening in nature raises consciousness and transforms children.

During my time at Cuyahoga Valley Environmental Education Center, I witnessed this potential for transformation profoundly. With each group of students, I saw change. As we listened deeply to our natural surroundings, reluctance to write evaporated. Students created poetry that reflected stillness, selfhood, wonder, playfulness, and interconnectivity with a larger world. I, too, left the park a different teacher and a different person—one far more willing to pause by a pond with my students on a September morning and ask, like this sixth grader:

The sound of crickets
Hiding among the cattails—
When will I see them?



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