

Learning, Magic, & Politics: Integrating Ecofeminist Spirituality into Environmental Education

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Abstract

Despite the growth and development of ecofeminist theory, ecofeminism has had little influence on environmental education. Within rich and diverse body of ecofeminist literature, there is great potential for ecofeminism to inform and shape environmental education. Spiritual ecofeminism offers an approach to be able to focus on interconnection and community, elements often missing from the standard, science based environmental education curriculum. Drawing on work done by feminist writer Starhawk, ecofeminist spirituality can be used to problematize both the focus on individuals and technocratic rationality. There are also inherent dangers in spiritual environmental education that are romantic and idealize "feminine nature." It is important to realize the potential of politically magical environmental education while evaluating the dangers of nature idealism.

Résumé

En dépit de la croissance et du développement de la théorie écoféministe, l'écoféminisme a eu peu d'influence sur l'éducation relative à l'environnement. Dans le corpus riche et diversifié de la littérature écoféministe, l'écoféminisme a d'énormes possibilités d'informer et de façonner l'éducation relative à l'environnement. L'écoféminisme spirituel propose une approche en vue de mettre l'accent sur l'interconnection et la collectivité, éléments souvent absents du programme standard d'éducation relative à l'environnement axé sur la science. Puisant dans le travail de l'écrivaine féministe Starhawk, la spiritualité écoféministe peut servir à problématiser à la fois l'insistance sur les individus et la rationalité technocratique. En outre, les dangers inhérents à l'éducation relative à l'environnement spirituelle consistent à romancer et à

idéaliser la « nature féminine ». En évaluant les dangers de l'idéalisme de la nature, il importe de se rendre compte de la possibilité de teinter l'éducation relative à l'environnement d'une dose de magie et de politique.

Generally speaking, ecofeminism makes links between the oppression of women and the oppression of nature. This diverse and contested body of theory ranges from theories that use the democratic political potential inherent in much of ecofeminism (Sandilands, 1999) to those that focus on the "reconciliation and conscious mediation (and) recognition of the underside of history and all the invisible voiceless activities of women over the millennia" (King, 1994). This diversity in ecofeminist thought is articulated by Karen Warren (1997) who writes:

... ecological feminism has roots in the wide variety of feminisms (e.g., liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, radical and socialist feminisms, black and Third World feminisms). What makes ecofeminism distinct is its insistence that non-human nature and naturism (i.e., the unjustified domination of nature) are feminist issues. Ecofeminist philosophy extends familiar feminist critiques of social "isms" of domination (e.g., sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, aegism, anti-Semitism) to nature. (p. 4)

In her fine work on ecofeminism entitled *Ecofeminist Natures*, Noel Sturgeon (1997) agrees with Ynestra King's assessment of ecofeminism as the "third wave" of the women's movement, but as a potentiality rather than an actuality. In other words, Sturgeon is suggesting that although an impressive body of research and vision exists within ecofeminism, there has been difficulty in closing the gap between vision and practice which helps lead to "radical political action" (Sturgeon, p. 23). This observation of Sturgeon's is particularly relevant to environmental education.

Despite the existence of a substantial ecofeminist body of theory, there has been very little written on ecofeminist perspectives on environmental education.¹ Peter Corcoran and Eric Sievers (1994) mention ecofeminism as one of the possible frameworks with which to reconceptualize environmental education. While they should be commended for adding to the very bare collection of writing on ecofeminism and environmental education, their analysis is brief and cursory. Corcoran and Sievers do acknowledge that most educational settings are male-centered, but they offer little insight into how environmental education might be transformed by ecofeminism. By only focusing on the connection between patriarchy and environmental degradation, educators trying to incorporate an ecofeminist analysis can

ignore the incredibly rich and sophisticated political and social critique present in much of ecofeminist theory.

Annette Gough (1997) has also pointed out that there has been little influence of ecofeminism on environmental education and suggests much as I do that ecofeminists have not addressed environmental education as a strategy for achieving their goals. I would also add that environmental educators have for the most part ignored ecofeminist work as potentially contributing to environmental education. This could be due to a number of reasons including the relative newness of ecofeminist theory and a failure of large portions of the environmental education field to focus on issues of gender, justice, and diversity. I believe that spiritual ecofeminism, in particular, has a lot of potential to positively influence a political environmental education that embraces diversity and holistic learning.

Greta Gaard (1998) describes ecofeminism as a mountain range or geography as a way to illustrate how women arrive at ecofeminist insights “through a variety of paths and perspectives” (p. 15). Looking at ecofeminism as a lake, Gaard portrays the various paths leading to the lake as streams flowing from the “feminist range” of radical feminism, socialist feminism, womanism, etc. In describing the feminist spirituality movement, Gaard makes sure to emphasize the stress placed by women’s spirituality on the interconnection of various forms of oppression and the resulting tendency to engage in movements such as disarmament and environmentalism. Because it is an important source for the “lake” of ecofeminism, I find it necessary to examine spiritual ecofeminism for its political potential but in doing so, take stock of the dangers and difficulties of integrating spirituality into environmental education.

Deep Ecology, Ecofeminism, Science, and Environmental Education

Deep ecology has remained on the fringes of environmental education but it has still had much more of an impact on environmental education than ecofeminism. Deep ecology is a complex movement within environmentalism. Embracing an ecocentric outlook by arguing for biospherical egalitarianism (deep respect for all lifeforms) deep ecology promotes diversity and complexity, local autonomy and decentralization as well as other principles that fall within a deep as opposed to shallow kind of environmentalism.² Despite deep ecology and ecofeminism having a history of critiquing each other, they also have a history of informing each other and even share several similarities. This is especially the case when it comes to earth based spirituality.

In his expansive collection on religion, nature, and the environment, Roger S. Gottlieb (1996) discusses aspects of spiritual deep ecology. Gottlieb investigates how, for deep ecologists, people's "selves" "are not bounded solely by individuality or social group, but are partly constituted by connections to and at times with the natural world" (p. 405). By not simply stressing the self as being constituted by individuality and/or social group, deep ecology is similar to other spiritual beliefs that, according to Gottlieb "deny the essential reality of the isolated ego" (p. 405). Although the spiritual orientations of deep ecology and ecofeminism differ, especially in terms of constructions of the self, the emphasis of both on deep connections with the natural world indicates some striking similarities. Michael Zimmerman (1993) argues that identifying with the cosmic whole does not preclude spiritual relationships with particular things. He maintains that particular relationships are an integral part of helping to nurture connections to a cosmic whole (p. 306). This assertion speaks to the tendency of ecofeminism to focus on particularity while deep ecology emphasizes universality and cosmic connections. If Zimmerman's claim is correct, if particular relationships are a necessary part of connecting to the cosmic whole, then spiritual deep ecology and spiritual ecofeminism may have more in common than it would appear at first glance.

While I will not restrict my analysis solely to ecofeminist spirituality, and will attempt to look at eco-spirituality more broadly, I will draw primarily on ecofeminist orientations of spirituality. I use a definition of spirituality inspired by Heather Eaton (1995). Eaton refers to spirituality not as "an other-worldly reality, but rather (a) Greek notion of *pneuma* meaning spirit or soul, and *spirit* coming from the Latin root 'to breathe'" (p. 29). Eaton sees spirituality as an intrinsic dimension of life. It refers to "deep, holistic knowledge of life, which evokes reverence and a sense of awe about the universe. Spirituality expresses something of the ineffable mystery of life" (p. 29). Eaton challenges treating spirituality as existing outside of time and space and argues that it exists "within cultural norms, symbols, expressions and politics of the day" (p. 29). Clearly then, a discussion of ecofeminist spirituality and an analysis of the role it plays, or can play in a politicized ecofeminist environmental education is not so out of place. In using Eaton's non-intrusive, almost secular definition, eco-spirituality can be seen as playing an important role in contesting other more dominant ways of viewing nature in environmental education, especially the view of positivistic science.

Science, Magic, and Environmental Education

Some of the most influential ideas about ecofeminism, politics and spirituality come from Starhawk (1990)³ who argues that earth based spirituality is rooted in three basic concepts she calls “immanence, interconnection, and community” (p. 73). The first concept Starhawk identifies in earth based spirituality is one that resonates through most of eco-spirituality. The notion of immanence not only suggests that the earth is dynamic and alive, but it submits that the sacred is the world, is us. Starhawk leaves the idea of the sacred open to many conceptualizations (Goddess, God, spirit, etc.) and argues that what form the sacred manifests as is not as important as how deep experiences offer a connection with the Earth and the world around us.

Starhawk’s (1990) conception of earth based spirituality is also one that attempts to undo the split between science and religion. The split disappears for Starhawk because “religion no longer becomes a set of dogmas and beliefs we have to accept even though they don’t make any sense, and science is no longer restricted to a type of analysis that picks the world apart” (p. 73). By challenging the split between science and religion, Starhawk conceives of a science that becomes a way of looking at the world more deeply and with more clarity. This kind of science is quite different than the science that currently influences environmental education.

Some environmental educators are beginning to challenge the authority and supremacy given to science within environmental education. The main thrust of the criticism of science based environmental education is that ecological concepts are often taught in what is couched as objective, neutral, and universal principles. Connie Russell, Anne Bell and Leesa Fawcett (in press) argue that science based environmental education “conceals the values, beliefs and assumptions which underlie information, creating an illusion of neutrality and anonymity” (in press). Ian Robottom (1991) has also been quite vocal in his criticism of the technocratic rationality he sees as underlying much of environmental education. Robottom argues that by framing environmental problems as technical matters, the strong political dimensions of environmental issues disappear. Technocratic rationality is expressed “not only in the pedagogy of environmental education (transmission of propositional knowledge) but also in the value free-images of ‘environment’ and ‘ecology’ that are taught” (p. 21). Robottom suggests that human interests (and I would include non-human interests) are overlooked when environmental problems are described only in scientific terms. By privileging the authority of science, one very particular form of knowledge becomes favoured and dominant. A kind of environmental education that incorporated a vision of science similar to that described by

Starhawk would see the environment as more interconnected and value based. This, I believe, would challenge the current forms of environmental education that are rarely self-reflexive about the role of science and technocratic rationality (see Russell et al., in press).

By focusing on interconnectedness, Starhawk (1990) makes room for a joining of politics, science, and the sacred. She calls this “building community.” “The goal is the creation of a community that becomes a place in which we can be empowered and in which we can be connected to the Earth and take action together to heal the Earth” (p. 74).

Starhawk’s focus on the principles of immanence, interconnection, and community leads to a collapse in the differentiation between the notion of action growing from spirituality and the notion of action growing from intellectual thought. Starhawk (1990) argues that the idea of the earth being alive “is becoming an acceptable intellectual philosophy” (p. 74). Pointing to the popularization of the Gaia hypothesis, Starhawk suggests that some scientists are unknowingly acknowledging what people in tribal cultures, Witches, shamans, and the like have been saying for years: the earth is alive.

The earth as a living entity, a feeling body, is an idea that is fundamental to Starhawk’s (1990) own spiritual tradition of Paganism (Wicca). This idea however is not limited to one particular tradition and can be found within many beliefs. Starhawk feels that pagan values and perspectives, while one of a number of earth based traditions, can make “important contributions to ecofeminist analysis and organizing” (p. 75). What I find particularly interesting about Starhawk’s analysis is how a pagan perspective influences political action. This politically charged magic is evident every year as a group of political Pagans converge onto Queen’s Park to rid it of the bad energy resulting from the conservative government as well as sending healing light and positive energy to the Ontario Legislature in an effort to change consciousness. Although the effectiveness of such an event can be called into question, many of the participants use the energy from such an event to fuel their political struggles after the affair.

Political pagans have also been active in recent struggles against globalization, organizing dozens of pagan centered “affinity groups”⁴ and public rituals during mass actions such as the shutdown of the World Trade Organization talks in Seattle.

Political Magic

Because Witches and Pagans practice magic and Starhawk (1990) defines magic as “the art of changing consciousness at will” (p. 76), there is an

important connection between magic and politics. Starhawk makes this connection quite explicitly by suggesting that changing consciousness on a mass scale can be a political manifestation of magic. What is appealing about Starhawk's conception of magic is that it focuses on self-transformation, or changing individual consciousness, but it also seems to acknowledge that not all change can be individual and not all magic manifests itself in the same way. Starhawk (1982) describes magic as being prosaic as in a lawsuit, a leaflet, or a demonstration; these actions all change consciousness. At the same time, magic can be esoteric involving a deepening awareness, psychic development, and heightened intuition. This has a personal dimension that Starhawk alludes to by looking at how political actions like leafleting and demonstrating can exist in hierarchical structures that promote "power-over."

Starhawk's (1982) conception of power is very different from popular uses of the word in contemporary western culture. Starhawk sees:

. . . power based on a principle very different from power-over, from domination. For power-over is, ultimately, the power of the gun and the bomb, the power of annihilation that backs up all the institutions of domination. Yet the power we sense in a seed, in the growth of a child, the power we feel writing, working, creating, making choices, has nothing to do with threats of annihilation. It has to do with the root meaning of the word power, from the (late popular) Latin, *podere* (to be able). It is the power that comes from within. (p. 3)

Starhawk (1982) talks about how there are many names used to describe power-from-within and she offers *spirit* and *Goddess* as two possibilities understanding that words such as *Goddess* make some people, especially those who identify as political, uneasy. For those who are not spiritual, the use of *Goddess* or *spirit* can be problematic so Starhawk maintains that political issues are in many ways also issues of the spirit, "conflicts between paradigms or underlying principles" (p. 4). The main question for Starhawk is not how to overthrow those presently in power but rather, how do we overthrow the principle of power-over? Starhawk's interest lies in figuring out how to shape a society based on the principle of power-from-within.

To use magic in politics could result in a discarding of hierarchical structures and power-over, in favour of immanence and understanding of the interconnectedness of all things. Magic as politics involves a whole series of moving energy, caring, connecting, and changing. Starhawk describes this as a paradox, where on one hand consciousness shapes reality, reality also shapes consciousness.

I like the paradox described by Starhawk because it can be used to acknowledge that consciousness is grounded in material and structural conditions without being deterministic. Starhawk's paradox gives agency to

individuals to change things but only within the scope of “conditioned reality.” There is room to move energy but the onus upon the liberal idea of the free and able individual is removed. The paradox is powerful and it is one that I think could effectively be incorporated into environmental education.

If Starhawk’s definition of magic is understood, the focus on individual *and* collective consciousness changing is full of potential. Starhawk’s approach of focusing on the individual as well as focusing on community is an approach that can be powerful in environmental education. Too often, environmental education fails to address how reality shapes consciousness. For example, programs like those found in Earth Education,⁵ focus on creating an ecological selfhood that is fully connected with the natural world without any regard for context or reality. In other words, although many strands of environmental education do focus on community, individual responsibility still ends up as the main focal point. Universalizing assumptions infer that everyone is in the same situation and thus ignores contexts. One cannot assume for example that the term “environment” is going to mean the same thing to all people. For a young woman growing up in a polluted community, health issues like breast cancer may be more relevant than issues of wilderness preservation. Learning how to lead civil disobedience actions or test for the presence of certain chemicals might be of greater importance than cosmic oneness or differentiating between different species of trees.

Although terms like “magic” and “spirituality” tend to make people uncomfortable, especially within the context of education, there may be room for magic and the sacred in an ecofeminist environmental education. Seeing science as being potentially non-positivistic and technocratic, a way of “looking more deeply at the earth as a living being” is spiritual. When education is seen to have magical possibilities that enhance its politicization, it does not seem so out of place to connect learning, magic, and politics.

Criticisms of Magic and Environmental Education

Some environmental theorists have a decidedly negative view of eco-spirituality and Murray Bookchin is one of the most vocal and harshest critics. Bookchin (1989), accuses eco-spirituality, specifically deep ecology and ecofeminism, of attempting to turn ecology into a religion by peopling the natural world with gods, goddesses, and wood sprites. Bookchin is scathing in his critique of eco-spirituality as uses terms like “appalling mixture of junk ideas,” “supernatural rubbish,” and “squalid ooze of atheistic religions” (p. 162) to describe and dismiss ideas and beliefs such as Starhawk’s. Bookchin

is particularly biting in his comments about theistic eco-feminism, which he sees as replacing male chauvinism with female chauvinism. Bookchin claims that “political engagement in this theistic terrain tends to shrivel from activism into quietism and from social organization into privatistic encounter-groups” (p. 162).

Bookchin’s (1989) criticisms of eco-spirituality are largely unsubstantiated lacking any real evidence or examples. Critics of ecological spirituality often fall into the “straw entity dilemma” where criticisms come from nowhere specific and are often in the form of ridicule. Bookchin fails to even consider the possibility of eco-spirituality and magic being political and therefore fails at bringing specific concerns about certain dangerous tendencies of eco-spirituality to light.

While Bookchin’s criticisms of environmental spirituality can be seen as an extreme, several theorists who identify themselves as ecofeminists have raised some concerns over tendencies in the spirituality movement to romanticize, objectify, and anthropomorphize nature. Concerns over the tendency of spiritual extensions of environmentalism to appropriate other cultural practices have also been raised (see Gaard, 1993; Eller, 1995).

Chaia Heller (1993) writes about how “nature idealism” can create a dangerously romantic view of the earth where romantic notions such as “idealization, protection and constraint” pervade (p. 223). Heller gives the example of designer buttons with pictures of the earth and attached slogans such as “Love our Mother.” In one particular example Heller cites a quotation which was included on the cardboard tag attached to the button which reads:

I hold in my mind a picture of perfection for Mother Earth.
I know this perfect picture creates positive energy from
my thought, which allows my vision to be manifested in the
world. (hooks in Heller, 1993, p. 199)

Heller (1993) finds such images problematic because the romantic “expresses his love through ‘perfect thoughts’ rather than through authentic knowledge or action” (p. 223). Not only is the perfected idea of the earth often seen as an insufficient expression of knowledge about nature, but Heller also argues that in romantic views of nature social contexts and plans for social action are often left out for fear of interrupting the romance.

Heller (1993) also points out the gender specificity of “Romancing Nature.” Not only is the romantic “unaware of woman’s capacity for self-assertion through sabotage and resistance” but Heller also sees romantic love as a “pitiful attempt to love and know another from behind the wall of domination” (p. 222). Further, since romantic love can be seen as sexist, extending romantic notions to nature and the earth is inherently a feminist

issue. Because environmental education is heavily influenced by ideas of earth as mother and humans as saviours, then the issue of romancing nature is relevant to environmental education.

I would argue that many manifestations of environmental education have been influenced by Gaia imagery (seeing the earth as alive, seeing the earth as a nurturing mother) and the cult of the romantic, and education inspired by deep ecology probably tends to be the most so. Heller (1993) talks about how the metaphors of deep ecology idealize nature. "Mother Earth and Mother Gaia reflect an idea of nature as the pure, ideal, all-giving woman for whom every ecologically minded knight should willingly risk his life" (p. 223).

As mentioned earlier, I feel that there is an important place for spirituality and magic within environmental education. To ignore the sacred and the magical connections one can develop with nature would be an unfortunate omission. The growth and development of holistic education, which argues for the importance of not only cognition but also, emotions, spirituality, and kinesiology as important aspects of the learning process. I see this development in education as promising; it makes room for the political possibilities of magic described by Starhawk. The idea of earth as alive is important in challenging the dominant positivist science paradigm that exists within environmental education yet environmental education needs to be careful and self critical in the process of incorporating spirituality into an environmental education pedagogy.

When environmental education applies romantic ideas of nature like those described by Heller (1993), it can engage in a process of depoliticization. Not only are dualisms of man/woman, nature/culture perpetuated thereby idealizing so called "feminine" traits, but the causes of environmental degradation and social injustice are masked. Ecofeminism generally rejects biologically reductive arguments about women being closer to nature not only because of its essentialist associations, but also because it reinforces the idea that women are inherently more nurturing and caring, and therefore in a better position to "clean up" the environment (see Sandilands, 1999).

Heller (1993) also suggests that romantic constraint further "increases alienation within society and between society and nature" (p. 227). Because humans are seen as a universal, homogeneous group, (except of course for the inherent traits of women being nurturing and closer to nature) an abstract notion of "humans" being responsible for environmental degradation fails to acknowledge the specificity of responsibility and contextualization of gendered (as well as classed, raced, and sexualized) individual situations.

I agree with Heller's (1993) call for a moratorium on female metaphors of nature such as "Mother Earth" but only within popular environmental-

ism. Heller calls for a complete moratorium, which, I believe is too broad and sweeping a demand that does not acknowledge cultural specificity. Several cultures have been using metaphors of, or similar to, "Mother Earth" for too long to dismiss them as entirely sexist. I do agree with Heller however that it is absurd to perpetuate an idea of loving "Mother Nature" when "motherhood in this culture is oppressive, devalued, and even despised" (p. 232). Environmental education then, must problematize dominant images of the earth as feminine and prevent ideologies of saving "her," saving a feminine nature to prevail. Environmental education would be better off incorporating social issues into its mandate and working in the struggle for women's liberation. This could be done by incorporating an advocacy approach to environmental education, using feminist and environmental justice issues as a basis in which to engage in action rather than romance.

Environmental education has in some ways already incorporated aspects of "spirituality" into its pedagogy. This has often been done through the unconscious use of Mother Earth imagery and romanticizing nature. This type of eco-spirituality can be problematic, especially from a politicized ecofeminist perspective. More traditional forms of environmental education on the other hand tend to treat the earth as dead matter to be quantified, controlled, and manipulated. Finding a place between these poles on the continuum then, could be promising.

The spirituality I see as working for the benefit of a politicized ecofeminist environmental education is one that not only sees the earth as alive and dynamic but is also a spirituality that focuses on the ability to change energy (consciousness) and perform magic. Spirituality that focuses on both individual and community, as well as agency and context, is one that is political. Where ecofeminism has tended to be split between political and spiritual orientations, political magic may be one attempt to heal the divisions as well as critically and thoughtfully engage in an environmental education that incorporates learning, magic, and politics.

Notes

¹ For some of what has been written on ecofeminism and environmental education, see C.L. Russell and A.C. Bell (1996), A.C. Bell and C.L. Russell (1999), L. Fawcett, d. marino, R. Raglon (1991) and G. Di Chiro (1987).

² Much has been written on deep ecology. See B. Devall and G. Sessions (1985), W. Fox (1990), A. Næss (1989), R. Nash (1982) to get a sampling of deep ecological theory.

³ Starhawk (1990) is a well known ecofeminist and Witch who has been a pioneer in the Feminist Spirituality movement as well as in the anti-nuclear struggle. Starhawk has been crucial, both as a scholar and as an activist, in bringing together spirituality and politics.

⁴ Affinity groups are used in large scale demonstrations to foster a sense of group kinship as well as to aid in an open, democratic decision making process.

⁵ Steve van Matre (1972) is adamant about distinguishing Earth Education from environmental education. Earth Education is centered on principles found in deep ecology and tends to be positioned as the “deep” answer to mainstream “shallow” environmental education. I have decided to take as broad as possible a definition of environmental education which includes Earth Education.

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my most sincere thanks to Leesa Fawcett, my undergraduate thesis supervisor and ecofeminist extraordinaire. Leesa is largely responsible for encouraging me to combine ecofeminism and environmental education and her comments and suggestions have been invaluable. I am also thankful to Cate Sandilands for encouragement and intellectual support and Connie Russell for her enthusiasm about my work.

Notes on Contributor

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