

Animism, Creativity, and a Tree: Shifting into Nature Connection through Attention to Subtle Energies and Contemplative Art Practice

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Abstract:

What can happen when the “monkey mind” of habitual conceptual thought is awakened to the more-than-human through attention to subtle energies and art-making? Drawing on autoethnographic methods, we demonstrate how one graduate student’s creative engagement with a tree brought animist theory to life. This paper illustrates how a combination of time-in-relation, the contemplative art-making practice of Creative Nature Connection, and special attention to subtle energies—the dark matter being addressed in this paper—can enable experiencing a tree as a sentient autonomous being. We address implications for environmental education and introduce easily doable principles for shifting into connection and opening to the unseen energy that connects all life.

Résumé

Que peut-il se passer lorsque notre “cerveau primate” de la pensée conceptuelle est éveillée au plus qu’humain par une attention aux énergies subtiles et aux processus artistiques? Avec l’auto-ethnographie comme approche méthodologique, nous démontrons comment l’engagement créatif d’une étudiante des cycles supérieurs avec un arbre a fait éclore une théorie animiste. Cet article illustre la manière dont la combinaison du temps-en-relation, d’une pratique contemplative du processus créatif « Creative Nature Connection », et d’une attention particulière aux énergies subtiles –la matière noire soulevée dans ce numéro permettent l’expérience de l’arbre comme entité autonome et sensible. Nous examinons quelles sont les conséquences pour l’éducation relative à l’environnement et introduisons des principes simples permettant l’ouverture et le désir de connecter avec l’invisible de l’énergie vitale.

Keywords: environmental education, subtle energy, eco-art education, animism, creativity, embodiment, relational ontology, contemplative art practice, Creative Nature Connection, nature connection

Introduction

Many educators and scholars in the environmental field suggest that a socially constructed human-nature dualism is at the heart of all environmental problems (e.g., Bai, 2009; Plumwood, 2002). This dualism separates humans from non-human others, establishing the universe as a collection of objects, rather than communion of subjects (Berry, 1988). In response, many environmental education practitioners and researchers have identified and advocated for the importance of “connection” with the more-than-human (e.g., Abram, 1996, 2010; Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2010; Cajete, 1999; Palmer, 1998; Sobel, 2008). Given the often intangible, embodied, and energetic nature of this connection, we cannot think our way into it. Connecting requires more than a simple change in thinking; it requires a shift in consciousness coupled with first-hand experience. Both, we argue, can be supported through a combination of time-in-relation with non-human others and creative practices that expand our awareness.

In this paper, we explore the roles of attention to subtle energies and contemplative art-making in shifting us into nature connection. We begin by explaining our methodology and locating ourselves as researchers and practitioners, then provide some background on subtle energies and nature connection. We then briefly describe the graduate course context of Michelle’s experiences before turning the paper over to her autoethnographic writing, artwork, and reflections. We close the paper by summarizing key learning from Michelle’s story, and sharing implications for environmental education practice.

To illustrate how a combination of time-in-relation, the contemplative art-making practice of Creative Nature Connection, and special attention to subtle energies enabled this student to experience a tree as a sentient autonomous being, we chose to draw on the reflexivity of autoethnographic writing. Autoethnography is particularly appropriate because of its ability to challenge discourses (Ellis, 2004) and provide a voice for individuals and ideas traditionally left out of social sciences (Ellis, 2004; Muncey, 2010). By opening doorways to the intimate lived experiences of the lead author, this methodology provides space for subjugated knowledges and ways of knowing “that dominant culture neglects, excludes, represses, or simply fails to recognise” (Muncey, 2010, p. 44). Michelle’s story, which appears in the middle of the paper, illustrates how opening to the subtle energies of a tree challenges the materialist subject-object dualism that has provided a convenient fit for Western frameworks of knowing and being which still dominate much environmental education practice. This paper is a combination of our collective voices and ideas. Michelle Flowers has a Master’s degree from the University of Saskatchewan and is an artist and alternative health practitioner. Lisa Lipsett is an artist and educator who has developed the Creative Nature Connection practice that Michelle worked with. M.J. Barrett designed and instructed the course from which this manuscript emerged. We are all sustained by spiritual connections to earth. All of us are white. Lisa and M.J. are settler Canadians, and Michelle, a transplanted Australian.

Subtle Energies and Nature Connection

The notion of subtle energies may provide an essential key to understanding the animated perception and participatory consciousness inherent in nature connection (Bai, 2009, 2013). As Bai (2013) notes, a focus on “the perceiver experiencing the whole world/earth as vibrating and pulsing with *qi* ... promises to be very helpful” (n.p.) for moving beyond dualistic thinking. While the presence of subtle energy is recognized in many cultures: for example, *qi/ki* in China and Japan; *prana* in India; *atua* in Maori; *gana* in South America; *mana* in Pacific civilizations; *wakan* in Lakota (Wilber, 2006); there is no one specific term that is used within western traditions (Kaptchuk, 2000). The lack of western academic consensus regarding its very existence, and the challenge of finding a language to describe it, relegates the knowledge gained from using modalities that profess to work with subtle energies as naive, impossible, and often, inconsequential (Flowers, 2014). To illustrate this problem, Maciocia (1989) in *Foundations of Chinese Medicine* explains that *qi* is something that is both material and immaterial at once, and that its fluid and transformational nature eludes description when utilizing a language based in western Cartesian dichotomy. Further, Levin (2011) in his exploration of energy healers (alternate medical practitioners that utilize these subtle energies in their healing work) describes *qi* as a circulating subtle energy or life force—ever present, yet unseen. Because of its ethereal nature, its frequent association with things “new age” or “flakey,” and its misalignment with the dualistic nature of modern western thought, discussion of subtle energies is seldom included in environmental education (See Bai, 2013, for a notable exception).

Natural History Journal¹ and Contemplative Art Practice

Michelle’s experience took place in response to a reflective journaling assignment in a graduate-level elective course, ENVS 811: Multiple Ways of Knowing in Environmental Decision-Making, taught at the University of Saskatchewan.² The course is designed to support students’ investigation into different ways of knowing. Part of the course entails exploration of the potential of an “animist turn” in epistemology, human-nature relations, and environmental education. Situated in the context of an interdisciplinary graduate program in environment and sustainability, the course readings and activities invite students to investigate the notion that humans may exist physically, spiritually, and energetically in relation with other-than-human beings (i.e., a “relational ontology”). Students also critically examine discourses and knowledge hierarchies that make engaging such relationality difficult, impossible, or unbelievable (Barrett, 2011). This one-semester course engages aspects of both decolonization and reinhabitation (Greenwood, 2013), focusing in particular on how colonization has resulted in narrowly framed understandings of how a person—whether Indigenous or not—can come to know and be in a place (see Bai, 2009; Barrett & Wuetherick, 2012).

To support experiential engagement in the twinned acts of decolonization and reinhabitation (Greenwood, 2013), a core course assignment entitled “the natural history journal” invites students to move beyond *thinking about* nature to *embodied engagement with* a natural being. Following Bai (2009), students are encouraged to move beyond habitual conceptual thought to open awareness, allowing “reanimation of our numbed perceptual consciousness so that the earth appears to us in full sentience and presence” (p. 136). According to Bai (2013, drawing on Appelbaum, 1995), such an opening requires the stop: “an event, a movement in one’s experience wherein the automaticity of thought comes to a halt and gives away to an embodied awareness” (n.p.; see also Bai, 2003). Expanding on Fawcett, Bell and Russell (2002), the intention of the natural history journal assignment is to invite students into a lived experience of connection, leading to a restored ecological or participatory consciousness (Bai, 2009; Conn, 2007).

Students are asked to *slow down* and pay attention to direct experience. This supports them to open and allow themselves “to be chosen by a natural being” (Conn, 2007, n.p.; Conn & Conn, 2009). This being could be anything: perhaps a tree, the wind, a river, a stone, or an animal. Students spend approximately 20-30 minutes with their being at least three times a week. To assist them with the journal assignment they are introduced to Creative Nature Connection (CNC), a hands-on contemplative drawing and painting practice that is sense-based, intuitive, feeling-centered, and embodied, supporting a shift from thinking about nature to strengthening direct engagement (Lipsett, 2013). When following the CNC Create Cycle, students set an intention; ask for permission to connect; direct their attention to breath, energy, and direct sensory engagement; tune in to another being and create; let images and nature speak; express gratitude; write down what they notice or wonder about; and reflect on process and images over time. Students follow the guidance of their hands and intuitive knowing as they engage in creative interaction with their natural being. They paint with fingertips directly on the page using both hands simultaneously, and paint or draw with their left hand (to access right-brain processing), sometimes with eyes open, sometimes closed. CNC brings attention to more than one sense at the same time and balances sight (a dominant sense for many) with sound and touch to awaken fresh ways to connect.

In addition to CNC, students are encouraged to both engage in their own previously acquired practices and to try new ones, including sketching, photography, meditation, poetry, and documentation of physical observations. Recording intuitive perceptions, reflective insights, and empirical observations are all encouraged. At the same time as they are engaging in these activities on their own, students are also reading and discussing a wide range of academic literature and listening to the teachings of First Nations Elders.³

As part of their final exam, students write a synthesis of their natural history journal experiences where they are asked to: (a) provide a summary

of their experiences; (b) draw on course teachings, readings, class discussions, student seminars, and guest presentations to propose a theoretical explanation for some of their experiences; and (c) discuss implications of the above for future personal and professional contexts or their planned research study. The journal assignment both supports the embodied experience and provides a space for reflection and exploration of how connections change over time. The synthesis follow-up provides a window into meaning and significance. Each student begins at their own starting point regardless of past experience. Yearly, students identify the journaling activities as providing a concrete experience of perspectives that they would otherwise be just hearing or reading about—ideas they might conceptually grasp but not internally know, have an opportunity to experience first-hand, or understand at a personal level.

Connecting with “Blue”

We turn now to Michelle’s autethnographic account of art-making in connection with a Colorado blue spruce tree to explore how her ability to access and experience subtle energies can further our collective thinking about how to move toward more participatory human-nature relationships.

And you my tree friend, you now walk the earth with every step that I take. You have grown legs because you now reside within my heart. (Journal entry, 8 December, 2011)

Let me introduce you to my friend Blue—a Colorado blue spruce. His roots are embedded in my neighbour’s yard, yet he hangs over our fence providing a shady canopy in the summer and protection from the cold when it snows. His needles are silvery blue/grey with hints of sage depending on the season’s light. These colours and tones shift and change as he takes on the various garbs of his different moods. When I look towards his uppermost branches, I notice a raw missing void: the result of a vicious storm that blew through two years ago. In response, there is an intensity of surging growth as the remaining upper limbs vie for the position of tallest point.

As I sat with Blue for a semester, sketching, painting, journaling and meditating, a story of our relationship emerged. This story may not be your story, it might not reflect your beliefs or persuasions, your truth or your ontological leanings, however it is a glimpse into what is possible when the grip on an absolute truth is released and unfamiliar realities are welcomed in.

From the very beginning of the natural history journal process, I struggled to find an authentic pronoun for Blue in my reflective writing. Using “it” failed to encompass the depth of connection that I was already feeling for my new friend.



I feel the acknowledgement of the spirit of this tree... I feel "it" bow its head in silent acknowledgment—a smile [of] warmth and friendliness. (Journal entry, 8 September, 2011)

Figure 1. Still reaching upwards. 6 November, 2011



As I pondered the limitations of the English language to describe a being that exists beyond gender, I sensed an older, grandfather energy, gentle and patient, quiet and ready to teach. I was reminded of my own grandfather, so in memory of him and in honour of this new friend, I took up the pronoun “he,” fully acknowledging that this wasn’t exactly correct either. It wasn’t long after, that the name “Blue” came into being as a response to my desire for a more intimate way to identify him.

Figure 2. Art-making with Blue. 27 November, 2011

As an artist, I was eager to explore the creative invitation that was extended as part of the natural history journal instructions, and therefore I jumped right into the CNC process. When I experimented with drawing while my eyes were closed I found that my awareness gravitated towards the subtle energies I could feel radiating from Blue. With a focus on these sensations, I began to express them on the page before me, my hand moving in sweeping gestures that were fluid and unrestrained.



I drew this image straight away, letting my pen move and dance across the page wherever it felt like moving. With my eyes closed, the inside of his trunk looked like it was full of flames and the intensity and light that I saw showed me how alive and vibrant Blue really is. Perhaps this is his true self: a glowing, ethereal magical being, masquerading as an earth-bound tree. (Journal entry, 21 September, 2011)

Figure 3. Inside my tree. 21 September, 2011



Figure 4. Closed eyes, left-hand connection.
21 September, 2011



Figure 5. Closed eyes, right-hand connection.
21 September, 2011

Encouraged by the creative permission and freedom I experienced when I drew with my eyes closed, I undertook other CNC activities enthusiastically. When I painted with my fingers directly on the paper, using both my dominant and non-dominant hand, I was enthralled by the physical sensations of the paint on my skin. I could feel the tacky texture of the pigment—wet enough to fill the ridges of my fingerprints and aching to be set free on the paper. When I placed my hand on the bare white page, I closed my eyes and released control of my hands. As they moved in a dance of textures and colour, I inhaled deeply and revelled in the freedom that I felt. The result was more than just a visual representation of Blue—I was expressing the movement of his branches in the wind and the light that shone from the sun, warming up each individual spruce needle: sensations that I had just felt when I closed my eyes and watched the division between the two of us dissolve.



If I close my eyes and feel the connection and link between the two of us ... I feel my fingers as outstretched tree limbs and pine needles. I am growing into the spinning blue ether of the Saskatchewan sky. (Journal entry, 28 September, 2011)

Figure 6. Left-hand impressions. 28 September, 2011

Although this assignment was undertaken in a suburban neighbourhood, I often found myself enveloped by a feeling of calmness; a reaction I usually have when I am out of the city spending time in the forest. This feeling of tranquility was something that I greatly appreciated as a balm to the typical stresses of graduate studies. When I sat outside with Blue, I felt my heart rate drop and my anxiety replaced by feelings of serenity and peace. In sitting with my friend and quieting my mind, I was able to observe the slower pace of this tree spirit and feel love and reverence for this regal being.

I'm struck with a calmness in my heart...By giving attention and thoughts of love—I instantly receive them back. (Journal entry, 18 October, 2011)

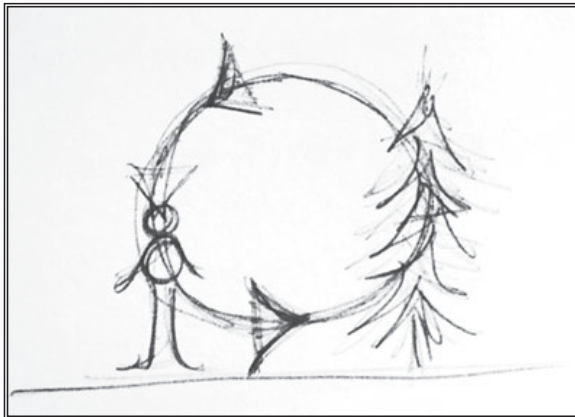


Figure 7. Sharing energy. 9 October, 2011

In order to vary my experiences and the observations I was recording in my journal, I also sat outside with Blue in the evening, reflecting on the distinctive sensations that came with the changing light. As the day slowly waned and the night sounds came alive, I learned that when I sat and experienced the natural world in connection with Blue, my senses were more attuned. I could smell the turning of the seasons on the cool night breeze and feel the chill of winter's approaching touch, flicking at my cheek.

It's immediate—the difference in smells and sounds when sitting outside at night. Everything has a getting-ready-for-winter kind of smell. [It reminds me] of the recognition of the seasons that comes with a life focused on nature. (Journal entry, 1 October, 2011)

Deepening our Relationship

The core of the tree is like a giant glowing heart—emanating energy—circular, expansive, beyond the physical—outward, engulfing, light, glowing, energetic, ethereal. (Journal entry, 26 November, 2011)

The moment when I experienced a clear and unmistakable example of Blue's autonomy and sentience occurred when my mind was focused on my own inner thoughts, as opposed to my connection with Blue. On this one particular morning I found myself outside my back door, pacing back and forth in frustration. An unexpected house guest was distracting me from deadlines and making my usual study space uninhabitable. As my anxiety rose, goading me to the brink of tears, I sat below the branches of my friend, wondering what I would do about this stressful situation. With my thoughts focused on my growing tension, I was interrupted as clearly as if a hand had been placed on my shoulder. I felt

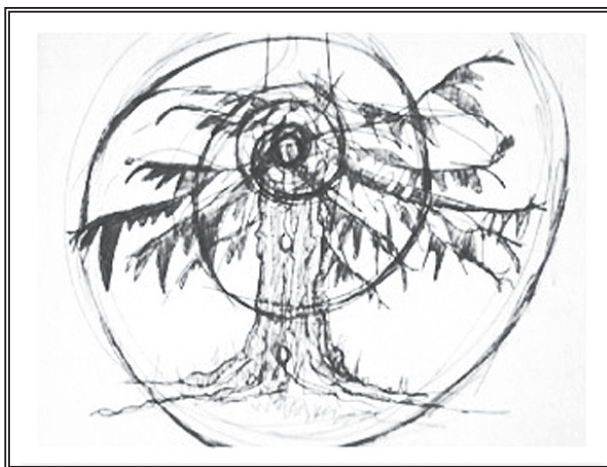


Figure 8. Beautiful bark. 25 October, 2011

an energetic outpouring of love and support flowing towards me from the open heart of Blue, pushing away my anxiety and calming my nerves. In that instant I was overwhelmed by the intensity of this experience and I realized that his energy had been entirely unsolicited and unexpected. The love that I could feel pouring towards me was so obviously flowing from Blue that it broke through the tumultuous thoughts and stress that had, only moments before, been overwhelming me.

I'm fully washed over with peace all of a sudden—it starts in my heart and I feel my whole body react. My shoulders drop their tension, my breathing deepens and slows [and] after a noticeable sigh, I feel still. (Journal entry, 31 October, 2011)

It was in this instance that I became fully aware of the independent life standing right in front of me. I realized this truth profoundly and was moved by its immediacy. It was as if all of the theory that I have learnt about our intimate connection with nature was confirmed by my physical experience and unquestionable awareness of this deeply supportive relationship.

I feel love and beauty and joy flow from Blue to me and with it, my own gratitude that I have witnessed his energy as a unique and sentient being—alive and powerful—a being just like ourselves. (Journal entry, 2 November, 2011)

As the semester moved on and my relationship with Blue deepened, I found my art-making activities continued to provide opportunities for me to experience



I sent my attention out to my tree and felt his core. [It was] a single vein of glowing light running through the centre, luminous and [radiant]. Then I found this same core reflected [and flowing through] me. (Journal entry, 16 November, 2011)

Figure 9. Veins of Gold. 16 November, 2011

Blue's autonomous spirit directly. By opening to these creative processes it was as if I was instantly plugging myself in and connecting with him. Because these art-making practices came with inherent instructions to release and let go of my often critical/thinking/planning mind, I stepped outside of my typical artistic mindset. I discovered that in releasing my attachment to the final product, my awareness became centred on the process. As I gave myself permission to open to the flow of creativity, I also became aware of the subtle energies I had previously only associated with my alternate healing practice.

When I turned my attention and inner awareness towards Blue I could feel him in his totality, a golden glowing creature—so much more than his earthbound form.

It was during these creative experiences with Blue and my subsequent reflection on them that I felt the most excitement and surprise. Although I believed the theory of an animate earth, personally experiencing and feeling the independent unique spirit of Blue allowed me to truly understand the agency of the natural world.

I directly credit this to the direct experiences. They bring it home—they make it real. It takes the theory and makes the understanding of it deeper. (Journal entry, 7 December, 2011)

Reflections

I received many precious gifts from spending time in relationship and art-making with Blue. Reflecting on my experience with the CNC process and the resulting paintings and drawings revealed that my creative knowing was way ahead of my linear logical mind. More than once during this journal process and the CNC practice I simultaneously realized something new yet felt that I had known it all along. The colours and forms in the images held what I felt but did not yet have words for, something that Taylor (1998) so eloquently describes as unconscious or “not yet speech ripe” (p. 263).

Blue showed me that when I drop out of my thinking mind and focus on my deep inner awareness, the world around me opens up as the rich interconnected community that I know it to be. By paying attention to what I feel beyond the typical boundaries of my daily awareness, I was able to connect with sensations that usually pass by unnoticed. When I jumped right into the possibilities offered by spontaneously painting with my fingertips directly on the page, it was as if I was given permission to throw myself into a pool whose waters I had previously only been allowed to wade in, ankle deep. When I undertook creative activities where my eyes were closed or I was using my non-dominant hand, I was able to focus my attention on the process of creating art rather than a polished final product. In giving myself permission to create without concern for the outcome, I was able to give my full attention to the embodied sensations that were accompanying the art-making. Not only was this liberating as an artist, it provided me with new tools to connect with the subtle energies I usually feel when I am practising my healing work.

As an alternative health practitioner, my familiarity in working with subtle energy made it a natural focus not only of my interactions with Blue, but also of many of my drawings and paintings. It was my experiences of these subtle perceptions that truly helped me fully understand an animist way of being in the world. While I had previously experienced these subtle energies as a part of my understanding of human health, my time-in-relation with Blue allowed me to feel this same lifeforce emanating from an individual tree. Although I have had experiences where I have felt the living sacredness of the land before, the difference with my experience during this semester was the autonomous way Blue's healing energy flowed towards me. Before that morning it had never occurred to me that a tree was an individual living entity that I could commune *and* create with, or one that I would be able to call my friend.

Implications for Environmental Education

Michelle's autoethnographic story is particularly instructive for examining subtle energy as a "dark matter" in environmental education. As an artist and alternate health practitioner who works with subtle energies, Michelle already utilized intuition as a tool in her art-making process. Exposure to the CNC practice, however, sparked fresh creative energy in her artwork and introduced her to novel tools and activities that provided a new way to shift into and remain in connection. Her final synthesis assignment, coupled with new considerations while we were writing this paper 18 months later, provides important reflections on both the process and outcome of building a relationship with a "natural being" by opening to subtle energy directly and through contemplative art-making. What is missing from our field is a thorough exploration of how attention to these ever-present, unseen phenomena can help us be more deliberate in how we teach shifting into connection. For Michelle, attending to subtle energies moved her "beyond her general connection and love of nature" to a place where she was able to "know an individual tree spirit and understand the ramifications of that experience" (personal communication, November 7, 2013).

This leads us to five implications for environmental education. All are related to moving beyond human-nature dualism, toward nature connection characterized by participatory consciousness:

1. the importance of time-in-relation;
2. the significance of attention to subtle energies;
3. insights into how contemplative art-making can support opening to subtle energies and a participatory consciousness;
4. the need for nature connection programming to be flexible to accommodate multiple ways to know, and
5. the importance of looking to fields outside our own—like energy healing and contemplative art practices—for ways to strengthen nature connection.

To experience nature connection requires a shift of consciousness, supported by practices that connect (Bai, 2009, 2013; Conn & Conn, 2009). Some of the pivotal characteristics that help us realize and hold a shift into connection are: spontaneity, in-the-moment presence, receptivity, actively using more than one sense simultaneously, following what attracts, cultivating joy and wonder, giving shape and colour to our experiences, and opening our hearts.

Many scholars and educators emphasize the potential of art-making to support such a connection (Bai, 2003; Inwood, 2008; Lipsett, 2013; London, 2003; Sweeney, 2013; van Boeckel, 2013). However, even though intimacy and deep connection can be strengthened from practices like the solo and sit-spot (Cohen, 1997; Young, Haas, & McGown, 2010), most nature-art initiatives neglect to provide for a repeatable pattern of engagement over time (Bai, 2003; Lipsett, 2009). As Michelle states: “I do not believe that I would have experienced what I did if I had only sat with him once a week.” Moving from eco-art activities into the realm of contemplative art practice requires a depth of connection that deepens over time.

Our human ability to make sustainable, connected environmental decisions, so that we may live and work in harmony with nature, depends on our capacity to open to moments when we listen and let Earth teach (Cohen, 1997). Many argue that we are hard-wired for opening and connecting (e.g., Abram, 1996; Bai, 2013). As educators, when we trust this innate capacity we strengthen belonging, hope, and resilience, in ourselves and our students. Creating with nature just may be “our healing medicine” (Bai, 2003, p. 39). By bringing ourselves out from our enclosed world of human verbiage, we can then tune in to nature’s creative energetic language (Abram, 1988). Opening to subtle energy and the creative process itself supports the development of empathy, perspective taking, creative problem-solving, a capacity for ambiguity, and understanding of multiple ways to know—all considered key capacities for nature connection. Some, like Michelle, who are trained in alternative healing modalities, can also experience that connection through an awareness of subtle energies. The contemplative practice of CNC, coupled with Michelle’s unique intuitive and energy skills, provide one example of how nature speaks to each of us differently, and how our individual sensitivities, skills, and perceptions allow us to connect in diverse ways, making this story of art-making with a tree both unique yet illustrative of a process anyone can follow. Michelle’s story also highlights how important it is that the nature connection practices we develop are flexible, allowing for varied individual entry points, supporting personal exploration and discovery, and encouraging multiple ways to build lasting relationships with the natural world that draw on knowledge gained from fields outside our own.

Regardless of what we believe, art-making done with an intention to connect, whether focused on subtle energies or on empathic attunement (Gablik, 1991) and practiced for all life’s sake (Lipsett, 2001) helps us to transition from our thoughts about things to direct felt experience. If a spruce tree or other “natural being” is expected to be a “subject” rather than “object” (Berry, 1988), then

the kind of relationship one can have with that being expands. As Abram (1996) suggests, by attending to our experiences “not as intangible minds but as sounding, speaking bodies, we begin to sense that we are heard, even listened to, by the numerous other bodies that surround us” (p. 86). Even if we believe that a tree is not sentient, we can still experience a marvellous co-creative exchange simply by setting the intention to connect, and shifting into our senses, intuition, and feelings (Harding, 2006). By shifting into creative energy to connect with the more than human, we address a significant blind spot in environmental education (Sandri, 2013). The usually unseen, untouched, and unheard is given its rightful role as a source of wisdom and sustenance.

Notes

- ¹ Many thanks to Leesa Fawcett, Ann Bell, and Connie Russell for developing the core elements of the Natural History Journal assignment.
- ² See Barrett 2011, Barrett & Wuetherick, 2012.
- ³ Thank you to Saulteaux/Ojibwe Elder Danny Musqua and Vuntut Gwich'in Elder Randall Tetlichy for their invaluable contributions to the course over the years.

Notes on Contributors

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