Singing the Spaces: Artful Approaches to Navigating the Emotional Landscape in Environmental Education

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Abstract

This paper briefly explores the gap in the environmental education literature on emotions, and then offers a rationale and potential directions for engaging the emotions more fully, through the arts. Using autoenthnographic and arts-based methods, and including original songs and invitational reflective questions to open spaces for further inquiry and experiential engagement, several approaches are presented to foster emotional resilience as a preparation for mature adulthood and soulful action in the world, for both students and educators. Embodied, contemplative, and creative practices enable the exploration and expression of feelings, needs, desires, and experiences of being in relationship—with ourselves, each other, and the natural world; through direct experience and non-judgemental observation, potential arises for fresh insight, leading to creative and innovative solutions, and actions motivated by awareness, courage, and compassion.

Résumé

Cet article aborde succinctement le manque d'écrits sur l'émotionnel dans le domaine de l'éducation à l'environnement. Il expose également un argumentaire en faveur de l'intégration accrue de cette dimension par l'entremise des arts, ainsi que des idées à explorer en ce sens. On y décrit plusieurs approches basées sur l'autoethnographie et l'utilisation des arts, dont certaines consistent à composer des chansons ou à lancer des questions dans le but d'amorcer une réflexion et d'encourager le questionnement et l'expérimentation, dans une démarche qui s'adresse autant aux élèves qu'aux éducateurs et qui vise à accroître la résilience émotionnelle pour façonner des adultes avertis prêts à s'engager dans le monde avec conviction et sensibilité. Les pratiques favorisant la création, la contemplation et l'expression corporelle permettent d'explorer et d'exprimer les sentiments, les besoins et les désirs, et d'entrer en relation avec soi-même, les autres et la nature; grâce aux expériences concrètes et à l'observation sans jugement, une nouvelle vision peut alors émerger et engendrer des solutions créatives et novatrices, de même que des actions empreintes de lucidité, de courage et de compassion.

Keywords: environmental education, emotions, holistic, contemplative, arts-based, autoethnography

Context and Rationale

We are living in an exciting time. There are many social and ecological challenges to face, and thus many opportunities for transformation, learning, and growth. However, even though human activities are increasingly understood to be both direct and indirect causes of ecological degradation, many people still perceive there to be a distinct line between themselves and the more-than-human world (Abram, 1996). There is a clear disconnect here. And as long as this misperception and associated behaviours persist, we will remain at odds with the ecological processes on which our lives depend (Capra, 2007; Orr, 1994; Puk, 2011; Sobel, 2004; Suzuki, 2002). This disconnect is not merely from the natural world, however; in a society focused on the material and external, the inner world is often neglected as well (Fisher, 2002; Plotkin, 2008). And any treatment of environmental issues must involve not only the world "out there," but also the world "in here" (Hughes, 1991); there is a great need for education research and pedagogies that will foster holistic self-awareness as part of ecological awareness, in all areas of education, for students and educators alike. A holistic approach to education is one that acknowledges and validates all of the various ways of knowing and being that stem from each aspect of our whole selves (Forbes, 1996; Miller, 2005). This includes making space for the realms of emotions, spirit, and soul. I recognize that the words spirit and soul are somewhat ambiguous. As I use the words, "spirit" refers to the intangible—and yet often sensed in some way—connection to that which is greater than oneself; "soul" makes reference to the particular beingness, inner knowing, and distinct unfolding of each unique person, whether evident or mysterious. I am intentionally choosing to not define these words more fully, and instead invite you to bring your own understanding of the words spirit and soul as you read the thoughts and references shared here.

Many critical visionaries have called for a great re-imagining, re-humanization, re-sacralization, and re-inhabitation of the world (Bai, 2003; Berry 1999; Gruenewald 2003; Hawken 2007), and of the education systems that are positioned to support this work (Bai, 2009; Plotkin, 2008; Weston, 2007). Plotkin (2008) suggests that the social and ecological crises we face are the result of halted human development, and that greater attention to the human maturation process is essential to bring about a paradigm shift from an ego-centric way of being to an eco- and soul-centric consciousness. For this shift to be complete, it needs to be embodied, not merely understood through intellectual analysis. As a tradition that frequently draws on experiential education techniques—specifically, direct embodied experience and reflective processing—environmental education is well positioned to play an important role in this shift.

Plotkin (2008) suggests that an ecologically conscious and responsible society requires the participation of authentically mature adults and genuinely wise teachers and elders who are living from an eco- and soul-centric consciousness. As Plotkin observes, "Our cultural resources have been so degraded over

the centuries that the majority of humans in 'developed' societies now never reach true adulthood" (p. 7), and it is our pathologically adolescent world that is responsible for the ecological, cultural, and spiritual crisis we now experience. (There are a lot of value-laden terms in that reference. Notice what they evoke or provoke for you as you read. Are you aware of what emotions are alive within you right now?) Plotkin goes on to remind us that

> viable cultural systems have always been sourced in the soul-rooted revelations, visions, and dreams of those with the courage to wander across the boarders into exotic psychospiritual realms, those like Crazy Horse, Ghandi, Jesus, and Buddha, and the equally inspiring but (in a patho-adolescent society) less-celebrated visionary women such as Mother Teresa, Hideagard von Bingen, and Wangari Maathai. (2008, p. 9)

The visionaries mentioned above knew who they were at the deepest level, and were able to stay connected to this sense of self in an uncompromising way through challenge and adversity. While the scope of their impact sets them apart, their rootedness in a profound and holistic sense of self—a soul connection and knowing—is what we need to foster and encourage in students and adolescents of all ages, as well as seek to develop and embody in ourselves as educators. This process is best facilitated through a personal journey of soul discovery, as either a spontaneous process, or as a formal rite of passage that marks the transition from adolescence to an adulthood that is ecologically and spiritually conscious, and Plotkin (2003, 2008) recognizes the vision quest as a contemplative and nature-based example of this sort of ritual soul journey that has both ancient and contemporary expression. Drawing on Berry (1999), Plotkin suggests that "through an individual's initiatory time in the underworld of soul, she uncovers a dream, a vision, or a revelation that will 'inspire, guide, and drive the action for the rest of life'…and provides the energy for adult action" (2008, p. 8). However, the vision quest is also not an experience to be taken lightly, and Plotkin offers that "entry into the life of the soul demands a steep price, an ordeal, a psychological form of dying" or death of ego (p. 12).

There are many critical considerations with contemporary vision quests (Cajete, 2000; Martinez, 2004; Norris, 2011; Ridington, 1982; Suler, 1990), and the vision quest itself is not what I intend to address in this paper, as not everyone will be drawn to or have opportunity to undertake this particular initiatory experience. Rather, I offer this example to highlight that the success of any soul initiation process requires a stable and grounded sense of self as a starting place, as well as adequate skillful preparation, guidance, and support (Davis, 2003; Fleischer, 2005; Plotkin, 2008). Soul encounter experiences can facilitate coming to know oneself both as a unique individual, as well as a humble self-in-relation to all life, and yet they are initiatory and confirmatory experiences, rather than preparatory ones (Foster & Little, 1989). Specifically, I am identifying the need to address emotions and emotional resilience as part of this adequate preparation, and suggesting the potential for environmental education to contribute toward this, both through the content and experiences we offer

to students, and through the awareness work we do within ourselves as educators that enables us to express as more mature adults and skillful role models. As Palmer (2007) affirms, we teach who we are. By taking a holistic approach to environmental education—one that acknowledges not only the physical and intellectual, but also the emotional, and the subtle experiences connected with spirit and soul—we can help prepare students for more psychologically mature engagement with the world, and develop the capacities needed for a soul initiation process for those who may seek this. This involves coming to know oneself deeply, as the sages of all wisdom traditions have encouraged. In a truly holistic approach to environmental education, to know oneself is not only to know about oneself in relationship with the external environment, but to be equally familiar with one's own inner landscape and experiences – including thoughts, emotions, desires, and needs—as they express in the body-mind-soul, in place, in relationship, and in community.

Emotions in Environmental Education: Context and Opportunity

To date, the theme of emotions has received only limited attention in the environmental education literature. In 1995, Tilbury suggested that the new direction for environmental education, as education for sustainability, be characterized as relevant, holistic, values-oriented, issues-based, action oriented, and critical. In this case, holistic referred to a more holistic outlook on problems, with reference to the environment, development, approach to learning, and approach to development of the whole person. Surprisingly, however, while many areas of experience were named—social, historical, aesthetic, creative, linguistic, literature, mathematical, moral physical, scientific, spiritual, and technological (Tilbury, 1995)—the dimension of emotions was not referred to, either in approaches to education and experience, or with regard to the development of the whole person.

Others have referred specifically to emotions in environmental education. Pooley and O'Connor (2000) found that emotions and beliefs, rather than knowledge, are a more effective base for environmental education aimed at changing environmental attitudes. MacPherson (2011) examined the possibilities of human-animal companionship for developing and deepening our emotional lives and empathic capacity. Ojala (2012) investigated the emotion of hope, and found that not only is hope a pleasant feeling, especially in environmental education regarding climate change, but that it could also be a pathway to engagement, if it is not founded on denial. Hope becomes a positive motivational force, Ojala offers, when it comes from the re-appraisal of the situation that accompanies positive news, a sense of expanding awareness about the issues, and a sense that one is not alone. At the other end of the emotional spectrum, Otieno et al. (2014) found that negative emotions, and higher perceived risk, arose from a sensationalistic style of environmental education information sharing, even

though that approach also appeared to enhance general learning outcomes. Reis and Roth (2009) had also touched on this, suggesting that beyond emotional responses being simply a natural outcome of effective environmental education, emotion discourses are an effective means to actually realize the pedagogical aims of environmental education. They also acknowledged the prevalent gap in the environmental education discussion regarding emotions, and attribute it to environmental education research being focused on the cognitive and behaviorist (disembodied) aspects of ecological knowing, with a tendency to privilege approaches to learning and instruction *in* and *about* the environment that are primarily statistical in nature. Clearly the emotions are an area to consider more thoroughly in an environmental education context.

Ojala (2012) suggests that it is important to help young people deal with the negative emotions that arise when faced with environmental education topics such as climate change, and, as mentioned above, to offer hope as an antidote. I would like to further explore how we might help students *respond* to their emotions. When uncomfortable emotions arise as we investigate the challenging topics that environmental education tends to address (such as pollution, deforestation, species extinction, etc.), can we equip students to respond to these emotions—within themselves and in others—with awareness, courage, and compassion? Can we guide them to look beneath the surface emotions to the deeper human needs and soul longings that are being revealed? Can we invite them to set down old, familiar strategies and open to the creative solutions that emerge when in non-judgemental contact with these deeper needs? Will we demonstrate these capacities in our own response to our emotions as they arise? I suggest that it is through becoming comfortable with our own emotional landscape and creative capacity, and through modeling this for our students with our own speech and actions, that we can best support them to develop this same ability. In what follows, I will explore a few perspectives and techniques toward this end, drawn from traditions outside environmental education.

Often informed by teachings from ancient wisdom traditions, modern approaches to contemplative practice (Bai, 2003; Bai, 2009; Chodron, 2000; Radha, 2004), conscious communication (Rosenberg, 2003), mind-body-energy therapies (Glendlin, 1978; Ruskan, 2003; Stein, 2006; Upledger, 2004), and contemporary vision quest preparation (Foster & Little, 1989; Plotkin, 2003) all offer suggestions for how to survey the inner landscape and learn to be present with challenging emotions such as grief, rage, sadness, anger, fear, anxiety, and despair. From these perspectives, difficult emotions are actually a gift, as they provide a gateway to greater self-awareness and empowered action. In this sense, emotions are like a flag marking the place where there are deeper and more nuanced layers of meaning and unclaimed power to uncover. Mindfulness traditions suggest to be present with the emotions, to bring awareness and compassion to them, rather than trying to push them aside or stuff them down (Chodron, 2000). Glendlin (1978) and Ruskan (2003) both suggest that if we stay at the level of the emotions, they can become overwhelming, and we can

get stuck in them. They each offer unique, simple, and yet powerful inner work techniques for feeling beneath the surface of the emotions to the bodily "felt sense" or core level energetic sensations. Once noticed and experienced non-judgementally, these energies often shift and release, revealing new and innovative solutions to the problem at hand. Rosenberg (2003) echoes this, offering that uncomfortable emotions and feelings are the surface indicators of unmet needs. While emotional literacy—the ability to feel and name the emotion—is important, Rosenberg suggests that if we stop there, we miss the chance to identify the level where the greatest freedom becomes possible: our core needs. When we are able to identify and name our needs, we also become able to make clear requests to get those needs met. Rosenberg claims that core human needs are universal, and that at the deepest level, people naturally desire to contribute to each other's wellbeing, so creative solutions to meet the needs of all involved become easier to imagine and implement once we have named the surface feelings and underlying needs, and have made a clear request aligned with those needs (Rosenberg, 2003). Plotkin (2003) suggests using nature-based practices to process challenging emotions. These include finding a place powerful enough to hold the grief, and entering into conversation with the natural world as a way of accessing and releasing pent up emotion and connecting with the underlying longing. In all of these approaches, the common thread is the sequence of noticing, naming, and non-judgementally experiencing the emotion and the deeper need or longing that lies beneath it. The capacity to do this work effectively is one mark of emotional independence and maturity, qualities that Plotkin (2008) suggests are necessary to act autonomously and in alignment with eco-centric and soul-centric ways of being in the world.

Pausing to Check In

Is this really the work of environmental education, you might wonder? Isn't this the sort of stuff to work through in therapy? While it is true that safe, contained, and confidential spaces are important for certain parts of any learning or healing journey, it is also true that whenever we get stuck in our work, whatever that work may be, we need to be able to employ tools that will help us to get unstuck. And when that stuckness is due to challenging emotions arising as we and our students grapple with issues in an environmental education class, there needs to be a way to address and respond to these authentically that we as educators can feel confident to navigate. Palmer's (2007) words are worth repeating here again: we teach who we are. As responsible educators, I suggest that we need to be doing our own inner work, and be comfortable navigating our own emotional landscape, in order to effectively hold space for students to do this as well.

Furthermore, there are several reasons why environmental education classrooms are excellent places to integrate an awareness of emotions and the inner world. The subject matter and pedagogical approaches often lend themselves

well to relational learning, connection, and emotional experiences, and, due to the often experiential nature of the programming, there is potentially greater ease with integrating more holistic approaches than in other disciplines. With often smaller class sizes, and the increased opportunity to spend time in the natural world where emotions are more readily inspired and released, environmental education programs are a fantastic place to make space for these explorations.

The confidence that I have in this comes in part through my own experience of being stuck in my emotions, and of finding inner work processes that led to release, an increased capacity to face challenge and persevere through hardship, and a renewal of inspiration, hope, and motivation to engage. For me, many of these inner work processes have been supported by experiences in the natural world, or with the arts, and I see natural links and great potential in incorporating the arts into environmental education as a way to create space for the acknowledgment, processing, and celebration of emotion. As Paintner and Beckman (2010) suggest, "the arts are the language of the soul" (p. 4), and we can turn to the creative arts for both expression and healing in service to soul.

The Arts: A Mode for Exploring Emotions in Environmental Education and a Methodological Influence

The arts are already present in environmental education literature and practice. As just a couple of examples, Song (2012) suggests that ecological art projects can inspire students to inquire more deeply, deepen a sense of connection with the natural world, and promote thought, dialogue, and changes in behaviour in viewers. Sandri (2013) suggests that "wicked problems need creative solutions" (p. 766) and notes that developing creativity and the capacity for innovation is crucial for the issues that environmental education addresses, as it enables a shift from knowledge acquisition to life-long learning. This is very much aligned with a holistic approach to environmental education that incorporates self-inquiry and creates space for experience and expressions of emotions. However, to open a space of creative inquiry is also to open a space of uncertainty, with less teacher control over the learning processes, content, outcomes, and/or directions and products that the inquiry might produce (Sandri, 2013). This requires a willingness to let go and trust the process.

This sort of spaciousness and letting go of control of outcome are also central components of the research methodologies that inform my work. In what follows, I will highlight some aspects of the arts-based and autoethnographic methodologies that have informed my choice to create and share life writing and song lyrics that examine my relationships with self, emotions, the natural world, the human community, and challenging environmental education topics such as climate change and ecological devastation. Following this, I will share three songs as a demonstration and exploration of how the arts can be used to

engage and express the emotions in environmental education.

Art-based research is defined as "the use of personal expression in various art forms as a primary mode of enquiry. This may include the artistic expression of others but the unique feature is the making of art by the researcher" (McNiff, 2013, p. 109), regardless of academic discipline. An interpretive-hermeneutic art-making model understands art as a way to communicate situated knowledge of a person's relationship with his or her world, and to produce a body of symbols that communicate the way we experience the world and are sustained within it (Rolling, 2013).

Life writing and journaling are an art form, and one way that I explore emotion. Leggo (2008) acknowledges that it is not easy to write autobiographically, especially in the academy, where it can feel risky to honestly reveal personal experiences of failure, fear, and frustration.

> We need a different culture, a culture that supports autobiographical writing that is marked by an understanding that writing about personal experiences is not merely egoism, solipsism, unseemly confession, boring prattle, and salacious revelation. We need to write personally because we live personally, and our personal living is always braided with our other ways of living – professional, academic, administrative, social, and political. (p. 91)

Smith (2012) suggests that life writing is an act of human recovery and healing, as it allows for the wisdom and knowing of life experience to come through in ways that may not be acknowledged or validated in conventional frameworks. Life writing grants permission to feel and sense life-responses, and also provides opportunities for life-reading; when the reader's own experience is validated through awareness of the life-writing of another, this life-giving experience reveals the fruits of the self-reflective work.

Song writing—creating lyric and melody—is another art form that I have used to engage and express emotion. Lyrical music shares similarities with poetry, as both use space and breath to evoke emotional responses. However, unlike poetry, space in musical performance also exists in, around, and between notes, and the transformation of the written composition into audible and tonal sound has the potential to access or reveal emotions, as well as to further elicit emotional responses from the audience (Leavy, 2009). The performance of lyrical music also invites the audience to engage in what is common to their experience, both building bonds and forging community. It can create a space where differences are transcended, and also open a space for dialogue and the sharing of ideas from multiple and diverse voices, as each has a chance to speak in response to their experience of the music (Leavy, 2009).

Ellingson and Ellis (2008) distinguish between analytical and evocative approaches to research and suggest that an evocative approach seeks to "open up conversations and evoke emotional responses" (p. 445). Thus, in the writing and lyrical representations that follow, my intention is to offer my own learning

through life writing and lyrics that will both explicitly and subtly communicate experience, while also inviting further inquiry, rather than offering authoritative interpretations and definitive answers. As you read, or, as I encourage, perhaps actually listen (www.jocelynburkhart.com/cjee/), I invite you to enter the space that has been created by the song, and to observe and express your own emotional response—either to the lyrics themselves or to the memories evoked of parallel experiences in your own life. What comes most clearly into focus for you as you listen? What pathways forward emerge when we together explore the spaces between the notes?

Active and Contemplative Practices for Engaging the Emotions, Explored Through Song

The three songs and accompanying life writing (in italic blocks) presented here emerged through my own engagement with the inner work of emotions, as I grappled with the outer work of environmental issues. Before beginning, I'll make two additional notes. First, about pronouns: in the songs shared here, I've sometimes used the words She or Her to refer to the Earth. Other times, I've used the words she, he, mother, and father, not as gender or personal referents, but to indicate the divine masculine and feminine qualities as aspects of the whole that are present for any person, being, or thing in an abstract way. Language is inherently limited; if these words present a block or challenge to your experience as you read these lyrics, I invite you to use your own. Second, a note about intention. These specific songs are not suggested for inclusion in curriculum, but rather are shared to reveal the depth of insight, healing, and motivation that become possible when we explore through the arts, and to create a space for experience for the reader/listener. Furthermore, each song and life writing corresponds thematically to the specific practices that are briefly referred to. Notice where you may experience resonance with any of this, or in what new ways you might be inspired to open spaces for creative and embodied exploration and expression of emotions—both for yourself, and for your students.

Embodied Ways to Notice, Name, Experience, Navigate, and Release Emotion

Come to the Water…
Come, to the water, come, to the mother, come, and lay yourself down.
Come, through the darkness, come to the mystery, come, and lay your burdens down.
She is compassion, and she is love, she helps me gently soften into each moment unfolding;
Joy, and a sense of peace, in this time when every moment brings change.

Oh....
Come, to the mountain, come to the father, come and stand your ground.
Come, to perspective, come, in the sunlight, come and look all around.
He is truth, and he is love, he helps me bravely step forward in each moment unfolding;
Courage, and a sense of peace, in this time when every moment brings change.
Oh…
Come, to your centre, come to your knowing, come and embody your light.
Come when you're joyful, come, when you're aching, come, and all will be made right.
You are connected, you are a part of the whole,
Come embrace and celebrate your place within the web of life;
Be present, peaceful and purposeful, in this time when every moment brings change.
Oh.... Come.

These verses came while walking and wandering on the land, where I often go to soothe my heart, or when I need some fresh inspiration and direction. The first verse bubbled up as I walked along the Bow River in Calgary, the second, several years later while hiking in the Nor'Wester range near Thunder Bay, and the third, while walking on a paved pathway around a lake in the city, reflecting to learn from and integrate a challenging experience. During times of ecological and personal struggle, when I choose to let my mind rest from the issues for a while, and instead spend time wandering and opening space for creative expression, there is usually a shift of some sort that reveals new perspectives and brings consolation, wonder, energy, and a renewed motivation for continued engagement, learning, and action.

Plotkin (2003, 2008) offers wandering and walking on the land as one way to enter into relationship with the "Sacred Other." By following one's own sense of intrigue, and engaging in actual conversation with the tree, rock, or creature that mysteriously captivates our attention, our own inner wisdom is able to rise to the surface. This wandering can also be a search for a place powerful enough to hold the grief, longing, or rage that wants to surface and be released.

Young, McGown, and Haas (2010) also offer practices that develop awareness and relationship through the body – five senses explorations, bird language listening, and tracking, among others. By attending to the patterns in the natural world with focus and concentration, not only do our burdens and challenges potentially dissipate as we come more directly into the present moment, but our increased capacity to notice and respond to what is happening in the moment better equips us to deal with challenges when they arise. While this sort of mindfulness can be practiced anywhere, and at any time, the natural world offers a focus for concentration that is both central and accessible for environmental

education. Further, all of the contemplative and spiritual traditions I have encountered teach some form of progressive relaxation as a meditation for the body and mind. Lying directly on the earth, paying attention to the breath, and then tensing, and then allowing the tension in the body to completely relax is one of the most powerful ways I have found to still the mind and release emotions. What is common to all of the practices mentioned above is the intent to mindfully come into the present moment, relax, and pay attention to and with the body, and simply respond to what is showing up in awareness, rather than impose a preconceived idea or try to force a particular outcome.

What burdens are you carrying? Where can you go that is spacious enough to see them more clearly, or perhaps even to lay them down and rest?

Expressive-Arts as a Way to Release Emotion and Integrate Learning

The Current Context
We, are living in a time, of confusion, and devastation, and
She, is showing us the signs, that we've caused this destruction.
Now, we've opened up our eyes, we must not fall to distraction,
We need to humbly bend and rise, as we listen for Her direction.
For we are one… and what harms Her, harms me, harms you, harms us all.

You, who say that you care, you have no right, to withhold your voice.
You, who say you've had a dream, you have no right, no right, to deny your vision.
You, who say that you love, you have no right, no right, no right, to hide your beauty from us all.
For we are one… and what limits you, limits me, oppresses Her and jails us all.

We, can lift each other up, when we gather together, and
We, have nothing left to fear, when we share with one another;
We will live, in peace and dignity, if we can stand strong with each other through this dark night.
For we are one… and what truly lifts me, lifts you, honours Her, and frees us all.
Yes we are one… and what heals me, heals you, helps Her heal us all.

This song came to me during a severe thunderstorm that damaged several trees and hydro poles near the place I was living. I was a student in a summer doctoral seminar focused on quantitative research methods, and one of our instructors had woven into the course content a sub-theme of climate change theory, pedagogy, and

activism. Our class was deeply engaged with the discussion, and many, including myself, acknowledged that the emotionally charged dialogue was stirring things up. For me, the storm that night brought with it a heightened sense of urgency—as if the earth herself was calling out for drastic change, and the words of the song seemed to flow spontaneously through me—I did not consciously "craft" them.

When I shared this song with a group of my classmates later that week, we all felt shivers, somberly. For each one, the call was experienced differently, but that the call was there was unmistakable. Stand up! Do your part! Share your voice! Live your vision! Come together and do not despair! For me, the change that was called for was not simply related to my participation in our human cultural practices that have a detrimental effect on the earth, but also my own life trajectory. In time, as the images in the song lyrics revealed themselves to me further, I heard them speaking to my own lifestyle choices and their detrimental effect on my body. Over the course of a year, my hips had become off centre, and I was walking with a limp. When I finally made the changes in my life that through reflection I had come to understand were needed, both of these problems resolved themselves within a matter of weeks! I had finally listened deeply and responded to the knowing of my body.

The arts, especially when they come from a place of pure expression, rather than imposed or even consciously intended meaning, have the potential to evoke, provoke, motivate, and inspire. In allowing experience to intuitively express through arts and metaphor, layers of symbol and meaning become available which can evoke radically different insights and awareness—between individuals, or even within the same individual over time. In this way, a single work of art can contribute to the life-long learning process advocated for by Sandri (2013).

What is your vision? What are you being called to? How will you respond?

Sharing Circles as Spaces to Practice Empathic Listening and Authentic Expression

The Song of this Land

D A Em G I sing the song of this place, of this land where I stand,
D A Em G And this land holds the space for the song of my soul.
D A Em G All the longing, all the pain, all the beauty and the shame;
D A Em G Be my witness, be my mother, be my father, be my child.

D A Em G I sing the song of this friend who stands next to me now,
D A Em G And this friend holds the space for the song of my soul.
D A Em G All the longing, all the pain, all the beauty and the shame;
D A Em G Be my mirror, be my brother, be my sister, be my friend.

A D G Water flows down,
A D G And all comes round.
A D G Making the space for each voice to be heard
D A G Is the pathway to harmony true
D A G As we align with the earth singing too.

A D G Rock wears down,
A D G And all comes round.
A D G Making the space for each voice to be heard
D A G Is the pathway to harmony true
D A G As I join in this choir with you.

D A Em G Let's sing the song of this place, of this land where we stand,
D A Em G As this land holds the space for the songs of our souls.
D A Em G All the longing, all the pain, all the beauty and the shame;
D A Em G Seasoned witness, truthful mirror, faithful lover, gentle muse.
D A Em G All the longing, all the pain, all the beauty and the shame;
D A Em G Seasoned witness, truthful mirror, faithful lover, gentle muse.
D A Em G Seasoned witness, truthful mirror, faithful lover, gentle muse.
D Oh gratitude

This song bubbled up at a favourite river swim spot of mine, and when I went back there to try to record it, I encountered someone else also enjoying that spot. In the water, I saw him crumple an empty can and toss it downstream. I tried to catch it as it went by, but missed. Disappointed, frustrated, shocked, annoyed, and saddened by his behaviour, I recognized both that I wanted to address the action, and that I first needed to calm myself and release the judgement that was boiling inside: "Who does that!?!" a part of me raged. I worked with an inner awareness technique of seeing him as a mirror for me, asking: "How am I like that? What do I do that is like that behaviour?" and I noticed places in my life where I have acted carelessly, like when I eat sugar with blatant disregard for my body. I also worked with empathy, asking: "What am I feeling and needing? What might he have been feeling or needing in that moment?" and I realized that what I desired was shared values and support with upholding these. Using a conscious communication model, I then formulated clear and kind feedback, and when I did finally verbally address the littering, I felt calm, relaxed, and detached both from the outcome of my words and from my desire for him to be different than he was. In his response, I learned that he had intended to throw the can onto shore, to then carry back, and that he had felt bad when he saw that he had missed and was unable to retrieve it before it floated away. Hearing this, I noticed my body instantly relax, and I felt more connected to him; we both wanted the same thing – to not pollute – and here was a case of unskillfulness or lack of foresight, rather than mere unconscious or careless behaviour. By using inner work processes to identify, understand, and manage my emotions, I was able to speak

with both clarity and kindness, and to open a space where he felt safe to speak as well, which then resulted in a sense of connection between us. Had I spoken from the place of anger and judgement that I initially felt, my incorrect assumptions would likely have met with resistance, and the potential for connection would have been negatively impacted or lost.

In the example above, my approach to giving feedback opened up a space for both people to share, similar to the sharing circles that are foundational to most experiential education models and thus often used in environmental education. In the space created to express experience, have it received without judgement, and hear it reflected back, there is an opportunity for the learning to deepen, and to open up new avenues for exploration. Palmer (2007) remarks on the depth of learning possible when every voice is given a chance to share their perspective, and Rosenberg (2003) suggests that in receiving another's expression with empathic reflection, we can help them to be present with the emotions they are experiencing, and more clearly identify the needs that run beneath their feelings and mind-based strategies. In a seminar I attended recently, the facilitator shared a teaching that we are all "connected by our waters" (A. Phillips, personal communication, April 24, 2015) and that when we share our emotions, we can come together and resonate in a way that restores harmony and facilitates collaboration. In my experience, and in the example above, the key is that the space for expression is without pressure or expectation to "get it right." When our focus shifts from knowledge acquisition to direct experience of our emotions, we are on the pulse of what is real and alive in the moment. It is from this place that we can see and name the truth of what is happening externally, experience the emotions that are arising internally without judgement, be compassionately present with ourselves, and open to a shift or transformation which may bring fresh insight and renew energy, enthusiasm, and the desire to act.

Where is your soul's song held and nurtured? How do you make space for the voices of others?

Conclusion

A creative process is an open-ended process, and even when this brings with it the discomfort of uncertainty that results from a lack of absolute clarity and closure, it is this very open-endedness that leads to change (Sandri, 2013). In this paper, I engaged the art forms of song lyric and life writing as a way to explore the use of the arts in environmental education to engage, express, and transform emotions. Through the examples of nature and body-based contemplative practices, artistic responses, sharing my own emotion-rich experience, and offering invitational reflective questions, my intent was to evoke a response within

you, the reader, rather than to provide a defendable theory, clear position, or definitive conclusion. My hope is that you've had an experience that raises more questions, and will perhaps lead you to further consider, engage, and observe the arts as a way to reveal, express, and transform emotions, both for yourself, and for your students. I think that further investigation of the learning potential through the arts in environmental education would be beneficial, especially as an avenue to develop the capacities needed for emotional maturity and eco- and soul-centred adulthood, and to motivate and inspire students toward respectful and empowered action.

It takes awareness, courage, and compassion to open ourselves up to the unpredictability and occasional volatility of the emotional landscape. It takes awareness, courage, and compassion to practice creative inquiry, teaching, and learning in general, and especially when the unpredictability of emotions interacts with the uncertainty of creative and experiential learning processes. And, it takes awareness, courage, and compassion to face the ecological challenges that are before us – on both the local and global scale. How wonderful to encounter and have access to pedagogies that will foster the very capacities we need for cooperative engagement, authentic expression, and skillful response!

Notes on Contributor

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