

I'm an East Coast Kid: Surfing the Waters of Spirituality and Place

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is two-fold: (a) to deepen environmental educators' understanding of the possibility and process of developing a sense of place in a transient culture, and (b) to encourage all environmental educators to explore their sense of place transformations. A personal anecdote of a rooted New England surfer and educator who transplants to Hawai'i is followed by a thorough description of the three major steps necessary for spiritual, cognitive, and affective learning that lead to a locally based ecological and social identity; a new sense of place. The theory of sense of place, Indigenous ways of developing identities associated with place, and of the spirituality of letting go are interwoven throughout the discussion.

Résumé

Le but de cet article est double : 1) approfondir la compréhension des éducateurs de l'environnement en ce qui concerne la possibilité et la façon de développer la notion d'espace dans une culture transitoire, et 2) encourager tous les éducateurs de l'environnement à étudier leur compréhension des transformations de l'espace. Une anecdote concernant un « surfeur » et éducateur enraciné en Nouvelle-Angleterre qui déménage à Hawaï est suivie d'une description circonstanciée des trois étapes importantes nécessaires à l'apprentissage cognitif et affectif qui mène à une identité écologique et spirituelle locale, un nouveau sens de l'espace. La théorie de la notion d'espace, les moyens autochtones du développement de l'identité associée à l'espace et la spiritualité de laisser-aller sont entrelacés tout au long de cette discussion.

Keywords: environmental education; sense of place; traditional ecological knowledge; place-based education

A New Hampshire Surfer

Six thousand miles away from the landscape and people that defined my spirit, soul, and personality, my Hawaiian colleague introduced me to 40 sets of new eyes, “She is a New Hampshire surfer.” The lethargic college students suddenly showed awe, “That’s cold there!” The surfers, who had only surfed Hawaiian waters, looked in disbelief and smiled. I wondered to myself, “Do my 36 years on this earth come down to a short conclusion of ‘I am a New Hampshire surfer?’”

My curiosity about the relationship between identity and sense of place inspired this paper. My goal is two-fold:

- to deepen environmental educators' understanding of sense of place and the spiritual, cognitive, and emotional transformations necessary for sense of place in a transient culture, and
- to encourage all environmental educators to explore their sense of place transformations.

I begin by modeling my personal exploration of the deep sense of place that I developed in New England as a surfer and educator, and then consider the transformation of that sense of place when I uprooted and moved to Hawai'i. This anecdote then forms the foundation of a thorough discussion of the three major steps necessary for spiritual, cognitive, and affective learning that lead to a locally based ecological and social identity; a new sense of place. Throughout this discussion the theory of sense of place intertwines with a consideration of Indigenous ways of developing identities associated with place, and of spiritually letting go.

I'm an East Coast Kid

There is a black and white 4x1-inch bumper sticker that righteously claims: "I'm an east coast kid." I grew up by the New England Gulf Stream of the Atlantic Ocean and felt that my very nature was tied into the cycles of the earth's rotations. My life ventured into its fourth decade with a calling to be closer and more intimate with the nearby ocean's pulse. The availability of sunlight, the tilt of the earth, and the dark green body of water pulled by the moon created the person I could comfortably define as *me*. To the outside world this "me" was easily labeled a "New Hampshire surfer;" however, the depth, emotion, and spirituality tied to this proud title transcend the image of a freezing wet person scanning the horizon for waves.

During the winter solstice, sunset is at 4 P.M. and sunrise is at practically 8 A.M., creating 16 hours of darkness. The brisk temperatures and lack of sunlight keep people inside their homes, reserving ventures out of doors for the essentials: work, food, and maybe snow sports. Rarely do people deal with layering varying depths of wool, down, and polypropylene just to go out to dinner or to the movies. Social expectations decline drastically during these isolating six-month stints each year. Although melancholy, this time is necessary for emotional recharge. The relationship with the self is revived, which can be neglected during the spring, summer, and fall, when community is thriving and all-encompassing. The lonely retreat and reflection becomes embedded in a New Englander's cellular structure.

Surfing among ice and snow in below-freezing temperatures makes New England surfers a rare breed. During the winter months, the ocean is

empty of the thousands of the seasonal, warmer-water-loving surfers that rush to the beaches in the summer. Regardless of snow, ice, ice-rain, sleet, ice cream headaches, and seemingly freezing waters, winter surfers exist because winter waves occasionally exist. Winter surf truly brings brief spurts of pure joy to my heart and soul.

Storytelling: An Invitation to Explore the Fusion of Ecological and Cultural Roots

A story about the life of a New England winter surfer might convey more than simple weather statistics can. One memorable session started when I glanced out the Christmas-lighted panes of glass and saw fat, wet flakes of snow slowly accumulating on the wet pavement. I squinted to see through the flakes out toward the east, and knew that just beyond that sheet of snow was the Atlantic Ocean rolling into shore. A quick glance at the on-line surf report indicated a typical winter fahrenheit temperature reading: "Air temp = 17 degrees," "Water temp = 36 degrees." I stripped naked to stick both legs into my already dampish six-millimetre wetsuit, a sensation that is simply miserable: COLD rubber sticking to your skin. The crotch seems to stay down between the lower thighs, making walking more like a waddle. The cool wetness of the neoprene leaves this sort of slimy damp sensation on your skin, causing the whole body to feel sort of...cold. After my body was covered in black neoprene, hood slightly off my head, I stepped into my seven-millimetre booties, even wetter and colder than my wetsuit.

There I was, perched by my kitchen counter, feeling the last thing one wants to feel before heading into icy aquatic conditions: clammy, cold, and constricted. I tried to guzzle hot tea, just to experience the "hot" feeling prior to entering the frosty sea water. I force-fed myself with hot oatmeal and nuts to "stoke the fire." After the fueling up session and a quick waxing of a nine-foot-long board, I slid out of the mudroom through the screen door. Outside the mudroom screen door was the world of freezing cold water, old grass, and snow. In the middle of our backyard the water drained into a puddle, causing the snow to fuse with water, creating a slushy consistency that required careful navigation.

As I stepped down to the rocky beach, I wobbled toward the water. The first flush of water shocked me as it always does, but the effort of paddling past the breakers made me completely hot. It surprises most people to know that the wetsuit keeps you warm. It is not until the waves die out and a breeze picks up that one begins to feel chilly. The other factor that allows the cold to seep in is the wearing off of the food energy supply. The force-feeding in the morning is crucial. When the breakfast fire turns to small coals, they no longer can heat your stove as it needs. At this point, it is time to paddle into shore.

But for the moment there was no breeze, and I was well-fed and warm. After so many flat, cold days with no snow for other secondary adventures, such as skiing, these waves were welcomed with open arms and strong paddle strokes. The snow let off and the sun came out for a greeting. Staring straight at the low-angle winter sun, looking for stacking up lines on the eastern horizon is both blinding and pacifying. Once I paddled for a wave, the sun slowly ducked behind it. The enormity of the wave was magnified by the sun shadowing me in the curl, an interactive phenomenon of light and water and season that cannot happen at lower latitudes or other times of year. Adrenaline surged through my arteries and my heart pumped faster as I slid to my feet and rode the wave. For those brief seconds (which seem like minutes), I danced with the wave, and even with six millimetres of rubber between us, I became one with the Atlantic Ocean. I glowed with this union as I paddled back out into the cold winter sun, relaxing as the lines continued to roll in.

Each wave offered was this kind of spiritual ride upon the shoulders of the ocean, coming into that intersection between myself and a power much greater than myself. The human-ocean interaction of “walking on water” cleanses, invigorates, heals, brightens, and enlivens the soul during the long, dark days of winter. The life inside me was rekindled and warmed into a blissful state.

After a long session, the hot shower experience of tearing the wetsuit off my body is needed. I started to thaw, as winter thaws into spring. The long, dark days from mid-November through middle to late April are character-building, forcing people toward solitude and reflection. Over the years, the body and mind come to expect the seasonal shifts. The cold and rainy days of winter end with the lilacs blooming, filling the warmer air with an intoxicating fragrance, announcing to every bodily sense spring’s arrival. Soon the smell of neighbourhood barbeques and sounds of people gathering fills the senses with the much-needed human interactions.

Uprooting

Things falling apart is kind of a testing and also kind of a healing...the healing comes from letting there be room for all this to happen: room for grief, for relief, for misery, for joy. (Chodron, 1997, p. 8)

With each turn around the sun, I felt increasingly satisfied with my local sense of place in New England: I had found a fellow surfer to marry; my lifelong friends surrounded me; the ocean embraced me; I felt comfortable in my own skin. Inevitably, this comfort ended when impermanence knocked at my door.

I received a phone call offering me a new job in Hawai’i, the surfing homeland. To leave meant to uproot and leave the “me” I had come to know, love,

and feel comfortable inside. Although I accepted the position, I unknowingly resisted the change and transformation, and this caused more suffering.

Haole from the Mainland

The 5000 miles from New England to Hawai'i crossed an entire continent, several latitude lines, and half an ocean to a new, yet ancient place. I quickly learned about the Hawaiian Sovereignty movement and felt immediately sympathetic, leaving me culturally displaced. I was a Haole, a white person from the mainland United States that "illegally took over Hawai'i." I felt that perhaps uprooting was the wrong idea and that I should quit my new job and return to New England.

Along with my sympathetic disposition, I felt displaced as a white New Englander because I was accustomed to being outspoken. My ability to speak my mind was part of my social identity. In Hawai'i, I was advised not to try to change the place but to become part of the place and accept the way of living in the place. I realized that my privilege of being outspoken was not one I had in my new land; I needed to quiet down and listen. At first, I felt resentment and anger as my social identity dissolved, feeling like an adolescent struggling with identity.

A hot and rainy August, September, and October passed. As if I was still in New England, I felt the desire to hibernate. I often pictured my "homeland" getting colder and darker, while I stood in my bathing suit in hot air among swaying palm trees. Living close to the equator, the days are practically equal length all year long, with perhaps an hour difference between winter and summer solstice. My identity, as a local New Englander, a cold-weather surfer, and a shredder of the snow was torn away. Yet, I was so far from being local that I now had a term to define my non-localness: Haole. The feeling of loss and being displaced was all-encompassing.

Aloha? Newcomers to Hawai'i

Hawai'i has an image of paradise and Aloha, but past practices of mainland people coming to the islands has made the local people reluctant to give without knowing who you are and your intentions. Some people never let go of their past identities and hence leave the islands with the perception that Hawai'i has no Aloha. Hawai'i asks newcomers to pay attention. Those who observe and listen to the land and people of Hawai'i, and learn from them, experience the Hawaiian value of Aloha. If you ever meet someone who moved to Hawai'i, they will agree that the land "tests you." My experience led me to believe that perhaps it is our attachment to past identities that tests us, not the land. The land merely makes us aware of our attachments and how they do not serve a newcomer in Hawai'i.

During my first month of surf sessions, I was introduced to the treachery of surfing on the Big Island. The rocks of the windward side and the *wana* (sea urchins) on the leeward side all shredded my feet, leaving me out of the water for two weeks at a time. The locals looked at me knowing I was new, and I felt threatened by the sense of insecurity from losing my identity.

Each time I paddled out at Poho'iki between the three-foot space created between two large *pahoehoe* lava-formed ledges, I prayed for my life as the waves came in, pounding me closer to the sharp edges. Once I was outside the breakers, I received many gifts, such as beautiful sunrises, *honu* (green sea turtles) swimming around me, and dolphin pods diving three feet away from my board. These gifts would briefly slip away when I fearfully made my way back in, as this was another time for serious concentrated prayer. I paddled furiously, trying to avoid the multitude of dangers: the three-foot window of space offering the path back to land, the two waves converging in front of the space, and the many surfers riding those waves.

I came to hate this process so much, as my cut-up feet told a story of many unsuccessful entrances and exits. I missed the long sandy beaches of New England. I stopped surfing. This was heart-breaking, as the ocean was the only link left between my old and new home; my old and new identity. I became emotionally unraveled during my hiatus from the ocean. My friends were thousands of miles away, and the only sense of identity I had left was an angry bitter person. I knew this was no way to live and needed to either embrace my new place or go back to New England.

As it was clear I would stay, I found it futile to hold onto my past identity. It was time to acknowledge my new home as my home, to release the past and observe, to listen to, and to critically think about the social and ecological community of Hawai'i. I had to stop battling, and embrace a new identity associated with the Pacific Ocean, the Hawaiian Island cycles, and the local people of Hawai'i. The land and people of Hawai'i welcomes those who are open to transformation. This experience enlightened me to the true process of developing a sense of place: releasing the past and allowing identity to be reshaped by the local land, sea, and people.

Commit to Staying or Leaving, Release the Past and Embrace the Present, AND Think Consciously and Critically

The very first noble truth of the Buddha points out that suffering is inevitable as long as human beings believe that things last. (Chodron, 1997, p. 9)

As an environmental education practitioner who promotes the integration of sense of place into curricula as one way to help people develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to protect their surroundings (a principle suggested by Orr, 1992), I benefited greatly from the process of developing

a new sense of place myself. I had read that the relationship building with new land and people is a spiritual, cognitive, and affective process (LaChapelle, 1991; Naess, 1989); experiencing this for myself allowed me to appreciate its meaning. Leaving New England and coming to Hawai'i helped me see that there are three major steps in the process of developing the relationships necessary for spiritual, cognitive, and affective learning that leads to a locally based ecological and social identity:

- Acknowledge that staying in the new place is likely;
- Release the past and embrace the present (allow for impermanence); and
- Maintain conscious and critical thinking.

Embedded in these three steps is the development of a sense of place. When one has a developed sense of place, "one possesses several characteristics which can be developed sequentially or simultaneously: 1) ecological knowledge of the place, which leads to ecological identity; 2) knowledge of the local institution/social context (social behaviours, structures and norms) which facilitates the development of a social identity; and 3) place attachment to a region" (Mueller-Worster & Abrams, 2005, p. 526). Social and ecological identities come from many sources, including the local land and sea, weather, living beings, public processes, ecological systems, and more (Thomashow, 1995). Dodge (1981), in his article on bioregionalism, discussed the concept of sense of place:

[Sense of place] involves a sense of closeness with the elements, geological structure, animals, plants, all natural beings in a given local, natural place. It is a feeling of community with people in the context of a larger family, which includes all the beings of the region. (p. 7)

Relationships are critical to feeling a sense of belonging to the community and are necessary for identity to emerge. The need for community is often forgotten in the dominant social structures of Western culture in the 21st century (Putnam, 2000). The Indigenous people studied by Raffan (1993), Kame'eleihiwa (1992), Meyer (2003), and Cajete (1994) show how Indigenous people's interdependent relationships with the land created social and ecological identities embedded in a place. "This archaic affinity for the land is an antidote to the loneliness that in our own culture we associate with individual estrangement and despair" (Lopez, 1986, p. 266). If a lack of affinity for the land leads to loneliness and despair, then the development of a relationship with the land we live on becomes necessary for people to participate in their own wellness.

To create a sense of place in a transient society, such as that of contemporary America, the three-step process outlined above makes it possible to develop a new sense of place, and social and ecological identities.

Step 1: Acknowledge that Staying in the New Place Is Likely

The first step to developing a new sense of place is to acknowledge that one is going to stay in the place for a while. Staying in a place might be by choice or necessity. If one stays, then it makes sense to develop a new sense of place, rather than painfully hold onto the past. My initial months in Hawai'i demonstrated the difficulty created by holding onto the past and not embracing the present. I did not initially plant my two feet on the island, believing perhaps I would not stay. Once I acknowledged that I was going to remain on the island for quite some time, I was ready to begin developing a new sense of place.

Step 2: Release the Past and Embrace the Present (Allow for Impermanence)

Developing a new identity while maintaining one's integrity of self requires releasing the past and allowing for the discomfort necessary for transformation. The more one lets go, the easier a process it is, becoming potentially enjoyable. Environmental educators who ask their students to engage in their own sense of place development might have many students who have moved several times in their lives. The process of developing a sense of place for 21st century citizens of the modern western world is spiritually, cognitively, and emotionally challenging, yet possible. By engaging Buddhist perspectives, we find spiritual lessons in letting go, which makes sense of place development possible.

Building new relationships, particularly when one is attached to past relationships, requires the acceptance of impermanence. Ordained Buddhist Monk Chodron (1997) suggested:

Impermanence becomes vivid in the present moment; so do compassion and wonder and courage. And so does fear. In fact, anyone who stands on the edge of the unknown, fully in the present without reference point, experiences groundlessness. That's when our understanding goes deeper, when we find that the present moment is a pretty vulnerable place and that this can be completely unnerving and completely tender at the same time. (p. 2)

Impermanence *can* be unsettling and emotionally painful, but acceptance of change in a transient culture is critical for the growth and transformation that allows new relationships to form. While developing a new sense of place, the person not only has to accept the impermanence of physically being somewhere, but the impermanence of one's identity. The spiritual lesson is not to escape the pain, but rather to explore the new feelings, place, and people that accompany change.

The process of letting go of the past was difficult for me as I longed for what was, rather than seeing what was. I missed the sandy beaches, my friends, and the harsh seasonal changes. I missed feeling comfortable in my own skin and knowing who I was and that being that person was acceptable. It was not until I acknowledged I was staying *and* let go of the past that I became free to evolve in relation to my new cultural and ecological landscape.

It becomes necessary and even desirable to listen to the local land and people, and follow the path laid out. The process of developing a sense of place includes opening the senses to observe, and listening to build new relationships (Abram, 1996). Snyder (1990) described listening to the plants and weather for feeling at home:

The presence of this tree signifies a rainfall and a temperature range and will indicate what your agriculture might be, how steep the pitch of your roof, what rain-coats you'd need....If you do know what is taught by the plants and weather, you are in on the gossip and can truly feel more at home. (p. 38)

Many Indigenous cultures encouraged learning through culturally enmeshing with the landscape and building spiritual relationships. As environmental educators face new challenges of the 21st century, facilitating relationships requires new worldviews, often based in religion, that encourage more adequate environmental values (Tucker & Grim, 2005). I make a distinction between religion and spirituality; spirituality refers to the acknowledgement of a power greater than us. Looking to Indigenous cultures, we find spiritual lessons in the belief that the earth is a power greater than ourselves.

Traditional education was embedded in nature and contained spiritual elements: "a sacred view that Nature permeates the foundational process of teaching and learning" (Cajete, 1994, p. 29). Cajete embedded his educational theory in the spiritual beliefs that shaped Native Americans' interconnected perspective of the natural world. "People make a place as much as a place makes them" (p. 44). Enmeshed, reciprocating relationships with the landscape spiritually, cognitively, and affectively shape peoples' ecological social identities.

The spiritual relationship to the land, shaping people's sense of place and contributing to environmental values, was studied by Raffan (1993). He found that a person's sense of place arose out of four processes:

- place names based on personal or family experience on the land,
- narrative storytelling,
- experiential links to the land, and
- a spiritual bond between people and place.

He concluded that a spiritual and educational process facilitates individuals' enmeshed relationship with the land, shaping social and ecological identities, an "existential definition of self." Hawaiians are another Indigenous culture that has an enmeshed relationship with the land and infuses this relationship into their learning process. In Kame'eleihiwa's 1992 book, she discussed the roots of Hawaiians' connection to the land:

Wakea and Papa, the sky-father and earth mother, who by Opukahonua lineage were half brother and half sister. These two were said to be the parents of the islands, Hawai'i and Maui...According to tradition their first human offspring was a daughter, Ho'ohokukalani, to generate stars in the sky. (p. 23)

This passage demonstrates native Hawaiians' belief that they come from the land, that their ancestry is deeply embedded in the earth. The spiritual and cultural worldview of coming from the land shapes a foundational Hawaiian value: "Malama 'Aina: to care for the land" (University of Hawai'i, 2006). Nature shapes Hawaiian ways of knowing because of their ancestral interconnectedness to the land (Meyer, 2003). Releasing the past and embracing the present becomes a critical step in opening oneself up to new relationships with, and the associated values of, the local land and people.

Step 3: Maintain Conscious and Critical Thinking

Listening to the people and land of the new place and developing a new, locally based identity does not mean to let go of one's essence and integrity, rather, it asks one to think critically and decide. Lave and Wenger (1991) explored the concept of "communities of practice" and found that many newcomers tend to take on the new community's socio-cultural practices without much discernment: "Learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and...knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the socio-cultural practices of a community..." (p. 29). This warning asks that newcomers listen and observe, while maintaining an ability to discern between acceptable and unacceptable cultural norms. In my own transformation toward a new sense of place, openness, combined with critical thought, helped me develop new social and ecological identities, while maintaining my individuality.

Knowing the Self Leads to a Compassionate Educator

My exploration of developing a new sense of place has put me back in touch with the spiritual, emotional, and cognitive difficulty associated with the process of releasing the past and developing a new sense of place. Knowing oneself and reflecting on one's experiences can lead to greater compassion for our students, and a deeper, more accurate understanding of the significant process that we are asking them to embrace when we encourage them to develop a new sense of place. When environmental educators ask their students to develop a sense of place as part of their curricula, they can benefit from encompassing the compassion necessary to facilitate such spiritual, emotional, and cognitive growth. In addition, the reflective process allows for the theory of sense of place to evolve and change. My experience not only embodied the current theory of sense of place, but also illuminated the process by which sense of place can be developed in a transient culture.

"E he'enalu me ka ho'ihī: Surf with Respect"

Embracing the three steps outlined above helped me develop a new commitment to embrace Hawai'i. Time and experience helped ease my initial fear

of the forbidding rocky shoreline of the windward side of our island. I began my daily communing with the ocean because there are waves every day. Every morning the same crew of old guys are out in the water, greeting one another and yelling for each other to catch waves. I learned the rules of engagement: “E he’enalu me ka ho’ihi: Surf with respect” (Hilo Surfboard Company, 2005).

I remember the first morning a bowl came right to me and I heard “Anneliese, it’s yours! Go for it!! Paddle, paddle, paddle!!!” A huge double overhead wave came to me as a gift from the sea. The other surfers in the line up yelled out my name as I caught the wave and pumped down the line, eventually jumping out the backside. I returned to the line up of smiling faces, and *Shakas* (Hawaiian hand gesture for greeting) were being shaken toward me. I felt like I belonged—to the ocean, to the local surf culture, to the place.

Notes on Contributor

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