

An Ecology of Teaching/Learning: Practicing Faith on a Georgia Sea Island

Tim Van Meter
Bethany Theological Seminary
vanmti@bethanyseminary.edu

Abstract

One of the challenges facing religious education in the age of globalization is the relationship of human beings with the earth and with fellow creatures. From a liberatory theoretical foundation, this paper seeks to describe the insights and practices gleaned from an experiential course in theology and ecology taught with young adults on Sapelo Island, Georgia (1998-2000). Through the reading of theological and ecological texts, working with a local ecologist, engaging in local narrative and crafts, kayaking, and poetic reflection, participants began to parse their engagement with languages and practices for meaning-making (faith).

Introductory Thoughts

The participatory nature of the pedagogical strategy described in this paper stems from a core value that all people participate in the human activity of making meaning. We do so through the use of the myths, metaphors, languages, and cultural resources available to us. Religious education is the practice of people walking alongside each other, trying on and refining skills, languages, narratives, and metaphors for making meaning in partnership with God's liturgical activity in the world.¹ It equips persons for the human activity of 'faithing'. As Fowler states, faith is "a verb, not a noun, faith is a way-of-being-in-relation (Fowler 1978, 25)." Faith is the construction of meaning in relationship to a context. Fowler contends that meaning-making does not occur in a vacuum but occurs within the construction of meaning as action in graced relation within a context. "In order to have a sense of relatedness to an ultimate environment, a person or community must *construct an idea or image of an ultimate environment*. This means, then, that faith, as a mode-of-being-in-relation to the ultimate environment, involves-for individuals and communities – acts of *knowing, constructing, or composing* (emphasis his) as apprehension of an ultimate environment (25)." Therefore, in order to facilitate the human inclination toward meaning-making, the religious educator seeks to develop educational avenues which place the contexts of our world in dialogue with the practices of 'faithing'.

In order to cultivate understandings of 'faithing' within our lived contexts, it is important to join in conversation with others who are thinking through theological and ecological questions. In developing the course, my reading list included Ed Ayres, Wendell Berry, Aldo Leopold, Wes Jackson, Alan Durning, and the monthly reports and essays of a variety of ecological journals. My reading was guided by questions about the relationships between human beings, fellow creatures and their environment.² An understanding of faith was conspicuously absent in much of this work, when it was included, Judaeo-Christian traditions are criticized as theologies of neglect or domination. These writers contended that historical and contemporary religious practice at best ignored the human relationship to the environment and at worst contributed to the degradation of the systems for fostering and sustaining life on our planet. Other writers called for a return to a simpler existence when human beings lived in small agricultural communities, in close relationship with each other and with their local ecological contexts. Both views offer insight into the

¹ Karl Rahner speaks of God's activity throughout history as a liturgy and revelation as "God's self-disclosure in a freely given intercommunion with God's people that begins at creation." (Kelly, 21 & 128) The human activity of making meaning allows the human to fully become who they were created to be as she discovers the liturgy of God's chosen revelation through creation and fellow human beings. This paper infers an extension of Rahner's definition of the neighbor to fellow creatures and the systems of natural world.

² This paper is taken from a larger work. These paragraphs are an attempt to give the reader a hint of the constructive work found in earlier chapters.

role western religious traditions have played in framing human ecological relationships, but if accepted uncritically, they can lead the religious educator to either teach shame, guilt, or romantic representations of the history of human impact on the world.

The constructive theological work of Sallie McFague, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Leonardo Boff, George Tinker, and Douglas John Hall seek to engage the anthropological questions raised by the ecological writers and offer insight for negotiating theological and ontological concerns. They offer alternative understandings of human/environmental³ relationships and raise other questions about the formation and education of human individuals and faith communities for the visions they construct. For example, how do we (or should we) reclaim understandings of stewardship? Are we to call back to primary myths of 'Eden', hope for eschatological rescue, or speak of faithful life in broken contexts? How do we speak of death, predation, and the beauty and fragility of life in our own bodies? What are the primary metaphors or theological categories for imagining human/fellow creature/ecological contexts interaction?

Sallie McFague reminds us, we love what we know, and to deepen our love of the natural world means to deepen our spiritual awareness of it in the same ways we strengthen our love of God and love of others (McFague, 1997, 12). McFague develops multiple modes for cultivating awareness and participating in a spirituality which celebrates our groundedness in earthly context as it opens us to the God and fellow creatures. However, even in her work, there is an implicit disconnect between the words on the page and the practice of teaching. We, as teachers, need to remember that the practices of love incorporate our souls, minds, hearts, and bodies. This might be the struggle of writing theology for even theologians who call for deep understanding of the body and the life in ecological contexts often write disembodied and decontextually. The danger of teaching is that we would accept the words on the page as the description of human/ fellow creature/ ecological interaction.⁴

We live in a fragile world, but it is not, nor has much of it been for centuries, untouched, pristine, or truly wild. The question generated by McFague is not how to love nature, but how to love nature⁵ as it exists, in reality and in its potential, rather than as a construction of purity or romantic fantasy. As a former environmental scientist, I perceive important differences between our reflections on the environment and human/fellow creature relationships as an abstract concept encountered through texts in a climate controlled classroom and the reflections on the environment and inter-relatedness while immersed on the lived boundary of human/creaturely relationship in an ecological border community.⁶

In my reading I was impressed by the depth of the commitment of the writers and their deep passion for charging their readers to change their lifestyles and to learn to live a simpler existence aware of the impact human beings have upon the systems of the earth and our shared life. In these writings I encountered both implicit understandings and explicit charges that human beings are largely unaware of the devastation which they are wreaking on the natural world and we may not wake up to our destructiveness in time to change behavior and save life. While I did not want to diminish the impact of the arguments for change, I wanted to respond with integrity as a reflective educator. I perceived the implicit educational framework in most of the readings following a prescribed formula. The writers construct a catastrophic argument

³ The words ecology, environment, and derivatives are used interchangeably and loosely in this particular work. A more accurate use might equate ecology with the interaction of biological, geological, and chemical systems in the creation and sustenance of habitats for life. Environment tends to be a more global term inferring the manifestation of these systems on a larger scale, of course you can argue with all of this and be accurate.

⁴ It is as if we could understand the life contained in our natural world through the windshield as we drive in our national parks rather than knee deep, elbows covered in mud, tactically exploring the life of the local contexts we are in relationship with.

⁵ Nature is another word which writers have filled volumes in attempting to define and unpack. I'll do my best to hide from it in the rest of this paper.

⁶ The idea of border is meant as both the border between ecological habitats, such as the dynamic border communities found in salt marshes, and the permeable and porous borders in the interaction of human beings and fellow creatures.

followed by an accusatory list of destructive behaviors concluding with a litany of 'shoulds', which if followed would lead to the proper purity for living in right relationship.

Constructing a Strategy for Teaching

Paulo Freire, throughout his published work, reminds us that knowing is fully contextual. That in learning and teaching, "(C)ritical study correlates with teaching that is equally critical, which necessarily demands a critical way of comprehending and of realizing the reading of the word and that of the world, the reading of text and context (Freire, 1998c, 22)." In this understanding of reading, the teacher and learners rewrite and reshape the text as a tool for living into full personhood in relationship with the world. Reading, and therefore teaching/learning, are never neutral acts. In this experiment in teaching, reading texts was not the only form of reading, but also learning to become more aware of the contexts in which reading is done. As stated earlier, ecological understandings are incomplete when practiced separated from the living communities of ecological habitats. Human beings function too often in artificial environments, and this removal changes our ability to understand ourselves as creatures created for life in the midst of rich biotic and geologic contexts. Therefore, reading in this pedagogical strategy is not merely the reading of texts, but also the reading of the world with clearer vision, deeper understanding, and the possibility of love. As said before, we cannot love what we do not know, Freire frames knowing and loving as critical practice in the world.

David Orr, ecological educator and professor of Environmental Studies at Oberlin College, opens Freire's liberative understanding to consider the interdependence of all life as the context for education. For Orr "all education is environmental education. By what is included or excluded, students are taught they are a part of or apart from the world." (Orr, 1994, 12) This is taught through the contexts chosen for education as well as the content presented. Teaching takes place in the world, regardless of how many layers of concrete and filtered air we place between the outside and the inside of a particular classroom. Education is ecological in the sense that there are no ecologically neutral ideas in education, just as there are no politically neutral ideas.

Orr understands Aldo Leopold's land ethic to be the central ethical measurement for action in the world. Therefore, each educational act is measured by how it responds to the idea that, "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise." (Leopold, 224) The land ethic removes human beings from the role of "conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It (land ethic) implies respect for fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such." (204) The land ethic as a center for pedagogical practice forces teachers and students to assess the impact of what is taught and learned on the systems of the earth. The land ethic echoes Paulo Freire's declaration that all education is political. Orr and Freire remind us that education is never a neutral act.

Finally, while this model for religious education is experiential, it is constructed in conscious resistance to assumptions found in models for experiential outdoor education which descend from Outward Bound and NOLS⁷. These models contain implicit assumptions counter to pedagogical claims of learning interdependence in ecological contexts. One such assumption is the idea that wilderness, or 'nature' represents a set of problems which the teaching/learning community seeks to overcome. In programs with central values of problem solving and team building, participants compete against the natural actions of their environment. These pedagogical models lead to an understanding that human beings have value in relationship to nature through their mastery and nature has value as another context for human achievement.

A second basis for the construction of experiential outdoor courses is grounded in the assumption that human beings need to discover how to be 'in touch with nature'. The assumption is articulated in a learning goal 'as students learn more about their relationship with the wilderness, they are able to discover more about themselves.' If this core assumption is not examined, it manifests itself in the curriculum through a romantic entanglement of the self and 'nature'. At worst, this fosters an understanding of identity in which

⁷ National Outdoor Leadership School

the student finds all of himself reflected in nature. I am not dismissing the importance of an ecological/religious pedagogy grounded in practices which nurture the love which students and teachers might experience for the world around them, but it must not remain in the idea that their perceptions are the measure of the life surrounding them. While this assumption may not cultivate the oppositional character inherent in problem solving models, it can prematurely close students and teachers from living a consistent practice of imagination and discovery in the midst of contexts for all life.

The Teaching /Learning Community

In the summers of 1998-2000, I invited small groups of college students to join me in exploring our faith practices through engagement with the context of Sapelo Island, Georgia. The students were primarily alumni from the summer academy of the Youth Theological Institute of Emory University. Some came in order to explore the connections between theology and ecology, while others anticipated a unique YTI reunion experience. All came accepting the opportunity to practice skills in theological reflection that they had been introduced to prior to their senior years in high school.⁸

The Youth Theological Initiative (YTI) is a formative experience for staff and students involved, but it is not a typical exercise in Christian education, nor is it a more intensive form of formation in the texts and narratives of the Christian faith. Christian texts and narratives are part of the core curriculum, but we did not understand our task to be to lead students into a deeper appreciation of and formation into 'the' Christian narrative. What was important in the development of my own educational philosophy through my tenure with YTI, and I believe is fundamental to the impact that the summer academy has on young people, is the pedagogical decision to center the questions and commitments of young people in our teaching. This is to say that the Christian narrative and Christian formation are an inevitable element in the construction of a summer academy founded in Christian theology. However, the program seeks to help young people in trying out and developing their own minds, their own passions, their own skills for making meaning through questions, narratives, myths and practices. YTI trusts the hearts and minds of young people with the mysteries of the Christian faith. Thus, a trip to a small island off the coast of Georgia was not seen as a particularly unique idea to the YTI alumni, it made perfect sense. Once again they were being asked to engage the life of the world and the passions of their minds and hearts through the languages of faith and science in order to make meaning.

By inviting YTI alumni to participate in the construction of the following pedagogical strategy I counted on a couple of things which allowed a head start to our learning and thinking together. The first was that all students had participated in communal theological reflection during the YTI summer academy. While the experience of the summer had faded or been recast in the memories of the alumni, the shared experience of exploring practical theological reflection in the summer before their senior years of high school was a substantive foundation for beginning to think in practical theological and ecological languages.

Also, I could assume a commitment to listening to each other and to the cultivation of space for trying out new practices. This student commitment made it easier to construct space for student and teacher participation. In this particular pedagogic strategy, it was imperative to construct a space that was open for the parsing of context, the participation in multiple languages for making meaning, and allowed multiple voices and perspectives to be heard. An explicit assumption was that learning would take place through the cultivation of conversation. As Charles Foster states in an essay on congregational memory, while safe space is the popular term for description of a participatory teaching/learning environment, the better term might designate such space as hospitable (Lee, 102). In this, Foster observes that no pedagogical environment can ever be completely safe. Our role as religious educators is to create environments that invite multiple ideas and perspectives to be brought to the conversation, not to create environments where individuals can feel completely safe. We participate in the construction of hospitable community for faithing; for testing, constructing, composing meaning as a foundational practice wherever we teach.

⁸ The program is now called the Youth Theological Initiative and is funded through a grant by the Lilly Endowment, Inc. The name change was instituted to point to a larger engagement with theological education of young people beyond the summer program.

Hospitable communities provide space and opportunities for trying out interpretations of experiences, narratives, metaphors, and languages for meaning-making in critical communal conversation. The depth of relationship which YTI alumni brought with them through shared experience, even though they were not all from the same year nor had they all met before the course, created the conversational infrastructure that Foster understands as necessary for learning, remembering, and trusting the hospitality of the community.

Second, the cultivation of hospitable space is important because it is rare in student experiences of teaching/learning contexts. This became evident on the first night of the 1999 trip. At the close of our discussion, the group dispersed in silence. I went across to the other side of camp to grab a snack from the kitchen area. On my way to my tent, I was approached by a young woman who had just graduated from the university. As we came closer, she rushed toward me and grasped me in a tight hug, held me and shook. After several minutes she finally said, "It has been so long since I have had the chance to be in a discussion like that, where I can talk about what is incredibly important to me both in faith and justice and ecology. I just felt like I could breathe for the first time in years." I initially interpreted this as evidence that she had been silenced by her faith community and in her college classrooms. This is a valid interpretation of what happened. But upon review of student journal reflections kept for the trip I found that it was more subtle than merely being silenced when their opinions did not fit the "party line". Several students expressed they had decided to be silent in academic settings due to the cultural appropriation of 'faith' and 'Christian' by individuals who identified themselves as exemplars in these categories through their condemnation and judgment against anyone or anything perceived as a threat. In other words, while they were being silenced it was not only for expressing unpopular opinions in inhospitable settings, they were also self-censoring because they did not want to be understood within with the cultural understanding of a 'Christian'. The student experience of the popular definition of 'Christian' is to adopt a religious expression of the same violence, rage, and fear that dominates other aspects of popular culture. In other words, Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson are two of the primary 'public Christians' because they express the same judgment, hatred, and fear in Christian language that is expressed by other exemplars of our necrophilic, individualistic culture.

Teaching/Learning Practice on the Island

Sapelo Island is one of the barrier islands bordering the southeastern coast. Sapelo has a long history tempering easy understanding of the human/environment relationship. Near the western shore is a large shell ring, evidence of the persistence of the rich oyster beds in the adjoining bays that helped sustain human habitation for thousands of years.⁹ Sapelo, just North of Jekyll Island near the center of the Atlantic Bight, the western curve of coastline extending from Cape Hatteras, North Carolina to Miami, Florida has tides on the Georgia coastline range up to six feet. The tides generate a dynamic system of salt marshes that serve as a significant breeding and nursery grounds for Atlantic fisheries

On the van ride down, we have a conversation about how we want to engage the elements of the course and what type of relationship we wanted to have with time. On Sapelo, we had choices, did we want to be driven by our watches, did we want to move when we felt like it, or did we want to find other ways to understand time? I began the conversation by asking, "How do you want to become aware of the times of the island?" "What do you mean, by times?" Julie broke in, somewhat prompted by a discussion she and I had held the previous week, "I think we are talking about trying to locate some rhythms, rhythm might be a better word than time, because time is caught up with clocks, watches and schedules. I think of rhythms and I think of my body and I think of how the sun comes up every day. When I was in India, we made sure that we were able to begin the day when the sun did. We started every morning by watching the sunrise. I don't necessarily want to get up at sunrise every day but I do think we should try and begin our day when the island is waking. I think we should think about an early morning start." From this we talked about when to rise, how we wanted to begin each day, the influence of weather and tides on our plans, and other ways of understanding that time on the island would have a different character from our homes or previous teaching/learning contexts.

⁹ The shell ring has been dated to 5800 BCE, it is the oldest feature on the coast of Georgia

The course consisted of experiences, practices, texts and forms of immersion in the daily life of the community of Sapelo Island. Each day began in silence with communal prayer and yoga, attempting to remember the body and the soul at the start of every day. After about 20 minutes of this practice we have breakfast. The silence is broken when the first person takes a second helping. We discuss the upcoming day including any options for responding to weather and tides. After washing dishes and securing the food from raccoons and squirrels, we move out from camp into the island communities.

The first full day on the island is spent with a local ecologist. The second year we studied with Taylor Schoettle, who worked for a number of years as an educator for the Sapelo Island research station of the University of Georgia. Since his retirement, he has written two books on the ecology of the Georgia barrier islands, one of which we used as a resource. He teaches by introducing students to animal and plant species that are characteristic of the particular habitat, for example fiddler crabs and marsh grass in the salt marshes. He then builds the relationships from these species to others that interact within their biotic niche. Taylor continues on a rapid pace throughout several habitats on the island, weaving the inter-relationship of systems and species with the consequences and promises of human interaction. Though he has studied the islands for decades, Taylor remains open to the wonder and beauty of the world around him. Witnessing his deep love for the habitats he knows intimately was as powerful a lesson as the introduction to new species and interactions.

Other days we explore from kayaks, an activity which places the body in motion, in relationship to the life of the island, and entails a physical shift in perspective. I don't frame kayaking in this way as we begin, but try to be aware of these elements as we paddle together from one place to the next, asking questions or making comments that highlight these elements as I paddle beside different students. Early in the course, we paddle from Sapelo down a meandering inter-island channel to Blackbeard Island, a National Wildlife Refuge. It is a context that complicates our understanding of natural. It is beautiful, austere, and seemingly pristine, but the natural species and habitats are under intense pressure from non-native species such as deer and wild pigs. There are few, if any, natural predators for these species. Blackbeard's claim to fame, beyond its wildlife refuge status, is the annual fall hunts it hosts in order to keep the non-native species at somewhat manageable populations. The walk on Blackbeard offers a number of opportunities for talking about the character of human interaction with the ecology of the planet.

At other times we spend time with a local historian, tour the community, listen to stories from Gullah-Geechee culture, make baskets with local craftswomen, or engage in service for the island. Each of these activities are framed as another way of practicing our engagement with the human / ecological contexts of the island. The entire course can be summed up as observing and parsing the context of theological and ecological observation and reflection. A learning goal is that the students become attuned to practices of discerning and living in relationship to their context. The unfamiliarity of Sapelo allows teachers and students to encounter explicit, implicit, and null assumptions about living in our home ecological contexts. My hope is that the practices will continue as we all return to our particular place. There is evidence that this does happen. Several students from the first two years have continued to write and are working on a book of photographs and reflections about Sapelo in dialogue with experiences in their home habitats.

The core of this pedagogical strategy is the evening reflection on the days events, readings, and the questions formed by students and teachers. In our nightly reflections, poetry is a lever. Spoken out of the darkness that inevitably cloaks the reflection at the end of the day, it serves as a narrative permission for playing with the metaphors of all of our languages. It also helps to link our observations, our practices of seeing, with the ideas that metaphor attempts to represent. Mary Oliver, Gary Snyder, Denise Levertov, Jane Hirshfield, Muriel Rukeyser, and other poets are conversation partners for wrestling with questions of meaning and the place of human beings in the world.

Wild Geese - Mary Oliver

You do not have to be good.

You do not have to walk on your knees

for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.

You only have to let the soft animal of your body

love what it loves.

Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
 Meanwhile the world goes on.
 Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
 are moving across the landscapes,
 over the prairies and the deep trees,
 the mountains and the rivers.
 Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
 are heading home again.
 Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
 the world offers itself to your imagination,
 calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting —
 over and over announcing your place
 in the family of things

After dinner, after 12 miles of paddling the day before¹⁰, after exploring and seining salt marsh and coastal waters, after struggling to learn a myriad of biotic creatures in geologic and biotic context, we sat under the night sky and began our theological discussion. Out of the dark, Bobbi (my co-teacher) spoke, “You do not have to be good, you do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert repenting....”. We began our reflection with this poem by Mary Oliver. The 12 students sat back for a few minutes at the completion of Bobbi’s recitation until I opened the discussion by asking what connections folks were beginning to make from our day and the day’s reading.¹¹

Clay, an Emory Woodruff and YTI alum, immediately jumped in. “We are all in this together, we have to be aware of all the ways we are involved in this world.” The group silently turned toward me and looked to see if he got it right. I sat back a little to remove myself from Clay’s line of sight and said, “Really, say more.” Clay, in a split second, said we have to be aware of our impact on the world, like the article said we read, you have to know.” “Hmmm, what do you mean?” A longer pause, and then a weak, “I’m not sure.” Bobbi, waited a long couple of minutes and asked, “Clay, are you talking about recycling or reuse of materials?” “Yeah, that’s it, we have to recycle and live simply.” We waited a longer time, no one else chimed in, Clay began to sweat and I said, “Hmm, I didn’t pick up on that at all, did anyone else?” Silence and an edge of panic as people wondered what they were in for over the next few days.

After a minute, I asked, “Why did we begin with a poem?” Matt, braved the suddenly dangerous water and said, “I heard the phrase, ‘your soft body’ and heard it with a sense of grace that the body was a good thing”. “Yeah, it was “You don’t have to be good”, Stacy. “I definitely understand the idea of a soft body, anyone sore?” “I’m sore but I’m sore not from crawling on my knees asking for repentance but because I worked to get my body to this island,” Jerry, an athletic young man who found the balance of the kayak beyond his ability to muscle or reason with. Kim, “Do you feel the breeze, this is the first time I can remember thinking of my body in a place, my body in the ‘family of things’.”

This began a conversation which moved back to the reading and remained lively until cut off at our covenanted ending time. During this time, our understanding of reciprocity moved from recycling and reuse, an easy mantra for a throwaway society, to an awareness of inter-relatedness with other creatures and shared contexts. The discussion moved from reciprocity to the importance of porous community, (outside that reading but coincidentally in a reading two days later) and the we moved past the place of correct answers and into a pedagogical space of live metaphors, connections, differences, open disagreement and into a community of teacher/learners and learner/teachers together.

¹⁰ A major mistake I made in the first year of the course was to paddle from the mainland to the island. Only two of us had ever been in a kayak before. It was a long and painful day for most of the participants and took some time to renegotiate the parameters of our teaching and learning together.

¹¹ Typically a short essay (8-20 pages) by Sallie McFague, George Tinker, Gary Snyder, Terry Tempest Williams, Bill McKibben.

In encountering this particular moment of teaching/learning, Clay had played his role as student. He knew that when a teacher paused in the transfer of information to ask a question, he/she was looking for a particular answer. He was performing in his role as student and I was not performing in my role as teacher. Because when I stopped to ask a question, I had decided to throw out all of the standard answers as inadequate. I was not playing fair, but my intent in doing so was to force the conversation of the week beyond the roles that we had been catechized into and ask the students to engage the work of the week as those who do not know along with a teacher who did not know, hoping for a practice of curiosity and questioning to evolve. It has worked, with different levels of resistance, each time I have either tried it or experienced it, but it is always an uncomfortable practice.

I can justify the discomfort because I understand the practice of evoking questions requires that we first overcome the pedagogical loop of seeking practiced answers. If we are too careful, we teach by pushing the dialogue with students toward our areas of expertise and comfort. However, this is not teaching towards awareness, this is teaching toward a particular bank of knowledge. While this might be an adequate form of teaching in some contexts, it is wholly inadequate in the practice of religious education. Teaching which leads to practiced answers cultivates certainty and absolutism. Religious educators teach toward encounters with mystery, not the constructions of certainty.

That having been said, this remains an important moment in my understanding of teaching and an incredibly difficult moment for Clay. His sense of dis-equilibrium remained throughout the week. We both remained committed to maintaining the relationships (teaching, mentoring, friendship) that existed prior to this moment and emerged outside. However, I had overstepped bounds and owe more to the graciousness of the student than my teaching ability. Clay and I have talked about this particular incident upon subsequent occasions and he repeatedly cautions me to remember the level of discomfort I caused. Since this initial teaching moment, I have taken the time to explain to the teaching/learning community that I will try and push beyond practiced answers, and that I hope that they will push me past my own easy answers.

Lost” - David Wagoner

Stand still. The trees ahead and bushes beside you
 Are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here,
 And you must treat it as a powerful stranger,
 Must ask permission to know it and be known.
 The forest breathes. Listen. It answers,
 I have made this place around you,
 If you leave it, you may come back again, saying Here.
 No two trees are the same to Raven.
 No two branches are the same to Wren.
 If what a tree or a bush does is lost on you,
 You are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows
 Where you are. You must let it find you.

In a reflection at the end of another evening, we began with the poem *Lost* by David Wagoner. The poem was spoken, we observed a silence about twice the length of the narration and then the poem was spoken again. We remained in silence after the second reading, waiting for entry into the reflection. Denise offered how the poet reminded us of the ability to become aware of a place regardless of whether you had been there before or not. “That there are certain aspects of a forest in the Midwest that remind you that you are in a forest in the Midwest. If it is out of the lowlands and has enough drainage, you will find beech trees and regardless of how lost you might feel, if you stop to sit at the foot of a beech, you can relax and assess the life of the forest around you.” “How so?” “Well, you know,” Julie jumped in, “it’s not just about finding your way out, I grew up on the Plains and it took me a while to not feel claustrophobic when I moved east. I missed the openness, or I never wanted to be there again, I don’t remember, but I knew that the way of seeing the world around me had changes when I went to a part of the country that had trees and hills as a central part of the geography.”

Barry interjected, "Have you ever noticed that when you ask people who live in the country for directions, they don't give them to you based on street names or maybe even town names. The directions are related to someone's barn or the house with the blue porch on the old Miller property, or the place where lightning struck and split the big white oak a few years back. The way they seem to know and relate the way through a place is related to how they have lived in it."

His reflection could have degenerated into an extended observation on the funny ways of people in the country but Julie picked up on the central theme. "I grew up in the country, way out, and the road names might be important, but that wasn't how you remembered how to get around. It was the relationships we had as we moved around. When I was a kid, it seemed that the ways I knew places were related to how and where I played in relationship to them. I knew places by where I swam, or where the tree that was always the safety spot for hide and seek, or the best place for playing flashlight tag, or gathering fireflies."

The reflection moved into a discussion on how we know a place and how we know ourselves in relation to a place. It became an avenue for expressing appreciation and longing for a deeper connection between our locations and our sense of living in space. During this time, and with most of the reflections, I took the role of repeating the generating lines from the poem and the generative events of the day. If the events of the day were to be likened to weaving, my role would be to remind folks of all of the elements of the pattern. To repeat the necessity for threads forgotten and to remember possibilities of areas for exploration as we followed another thread for reflection until it was exhausted. My role was not to add content, but to remind folks of the areas we had encountered and explored and the questions we had all brought into a week of theological and ecological reflection. It was true that the role of teacher was made easy by the curiosity of the students, but the role of the teacher should always be to nurture curiosity, even in those in which it seems to have died. It is teaching by reminding, generating dissonance and nurturing connections.

In the best discussions, each line of the poem became a frame for launching deeper discussions. Lostness as a sense of anxiety in familiar or unfamiliar places. Lostness as in the losses of childhood/adolescence/celebratory purposelessness associated with innocence no longer attainable after some of the disillusionment of adulthood. Lost in fulfilling the purposes of others without the sources for meaning within your own educational or vocational pursuit. The loss of family, home, community, familiarity allowing people to live into new understandings of themselves. Wonderful losses that open up new worlds of freedom, knowledge, responsibility. Loss of hope, vision, ideals and regaining the possibility of listening where you are, or moving to a place that will teach you.

Concluding Thoughts

I am still contemplating the elements of this experiment and the modes of teaching and learning bridging the disciplines of theology and ecology. In this niche, the practice of teaching is not the transfer of knowledge in order to answer rote questions; it is the practice of questions in order to evoke a lifetime of curiosity, imagination, and meaning making. In this, the teacher takes on the role of fellow seeker and questioner without abdicating the authority of the role of teacher. The practices described above are not techniques for teaching, but rather attempts to become aware of ways that allow us to remain open in conversation with each other and fellow creatures learning within and from our lived contexts.

Generative Bibliography

Ayers, Ed. *God's Last Offer: Negotiating for a Sustainable Future*. New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1999.

Berry, Wendell. *What are People For?* New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, North Point Press, 1990.

Berry, Wendell. *Another Turn of the Crank*. Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1995.

- Bowers, C. A and David J. Flinders. *Responsive Teaching: An Ecological Approach to Classroom Patterns of Language, Culture, and Thought*. Teachers College Press, New York, 1990.
- Bowers, C. A. *Critical Essays on Education, Modernity, and the Recovery of the Ecological Imperative*. Teachers College Press, New York, 1993
- Bowers, C. A. *Educating for an Ecologically Sustainable Culture: Rethinking Moral Education, Creativity, Intelligence, and Other Modern Orthodoxies*. Teachers College Press, New York, 1995.
- Callicott, J. Baird, and Fernando J. R. da Rocha. *Earth Summit Ethics: Toward a Reconstructive Postmodern Philosophy of Environmental Education*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996.
- Deloria, Jr., Vine. *God is Red: A Native View of Religion*. Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 1993.
- Durning, Alan Thein. *How Much is Enough: The Consumer Society and the Future of the Earth*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992.
- Fowler, Jim and Sam Keen. *Life Maps: Conversations on the Journey of Faith*. Jerome Berryman, ed. Waco, TX: Word Books, 1978.
- Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum, 1990.
- Freire, Paulo. *Educating for Critical Consciousness*. New York: Continuum, 1998a.
- Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage*. Patrick Clark, trans. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998b.
- Freire, Paulo. *Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare to Teach*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998c.
- Hall, Douglas John. *The Stewardship of Life in the Kingdom of Death*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985.
- Hessel, Dieter T. ed. *After Nature's Revolt: Eco-Justice and Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992.
- Hessel, Dieter T., ed. *Theology for Earth Community: A Field Guide*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996.
- Hirshfield, Jane. *The Lives of the Heart*. New York: HarperCollins, 1997.
- Horton, Myles, and Paulo Freire. *We Make this Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change*. Brenda Bell, John Gaventa, and John Peters, eds. Philadelphia: Temple Press, 1990.
- Kelly, Geoffrey B, ed. *Karl Rahner: Theologian of the Graced Search for Meaning*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992.
- Jackson, Wes. *Becoming Native to this Place*. Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1994.
- Jackson, Wes. *Altars of Unhewn Stone: Science and the Earth*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, North Point Press, 1995.
- Lee, James Michael, ed. *Forging a Better Religious Education in the Third Millennium*. Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 2000.
- Leopold, Aldo. *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1949. paperback edition, 1989.
- Levertov, Denise. *The Life Around Us: Selected Poems on Nature*. New York: New Directions Publishing, 1997.

- Levertov, Denise. *Sands of the Well*. New York: New Directions Publishing, 1998.
- McFague, Sallie. *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987.
- McFague, Sallie. *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993.
- McFague, Sallie. *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997.
- McKibben, Bill. *The End of Nature*. New York: Doubleday-Anchor Books, 1989.
- Oelschlaeger, Max. *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991.
- Oliver, Mary. *New and Selected Poems*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992.
- Oliver, Mary. *West Wind: Poems and Prose Poems*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997.
- Orr, David W. *Ecological Literacy: Education and the Transition to a Postmodern World*. New York: SUNY Press, 1992.
- Orr, David W. *Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment, and the Human Prospect*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1994.
- Petty, Michael W. *A Faith that Loves the Earth: The Ecological Theology of Karl Rahner*. New York: University Press of America, 1996.
- Rahner, Karl. *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996.
- Rukeyser, Muriel. *The Life of Poetry*. Ashfield, MA.: Paris Press, 1996.
- Schoettle, Taylor. *A Guide to a Georgia Sea Island*. St. Simons Island, GA: Watermarks Publishing, 1996.
- Sessions, George. *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century: Readings on the Philosophy and Practice of the New Environmentalism*. Boston: Shambala, 1995.
- Snyder, Gary. *The Practice of the Wild*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, North Point Press, 1990.
- Snyder, Gary. *A Place in Space: Ethics, Aesthetics and Watersheds*. Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1995.
- Snyder, Gary. *Mountains and Rivers without End*. Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1996.
- Snyder, Gary. *No Nature: New and Selected Poems*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1997.
- Teal, John and Mildred. *Life and Death of the Salt Marsh*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1969.
- Vitek, William and Wes Jackson, eds. *Rooted in the Land: Essays on Community and Place*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996.

