

Looking into the eyes of these young beings, I see something incredibly familiar . . . strength, hesitation, wonder, doubt, myself. They are mirrors. Not of America, India, Kerala, Bangalore, but of ourselves, our global self breathing, being, transforming. They come to us buzzing with the bustle of city life. Often donned in logo-stitched clothing, cotton, and jeans. In appearance, they could be from somewhere in America, Los Angeles, Chicago, Atlanta. They speak the same language, perhaps with a bit more rhythm, but the similarities are striking, the differences subtle. Self-consciousness abounds, as well as the often awkward reconciliation of child merging with adulthood. In this state of transition, they come to us, to the Sanctuary where the wild things are. How do they enter? How do they adjust? Who do they become after their encounters here? And who will they be upon returning to their families, schools, and daily routines? Will they remember river splashing, forest walks, the language of birds, plants, frogs, . . .the moon?

I am reminded of their peers on the other side of the globe. I have worked with them in their schools, summer camps, in the city, and in nature. They also struggle with the countless forms of integration. Integration of the self into the natural world is virtually impossible. In America, cities appear to belong to nature lovers with their tree lined streets and parks of green. There is an illusion of the natural world that permeates within the lives of these children. They are living within a nature constructed by human hands, trimmed, planted, sculpted to satisfy human desires. This separateness from the natural world runs deep, pulsing in the veins of these young beings.

I once asked a group of American schoolchildren to draw their favorite foods. The results were page after page of processed and packaged foods, a wrapped piece of candy, a bag of potato chips, a drumstick, and a carton of chocolate milk. When asked to describe where these items come from, the replies were unanimous, “the supermarket, the grocery store”. Probing more deeply, a child replied, “from a cow”. But, how the cow’s milk was mixed with chocolate and placed in a carton to be held in his hand remained a mystery. So, this is the fragmented state of our nation’s nourishment- desensitization and a severed connection to the giver of life, our Earth. We, as a nation have reached a critical point in our history that demands for us to reconnect, to recognize ourselves as integral to the survival of the natural world. For America, this is certain.

Coming here to India, I expected to discover a world of integration despite the poverty, the division of castes. I expected to find this intimate connection with the Earth still in abundance. Instead, what I found was myself within a world in transition. Despite the widespread use of traditional agricultural methods, there is ample evidence of the same breed of separateness from our Earth present in the form of plastic strewn along roadsides and septic smelling streams, the stripping of hillsides and the blossoming of supermarkets. Here, I found the reality visible rather than disguised in the form of tree-lined avenues. The evidence is not concealed. The shift is occurring now. It is a critical point in India’s history, a critical point in our collective history.

Arriving at the Sanctuary, I became a witness to the potential of an integrated life. One in which learning occurs upon waking. Just by showing up, participating in this living

organism that is a true learning community, one begins to notice, to breathe, to live. By living here in the warm embrace of the forest, I came to recall how life is intended.

As an educator, my being stirred with the realization of the incredible potential of a child's experience conversing with this world of wild things. There are infinite possibilities of reintegration. A child can experience firsthand, the endless cycles of life and death, the process of seed to plant to harvest to mouth and back again. Children can feel the elements upon their skin, observe themselves humbled by the power of the natural world, they can be reminded. They come and have been coming for many years . . . one by one, two by two, ten by ten, and most who come do not desire to leave.

Within this ideal classroom, this school in the forest, I am challenged to reconnect with my own being and to relinquish any tendency I possess to desire to teach, so that I may become a collaborator within the learning process. During our sessions together, I focus on creating situations in which the children are provoked to explore themselves and the environment through the use of a variety of mediums. The provocations take on many forms; blind contour drawing, the creation of symbolic pictorial language, guided imagery, and blindfolded sensory exercises. There are many of us, residents and visitors, who work with the children, who share tools to evoke expanded awareness.

The intention for these experiences is to dissolve the boundaries between self and nature, to open the senses, to observe one's sensory limitations for the purpose of reintegration with the natural world. Reintegration is difficult to recognize. It occurs in fleeting moments, which may or may not be voiced by the participant. It may occur in the form of a subtle silence or a joyful yelp or as an individual begins to use one sense when another is not available. What is exceptional is that these moments occur, that this living classroom allows for sensory integration, an environment in which one "sees" with the ears and "tastes" with touch. These once ordinary experiences of our ancestors are happening with contemporary city dwellers *here* in this very forest. Just listen . . . all around us, it is happening . . . it is in the moment while blindfolded, Deepak orients himself by the sound of bamboo rustling, in the moment when the apprehension of peer judgment dissolves with the drumming of foot to ground in fire dance, and in the moment when a view of sun rising invokes a reverent silence. These are the seeds of awareness, these are the endangered connections replenished.

They say here at the Sanctuary they are committed to the preservation of species . . . look around . . . is it only plants who are being saved?