

# Making Ethics an Everyday Activity: How Can We Reduce the Barriers?

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## **Abstract**

*I propose that for ethics to become a normal activity, practiced by citizens on a daily basis, we begin by identifying barriers to this activity. Once things that get in the way have been identified, I examine ways that environmental educators can create conditions for ethics to become part of mainstream practices and processes of inquiry—to become a serious educational endeavor. Some practical examples and suggestions are provided.*

## **Résumé**

*À mon avis, si nous voulons que l'éthique fasse partie intégrante de la vie quotidienne des citoyens, il faut commencer par déterminer quels sont les obstacles à l'atteinte de cet objectif. Après avoir discuté des obstacles à l'intégration de l'éthique dans la vie courante, j'examinerai comment les enseignants en études environnementales peuvent créer des conditions propices à l'intégration de l'éthique dans les pratiques et les processus de questionnement de sorte que l'éducation environnementale prenne plus d'importance. Des exemples et des suggestions pratiques seront fournis.*

In August 2002, I read about the Earth Summit in Johannesburg. It was during the early days of this conference and the pages of our national newspaper, *The Globe and Mail*, presented an array of perspectives. Some authors were more positive than others, but there was an overall sense of anticipation and, dare I say, hope. Big issues like global climate change and biodiversity seemed to be at the forefront.

I had been thinking about biodiversity, and read with interest, prospects for pressing this agenda forward. Canadians had been lobbying hard for endangered species legislation (Austen, 1996). Some opinion poles had indicated that as many as 94 % of Canadians had urged the Minister of the Environment to give our country strong legislation in this area. Many of us working on environmental issues found comfort in these numbers. We saw, in this, a strong undercurrent of environmental concern and, in particular, concern for disappearing species and habitats that support them. So, I read the newspaper with a renewed sense of optimism knowing that biodiversity was being discussed in mainstream media as the Earth Summit was getting underway. This optimism wasn't to last long.

My attention next turned to the Air Canada inflight magazine *en Route* (August, 2002). Here I was drawn to an advertizement for the all-wheel

drive vehicle made by Subaru, the Outback. Picture a photograph of a station wagon sitting in the middle of a jungle stream. Now picture the caption presented below: "Start a rare bug collection on your windshield." Further below, in the smaller print, the advertisement read, "Entomologists aren't the only ones who can discover a new insect. All you need is the 2002 6-cylinder Subaru Outback."

Here the marketing gurus at Subaru had invoked the collectability of rare insects—or even worse, the destruction of rare insects by their products' windshields—as a sales gimmick. And, their pitch is made to the same community that overwhelmingly approves passage of strong endangered species legislation. What gives? Marketers are clever, they know how to sell products. Yet, this advertisement seems to fly in the face of public sentiment. Why?

Canadians are not alone in such apparent confusion. Earlier the same year, I saw a Scottish tourism flyer encourage visitors to experience a "natural high" in the Cairn Gorm mountains. The flyer advertizes the "inspiration, adventure, and enjoyment" of mountains as an enticement to patronize the new mountain railway that now carries visitors "in total comfort (protected from the infamous Scottish weather!) from carpark level to the new Ptarmigan Station and the higher lying snowfields in around fifteen minutes." On arrival, this Ptarmigan Station "offers spectacular views combined with a mountain exhibition and the highest panoramic restaurant and shopping in the UK."

There are many ways to analyze this Scottish flyer. For my part, I was immediately struck by the juxtaposition of contrasting, even contradictory, messages. How, for example, does one reconcile the inspiration of the mountains—the natural high—with the total comfort and protection of the artificial environment of the railway car? And then, there are unforgettable mountain memories that are topped off with dining and shopping.

When extracted from their advertising contexts these examples leave many of us shaking our heads. They seem so blatantly opposed to prevailing values, or the social reality of many people, yet they successfully sell products. Why does this happen and what can be done?

Herbert Marcuse (1964) provides a possible explanation. According to his theory, this juxtaposition of opposing views serves in "the flattening out of the antagonism between culture and social reality through the obliteration of the oppositional, alien, and transcendent elements" (p. 57). In this sense he is talking about the dominant culture of consumerism and instrumentalism on one hand, and for example, the widespread care for other species that is also an important part of our social reality. It is the prospect of preserving endangered species at the expense of consumer practices that is alien to our dominant culture. And, it is the challenge posed by this social reality, held by so many citizens, that creates possibilities to transcend societal norms. This is what is so threatening to the status quo, and sets up the "antagonisms" referred to by Marcuse. Further, underlying these opposing views, are ethical questions; these are controversial and, for some, threatening.

The flattening out of conflicting points of view, or antagonisms, or controversy, or differing social assumptions—it can be framed in many ways—doesn't come about, according to Marcuse (1964), through direct challenges. Rather, it comes about “through their wholesale incorporation into the established order, through their reproduction and display on a massive scale” (p. 57). Today we call it cooption.

Rather than confront the challenging ideas of our times they are incorporated into our cultural texts, in this case through advertizements. These cultural products “indoctrinate and manipulate—promote a false consciousness” (Marcuse, 1964, p. 57). And, the “indoctrination they carry ceases to be publicity; becomes a way of life—good way of life—militates against qualitative change” (p. 12). Marcuse calls this the “music of salesmanship” where “[e]xchange value, and not truth value counts. On it centers the rationality of the status quo, and all alien rationality is bent to it” (p. 57). In other words, the controversy inherent in the opposing views is subsumed by the dominant cultural perspective. Opposing views are seen so often in the same context that their differences cease to illicit a negative response. We increasingly view contesting messages without concern. This is how the inherent contradictions and antagonisms of our social reality are softened, or flattened out. And, as these antagonisms are softened, we slip into conformism and a collective unconsciousness (e.g., Saul, 1995).

The major casualty in the flattening of contrasting points of view is our desire and ability to engage in meaningful discussions about issues of social importance—discussions about what constitutes a good life, how we ought to live, and right relationships amongst people, and between people and the more-than-human world. One of the themes running through these potential discussions is that they are importantly about ethics. When we wonder why ethics isn't an everyday activity for most of society, we need to consider the daily bombardment of mixed messages that numbs our ability to distinguish between dominant cultural goals and the social reality of many citizens—that flatten out the contradictions between these two realities. This is but one of many barriers to ethical thinking in today's culture.

Another phenomenon that can work against ethical thinking is the tendency to frame complex issues in terms of simple—and perhaps simplistic—dichotomies. When we present yes or no questions, we deny the inherent complexities of social issues and their underlying ethical dimensions. Also, the yes or no answer demanded, discourages thoughtful public discussion about controversial issues.

Perhaps the most poignant example of this phenomenon is found in the now infamous declaration by George W. Bush, “You're either with us or against us.” The overtones are ominous. When faced with the prospect of standing with this president or being grouped with the unpatriotic and traitorous, many felt their breath literally taken away—left speechless. In the lead up to the Iraq war, the disenfranchised were again finding their voices, but

sadly, too late to force a real and substantive debate about the ethics of the Iraqi war prior to commencement. (Though their impact will be felt for years to come.)

There are those who have worked persistently to counter this trend towards making the complex evermore simplistic—and to give breath to the voiceless. Contrast, for example, the Bush statement with the thoughts of Canadian philosopher John Ralston Saul (1995) who said:

Equilibrium, in the Western experience, is dependent not just on criticism, but on non-conformism in the public place. The road away from the illusions of ideology towards reality is passable only if that anti-conformism makes full use of our qualities and strengths in order to maintain the tension of uncertainty. The examined life makes a virtue of uncertainty. It celebrates doubt. (p. 190)

For Saul, this “equilibrium” is a creative tension that can exist when ideologies, utopias, and assorted solutions are juxtaposed against our collective abilities—our practices and processes of inquiry, our powers of consciousness—that test, prod, and judge the way we approach reality. And, again following Saul, the success of citizen-based democracy rests on public participation, including criticism and dissent. It is through public discussion, and the controversy of contested positions, that we can engage with the ethics of social and environmental issues and avoid the monologue of ideology.

### Reducing Barriers to Ethics

In spite of the barriers to ethics presented in the examples of the previous section there are premises to advance from. First, everyone operates from within value systems, or stories, and ethical thinking enables individuals and groups to examine these systems and stories. In this sense ethical thinking is about involving people in a process of exploration and understanding values and how they affect lifestyle choices and the political decisions we make. Our question, as educators, is how do we encourage this—help to make it happen?

Second, policies have been developed which appear to create opportunities—or at least give permission—to explore ethics, and even environmental ethics, within education systems. In 1995 the Ministry of Education in British Columbia, for example, published *Environmental Concepts in the Classroom: A Guide for Teachers*. In this document it says that, “the study of the environment enables students to develop an environmental ethic.” In 2002 Environment Canada released *A Framework for Environmental Learning and Sustainability in Canada* (Government of Canada, 2002). Here too, the importance of “ethical thinking” is highlighted.

Third, these developments seem to parallel emerging trends within Canadian society. Recently, I surveyed a number of major Canadian newspapers and found columns dealing with “everyday ethics.” I have also heard

similar forums aired on CBC radio. And, to start 2001, the *Ottawa Citizen* (Todd, 2001) ran a story about the decade's top 10 ethical dilemmas. Environmental ethics was the first; "There's no future on an unlivable planet, which is a key reason this is ranked the No. 1 moral agenda item of the next decade" (p. A14). Now, John Ralson Saul's best selling book, *On Equilibrium* (2001), is also helping to bring ethics to public prominence. Together, these observations suggest that discussing ethics is both timely and topical.

What is particularly interesting about Saul's (2001) approach is his insistence that ethics should not be an exotic activity performed by "Heroes and Saints," but that exercising our ethical abilities should be built into our lives such that they become "simply normal behaviour" (p. 5). This means that ethics needs to become an everyday activity and not something left to experts who reside elsewhere.

While the previous sections point to harbingers of new ethical possibilities, we are still a long way from making ethics an everyday activity. *Environmental Concepts in the Classroom: A Guide for Teachers* (Ministry of Education) was published in 1995, yet there seems to be little "on the ground progress" to show for the effort. Talk about ethics seems to circle the perimeter of mainstream education. Yet, the vast majority of the 5,500 Canadians consulted between 1999 and 2002 believe that environmental learning is inextricably linked to values and ethical thinking (Government of Canada, 2002). Again there appears to be a disjunction. There is a will, but is there a way?

One way to make ethics an everyday activity is to seek systemic barriers that block progress. Once we've identified things that get in the way, we can seek to create conditions for ethics to more readily emerge from behind the barricades and become part of mainstream discussions about social and environmental issues. For this paper, I will examine barriers created by confusing ethics with ideology and acquiescing to instrumental rationality.<sup>1</sup>

### *Beyond Ethics as Ideology*

One of the fears of the anxious, as Saul (2001) suggests, is that "if you let ethics off the rational leash, it will turn into ideology" (p. 86). This is not without justification. For some, raising the specter of teaching ethics, kindles unpleasant memories of being subjected to doctrinaire practices and preaching—in both religious and secular contexts. For these folks there is a fear that somebody else's values will be imposed on their children—perhaps "crammed down their throats."

A first step in rehabilitating ethics in the minds of skeptics is to be clear that this term is used in more than one way. In some cases we refer to it as a code of practice. Many professionals are, for example, expected to adhere to the ethical codes of their governing bodies. In some communities

other codes of acceptable practice (for some at least) are developed and then inculcated. A code of "hunting ethics" is an example of a product, in the form of recommended guidelines, that has been formulated by subgroups within a society as a way of controlling members within those groups—in this case, other hunters.

While "ethics as code," may make useful contributions, it is not the same as making ethics an everyday activity. We aren't necessarily engaged fully in ethical practices if we are simply following rules, especially rules established by committees or experts that reside elsewhere. More ominously, as Saul (2001) warns us, "Of all our qualities, ethics slips most easily into extremism" (p. 86), particularly when ethics is understood as rules or social prescriptions.

Consider again the statement, "You're either with us or against us." Not only does it discourage thoughtful ethical debate, but whatever good intentions may underlie this statement, they appear to have been converted into what Saul (2001) has called "misplaced certainty as to moral rectitude." Ethics becomes ideology. And, in such instances "This certainty convinces the holder of the truth that he has the right to harm others" (p. 86).

Fortunately, ethics is also used in another way. Seen from a different perspective, ethics is a process of inquiry—a philosophical examination of those varied and sometimes contested stories that constitute our social reality. This is quite different from following prescribed rules or an ideologue. Rather, "ethics as process" invites individuals into an ongoing process of defining and redefining their own rules for individual and community conduct. Ethics in this sense is an everyday activity for ordinary people. And, it is the essence of citizen-based democracy.

Seen this way, ethics is an open-ended process with the potential to expose new challenges and generate new possibilities. Here, ethics isn't codified, but rather enacted afresh everyday in myriad ways. And, it is a continuous and evolving process. A second step in rehabilitating ethics is to practice, explain, and enable "ethics as process." This doesn't mean that decisions and actions are never taken. It does mean that ethical positions are always open for discussion, reexamination, and revision.

Perhaps the easiest way to engage individuals and communities in ethical discussions is to ask them philosophical questions: Why? What do you mean? And we can ask: What ought we do in this case or that? And, why? What would be a good way to live? What would good relationships between people and societies look like? What about good relationships between people and animals? Ecosystems? And, the more-than-human world? Presidential candidate Ralph Nader said, during the 2000 U. S. election, that we don't need heroic leaders so much as a lot more people asking better questions.

A good entry into ethical discourse can be found through evaluations of cultural texts. Canadian environmental philosopher, Neil Evernden (1985),

argued that the real authorities in a culture are unquestioned assumptions. So, upon which cultural assumptions do the advertizements discussed at the beginning of this article rest? By looking carefully at the language, metaphors, images, and practices in contemporary texts, we can often learn a lot about prevalent cultural values. What, for example, do images of squashed insects on an automobile windshield say about relationships between humans and other living beings? What metaphors for nature can we find in this image? And are these good and appropriate metaphors? And what does it say about our collective ideas about a good life when restaurants and shopping become incorporated into our "mountain memory"? Once started we can go on and on, it is not that hard really.

The point here isn't to lead people to "pat" or "right" answers to the kinds of questions posed above. Rather it is to engage them in the discussion. Awaken their consciousness and give them back their voice. As Marcuse (1964) says, "Naming the 'things that are absent' is breaking the spell of the things that are" (p. 68). Revealing unconscious and invisible assumptions, the sources of much authority in our culture, can be a first step in social critique. It can lead to "better questions," and it can provide a first step towards reimagining new possibilities.

### *Beyond Instrumental Rationality*

Many have traced historical antecedents to the present preeminence of instrumental rationality. Frustrated by the circularity of metaphysical arguments of the day, scholars such as Descartes sought new ways to understand the world. As Morris Berman (1984) (and many others) explains, Descartes' resolve to construct a new epistemology began a process that shifted the nature of inquiry from metaphysical and ethical questions about "why" to the more instrumental questions about "how." Emphasis about larger purposes gradually lost ground to questions about how to do some useful function. Some would argue that the conversion was near complete when Newton, when asked to explain the larger significance of his theory of light and colour, and his explanation of this behaviour, he answered, "I've measured it and that is enough" (cited in Berman, 1984, p. 33).

While ethics may be clawing its way back into public consciousness we can see on a daily basis anecdotal evidence for the overwhelming presence of a more instrumental form of rationality. This often comes up when we try to protect something we value by resorting to an economic argument rather than making a case based in values. Neil Evernden (1985) describes the problem:

Applying monetary evaluation to nature is dangerous to start with, just because it encourages a comparison between the uses of each mountain. As soon as it is worth more as tin cans than as scenery, the case for the mountain vanishes. But, more important, monetary evaluation distracts us from the fact that other

values at issue are not economic in the first place. It is all these other values that are at risk when the environmentalist opts for the argument from expedience.  
(p. 11)

In this example Evernden shows how utility, or instrumental worth, is radically different from other kinds of values. And to understand this, and redirect our efforts, we need to move outside the epistemology of this dominant form.

Another way of looking at this issue is through the eyes of ecologists working on behalf of threatened and endangered species. A scientist recently shared her frustrations that while she and her colleagues can show that animals and their habitats are threatened, nothing happens. Yet, in some ways this isn't a surprise. Science can work towards explaining how phenomena occur, and based on this knowledge can make predictions about what might happen. But, knowing a species is becoming extinct, does not necessarily lead us to a conclusion that we ought to do any thing about it. Robert Bringham (1995) expresses the same thing poetically in his "Conversations with a Toad":

My people have named a million species of insects.  
They tell me that millions more are unnamed —  
tens of millions among the living  
and hundreds of millions among the dead

It is good news, toad: that no one can list  
what exists in the world. But not good enough.  
Named or unnamed, if it lives, we can kill it. (p. 22)

What Bringham so brilliantly reveals is how our typical inquiries are full of science yet lack attention to the a priori question, "Why should we care?"

Critique of the Cartesian experiment is not new; it has been amply discussed in environmental and philosophical literature. Yet, as Evernden (1985) points out, public faith in the resulting instrumental rationality has never been shaken. Having identified barriers to ethical thinking it is time to do more—to claim the space opened up by the critical work—to create conditions for ethical thinking to emerge. In the following sections I focus on some conditions that we can tackle including the language, images, and metaphors of everyday use, and the roles of experience and emotions. The final section suggests possibilities for connecting the practices and processes of ethics to real life issues.

### Language, Images, and Metaphors

Conditions favourable to the emergence of environmental ethics will require language, images, and metaphors adequate to the task—these are the tools of ethical discourse. Yet, there is some evidence to suggest that we are



poorly equipped. Eugene Hargrove (2000) commented on a policy document (Yukon Wolf management Team, 1992) that described "inherent value" as a relatively new attitude. Hargrove argues that this term, used synonymously with "intrinsic value," was actually a commonly expressed value in the mid-19th century. Rather, "intrinsic value" is a traditional, simple, straightforward term that has been largely displaced by the more instrumental language of economics.

According to Hargrove (2000) this displacement has come about as a result of the work of the utilitarian ethicists of the 19th century and the pragmatists and logical positivists in the early 20th century. Hargrove goes on to argue that the legacy, of at least some philosophers working within these traditions, is the common belief that values are arbitrary, subjective, irrational, and the product of meaningless emotion. But other unintended consequences of their work have been a slow elimination of the language of values and ethics from respectable discourse. Continuing Hargrove's argument, these unintended consequences were comparable to the development "Newspeak," the simplified language described in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1989). In this text, the totalitarian government of Big Brother was trying to develop a simplified language in which a wide range of ethical and political ideas could not be expressed, thus making it impossible to think certain kinds of thoughts.<sup>2</sup>

In Hargrove's (2000) experience, citizens no longer seem comfortable using the traditional language of intrinsic value to discuss ethics. He suggests that it is now considered quaint, old-fashioned, and that it is on the verge of disappearing from ordinary language. I can add from experience that "intrinsic talk" can be the object of public derision in particular contexts. It is dismissed as "fluff," but in reality it is also threatening. Further, it is still common to hear people speak of the sciences as producing "hard" knowledge and everything else as "soft."

We need to resist linguistic intimidation by this "soft" talk. And, we can be proactive. Let's, for example, consciously start reducing our dependence on instrumentalist words and phrases like: *renewable resource management, resource, development, economic growth, non-human, consumptive and non-consumptive, trophy, game, overburden* (all material—organic and inorganic that lies above a mineral deposit), *consumer*. Then, let's start reclaiming the language required for ethical discussion, and creating words, like David Abram's (1996) *more-than-human*, where needed. Perhaps we can begin by using words and phrases like: *conservation biology, intrinsic, respect, care, empathy, affinity, love, ethics, justice, interspecific justice, equity, plain citizen of the biotic community*.

We can also do much by adjusting the images that we live by. Environmental philosopher Holmes Rolston III (1999) has spoken about visiting a favourite campground in the Rocky Mountains that is adjacent to subalpine meadows. The trail signs in these meadows, profuse with daisies,

lupines, columbines, delphiniums, bluebells, paintbrushes, penstemons, shooting stars, and violets, for years read, "Please leave the flowers for others to enjoy." More recently these signs had been replaced by newly cut ones saying, "Let the flowers live!"

I live in an area where bears are still abundant and have also noticed a shift in signage. Warnings that were once posted and created images of bears as fearsome and dangerous creatures have been replaced by the message that, "You are entering bear country"—you are the intruder, so be careful and respectful.

In February 2003, I was stopped in my tracks in a large shopping mall. A window-sized sign posted in a Body Shop store read, "One cannot simultaneously prepare for war and create peace."<sup>3</sup> Once my companion and I got over our admiration for the courage of this merchant, we could not help speculating about how public discussion could be enriched if half, or even just a quarter, of the stores in this mall had displayed similar signs. In each of the examples shared here, the imagery has, unlike the advertisements presented earlier, served to give presence to contradictions, controversy, transcendent elements in our social reality—our different stories. These images all invite us to examine social norms—to examine life. They also invite us, in small but intimate ways, to enrich our ethical lives, to make ethics part of our everyday activities.

So now we can ask the more open questions, "what new images and metaphors do we need?" When your political representative, school principal, or university president waves the new flag, what should he or she say—what images should she or he present? What new images can you generate—personally, now?

## Experience, Emotions, and Feelings

Environmental philosopher, Anthony Weston (2004, in this *Volume*), describes a belief that Western culture is increasingly committed to disconnection from the rest of the world. Citizens who are physically "protected" from the larger living world—barricaded, by enclosed mountain railways, climate controlled four wheel drive vehicles, buildings with connecting walkways, malls, televisions, and computers, and classrooms—don't feel themselves as part of larger living systems. A civilization whose citizens who don't "know in their bones that what 'goes around' will eventually come *back*, is likely to end up in trouble sooner or later, probably sooner" (p. 33). For Weston, this insistent kind of felt disconnection "is not the root of the environmental crisis but, most fundamentally, is the very crisis itself" (p. 33).

In speaking about schools, Weston (2004) describes how, in teaching, we most often tell students that they belong to the Earth—complete with information to back up this claim. Yet, this is a place where Earth herself, seldom

shows up. For Weston, the task of environmental education is to address our disconnection—“to reverse it, to re-situate it, to welcome us home” (p 33). And this is urgent.

Hear again we have a demand for an epistemology beyond the barriers of instrumental rationality. This “know it in your bones” kind of knowing requires another way of seeing and feeling the world. What we do counts. If we believe that an environmental ethic may be grounded in qualities such as care, empathy, concern, understanding for the Earth—indeed belonging to Earth—then we need to create contexts that are friendly to this possibility. Some, for example, speak of a biophilic, life-loving, classroom (see Selby, 1996); yet, it is hard to imagine success in contexts where children never see, touch, smell, or listen to other living beings.

One of the points here is that ethical approaches are never simply objective, or instrumental, there is always a more subjective and emotional component. We need to pay attention to this. As Arne Næss says, “There is an underestimation of the cognitive values of feelings” (Næss & Jickling, 2000, p. 53). Following Næss we should allow space in our instructional programs for his sequences of questions: “How do you feel?” “What do you feel?” Then, “What should you feel?” “What do you think you are right to feel?” and “What do you want yourself to feel?” (p. 56). And, if our feelings are connected to Earth then they must be grounded in experiences with Earth.

For both Weston and Næss, joyful experiences with the world need not be difficult or expensive. Weston (2002, 2004) suggests we might even begin by recognizing the “animalness” within us all, our closest kinship with the more-than-human world. Næss (Næss & Jickling, 2000) speaks about the centrality of the schoolyard itself—even in urban centers. For him, nature is where you find it, and it is everywhere. Næss insists that we can even begin in the corner of the yard where only one flower exists and then he rehearses a possible scenario:

You bend down—you use your body language—and you say: “Look here.” And some answer: “There is nothing there.” And then you talk a little about what you see: “This flower here, it’s not the season for it. How can it be here this late in the year? And look at it. It certainly has need of a little more water; it’s bending, look at the way it bends. What do you see when it is bending like this?” (p. 54).

The objective for Næss is to help students to see things they haven’t seen before, even inside the schoolyards. And, these experiences can be developed in terms of personal relationships.

This attention to joyful experiences should not, however, be seen as simple emotivism. As Næss (2002) points out, emotional experiences and feelings “may take an immature direction” (p. 71). Just as narrowly conceived rationality can be trite and petty, emotional experiences, on their own, can be inadequate. For Næss, the highest form of understanding, *amor intellectualis*, is a unified emotional understanding—understanding that

does not distinguish between feeling and reason. Still, he adds, in our kind of society, "intellectual development in the narrowest sense seems to have received far too great a role compared with emotional development" (p. 85). In society at large "people ascribe to [emotions] little or no value as knowledge" (p. 53).

Seen this way, meaningful environmental experiences are within the grasp of everyone. And our job is to find and share the joy that can be in everyday experiences, and to develop our own stories for interpreting Earth with empathy, etiquette, and feeling. In our present context, this may be the most important task of all.

## Connecting Ethics and Real Life Issues

As Eugene Hargrove has said, "ultimately the form environmental ethics takes in any particular place on this planet will be determined by those who use it" (1994, p. 44-45). Put this way, ethics are defined by usage, they are performative. At the end of the day our ethics—codes and practices—are revealed in our every day actions. If we ignore ethical dimensions of real life issues, then we risk acquiescing to the status quo—the unquestioned assumptions of our culture. Alternatively, we can work towards making ethics an everyday activity and this necessarily involves the process of bringing ethics questions into our daily conversations and work places. In this way we gain practice and experience. And we make more purposeful and ethically informed decisions.

In some cases our actions may help to create a context that can enable ethical conversations. In other instances ethics will help us to make sense of pressing issues of our time. There is no formula. However, in what follows, I will offer a few examples. As such they are just a few of many tentative starting points. Use them, if you wish, as stepping stones over barriers to ethics as an everyday activity. And, then invent more.

Some cautious suggestions:

- ***Accept invitations to begin.*** The British Columbia Ministry of Education (1995) has acknowledged the educational significance of environmental ethics. This can be taken as a precedent and an invitation to bring ethics as a field of enquiry—a process—into learning environments. In another context, consider the reflections circulated by the British Parliamentary Office in a Science and Technology posting (2000): "... there is a need to develop a broader basis for expressing 'value' beyond the controversial approaches of 'environmental economics' that seek to place monetary values on species, habitats, and landscapes." Look for these kinds of statements and then use them, when you can, to raise questions of ethics.

- **Go beyond the classroom.** Everyday activities exist outside of the classroom—in the real world. Go there when you can. We are physical beings and we gain vitally important knowledge and feelings through the physicality of our bodies—through our sensory experiences. Yet, as Joe Sheridan (2002) observes, “[e]ducation’s mandated role to break the physicality of the human body is akin to breaking horses and here education’s success is not outdoor movement but its capacity to prevail upon the body to sit still and examine the outside world through mediated experience that takes place indoors” (p. 197). Let’s embrace our physicality not break it. Let’s give that “know it in the bones” knowledge opportunities to flourish.
- **Get involved in real issues.** Examine the pernicious effects of advertising—and resulting patterns of consumption. Explore concepts of justice, equity, ethics, and multiculturalism. And, look into big contemporary issues like climate change, biodiversity loss, poverty, and war. If we ignore such important issues, we risk conveying an implicit message that they aren’t important—that they shouldn’t become part of everyday discussions and activities. However, issues must be selected carefully. Our issues are not necessarily our students’ issues, and what is important to them may not be as obvious as we think.
- **Be a citizen.** Educators are citizens too, and should have an active role in their community affairs. To do otherwise can carry the message that citizen participation is unimportant, and makes little difference. At an increasingly cynical juncture in our history, students need more than ever to see mentors “walking their talk.” This is certainly what the Body Shop managers were doing when they displayed a “peace” sign in their store during the period leading up to the Iraq war. However, it is crucial to know when our actions can influence or impede their progress. Students can be impressionable, and coercion, however subtle or unintentional, indicates the shift from ethics towards ideology.
- **Get involved with policy development.** Citizens can often influence policy development through processes of public consultation. And, of course, curriculum revision and development is ongoing, there are plenty opportunities here. The Yukon’s Protected Areas Strategy (Yukon Department of Renewable Resources, 1998) is an example of such citizen effort. Its mission statement reads:

Our shared relationship with the northern land, water, air and life forms defines our character, sustains our spirits and unites us as people of the Yukon. We have a duty to protect the ecosystems and natural processes that support this relationship. We will meet this responsibility for the benefit of ourselves and our children, but also for the benefit of other life forms and the earth as a whole—for biodiversity and the intrinsic value of wilderness. (p. 1)

Here citizens have consciously sought to infuse a policy document with the language, metaphors, and images needed to bring ethics into the public domain, and give citizens the tools they need for ethical discourse.

- **Get beyond facts.** Examine and declare your assumptions and report them in research papers, policy documents, and curricula. This is starting to occur. The scientific report, *Large Carnivore Conservation in the Rocky Mountains* (Paquet & Hackman, 1995), begins with the authors discussing their philosophical, ecological, and sociological assumptions. Imagine the impact if this could, over time, become the norm. Why not begin to expect this kind of conversation at the beginning of research and policy documents?
- **Participate in shaping workplace environments.** We can make ethical choices everyday and many do through recycling, energy conservation, purchasing policies and dozens of other little actions. But why not think big too. What could happen if knowledge of environmental ethics became a condition of employment? Such an audacious idea was a policy, albeit short lived, of the Yukon's Department of Renewable Resources. When they advertized for the position of "Assistant Deputy Minister" the job posting (Yukon Public Service Commission, 1997) included the line: "It would be desirable if the successful candidate had a knowledge of environmental ethics and conservation biology." Now, consider the impact of such commitments if they became a little more widespread. Universities do not wish to disadvantage their students' employment opportunities and meeting such employment demands could significantly increase the profile of ethics.

Issues can be complex and messy, but get involved when you can anyway. A vibrant democracy depends on this participation that is the very expression of discomfort and controversy. However, careful preparation is required; success and failure can be separated by a heartbeat. The greater the controversy, the greater the need to present clear, explicit, and defensible educational theory and pedagogy.

Good education that can enable change, that can transcend the status quo, requires risk. Take some chances. Some of the best education will take place on the edge between present realities and future possibilities. Good educators will make some mistakes and will, from time to time, have to pull back. However they will also be pushing the pedagogical and theoretical "envelope."

With this in mind, "We should not regret our inability to perform a feat which no one has any idea how to perform" (Richard Rorty, cited in Saul, 2001, p. 77). "Having performed one" Saul adds, "it is there as an example" (p. 77). Good luck.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This is a beginning, not an exhaustive enumeration of barriers. Further researchers might consider the effects of secularization of schools, the values clarification movement, the decline and now reemergence of religion. Some might say that religion too often takes dogmatic forms, but how could, for example, the religious language of values evolve in ways that avoid the dogmatism pitfall?
- <sup>2</sup> This not to say that philosophers representing these traditions have not been helpful. Utilitarians, for example, and Pragmatists, such as John Dewey, have taken ethics seriously and made important and useful contributions.
- <sup>3</sup> See the cover photograph on *Volume 8* of the *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*.

## Notes on Contributor

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