



Inner and outer weather: Creative practice as contemplative ecological inquiry

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Abstract

Ecological crises exist not only in the external environment; they have their source within us — in the mind and in personal and cultural values (Bai, 2012; Stoknes, 2018). Arts-based and contemplative inquiry are helpful in opening the self and the senses to the natural world and its elemental dynamics of weather. Creative contemplative practice also creates room for inner exploration about how we relate to other species and to the larger cosmos. This article describes a drawing project that was undertaken in an endeavour to build these connections, both within and without. Through the process of walking and making drawings of the bark of trees in a local ecosystem, attention was given also to the dynamics of weather and how we might be more conscious of its role in everyday life, with the belief that such caring attentiveness is necessary in a time of critical climate change. From a perspective that values interconnectivity, this exploration puts forth that the elements of air and water are within us too, and that our inner weather — our shifting psycho spiritual states — is affected by earth's dynamics, just as, more importantly, and our more long-term values and psycho-spiritual perspectives have significant effects on ecological health.

Keywords: Arts-based education; ecology & education; contemplative practice; walking; environmental ethics; sensory & aesthetic attentiveness; weather & climate

1. Introduction

Per Espen Stoknes (2018) has said that 'Our current environmental crises aren't just out there. They're equally a crisis of mind, emotion, imagination' (Stoknes, 2018, p. 14). Indeed, if we are to affect long term and meaningful change, it seems necessary to attend carefully to what is within — to that which has brought about the production-oriented culture — and consider our values, desires and our sense of who we are in the world (Bai, 2012). This paper considers ecological ways of being that emphasise the relational and the

interdependent: the co-existence and resonance with different life forms and elements in the cosmos, with a specific consideration of our relation to weather. Through the frameworks of arts-based ecological learning and a personal contemplative art practice, the article describes a project of walking and drawing that considers how the weather in our local ecosystems might play a more consciously valued role in our everyday lives.

In my area of arts-based ecological education I have often encountered experiences where — both in my

own practice and that of my students — the practice of aesthetic contemplation, of drawing or writing in response to the natural world, brings about moments of intimate connection and understanding of the value of our co-existence with other life forms. Here, a regular practice of drawing done on repeated visits to local natural areas, aims to cultivate closeness with interconnected natural systems, and considers how an increased awareness of these ecologies and their particular dynamics — atmospheric and otherwise — might contribute also to a more expanded and inclusive sense of self. The inquiry occurs within the frameworks of expressive arts practice, contemplative inquiry and deep ecology. Expressive arts practice, which assumes that capacities for creativity and aesthetic responsiveness dwell within us all, allows for personal discoveries about the self, and about our relations with the world around us. While this project is done in that framework, many forms of creative practice have the potential to engender such discoveries provided the work is process-oriented, rather than being done primarily for the results produced.

My exploration is with the natural ecologies close to my home outside the Vancouver area, and its connection to weather seeks to bring the larger concerns around climate closer to home, to the neighbourhoods in which we dwell. At a time when climate is changing evermore rapidly, there seems to be a need for increased consciousness at the local and personal, everyday level. In my experience, this consciousness is deeper and more affecting when gained through personal embodied and sensuous experience. The dynamics of nature, including the common everyday phenomenon of weather, are in need of our genuine everyday curiosity and humble, caring observation. If our *sensitivity* and receptiveness to the dynamics of local ecosystems is cultivated and expanded, this contributes also to a richer expansion of who we are as humans (Bringhurst, 2008; Wilson, 1984).

2. Background to the project

I have had a long-standing practice of connecting with wilderness areas near my home through art — primarily through drawing but also through

photography, narrative and poetry. Working with Stephen J. Gould's (1991) observation that we are only likely to actively protect what we know and love (as cited in Orr, [2004], p. 43), this practice has mostly been about building intimacy with the land and with local wilderness areas. I live close to a series of wooded hills in the Fraser Valley in British Columbia, an area characterised by many waterways, established forests and backgrounded by the Golden Ears mountain range. While I often experience anxiety over areas that are threatened by development, I feel immensely fortunate to have areas of relatively pristine wilderness close by, as well as neighbourhoods well sheltered by a rich variety of trees.

I embarked upon a project that was partly inspired by the work of a student I had some years ago. A graduate student in Arts Education, she completed a series of drawings on the part of the Trans Canada Trail that traverses our university campus. She had set out to do a drawing each day and to write about her process. The journalistic and daily quality of this project resonated and felt familiar to me: in previous years, I too, had worked on a long-term journalistic series of small abstract drawings as well as one of contour drawings. There was also the particular quality of her images: the process of contour drawing focuses on attending, in a very sincere and concentrated way, to the contours of the subject being drawn. The emphasis is on the process of seeing rather than on the finished image, and as such, has the very specific mark of the author's hand. I have also since had the journey of several series of forest drawings — responses to places that offer me deep spiritual nourishment near my home — a practice that became very much a part of my life when I later sought out ways to come to intimately know more a wilderness area through drawing.

Many years after looking through her project, what I recall most particularly are her last lines. She explained that while she had set out to draw along the trail every day, this had not materialised quite as planned. She had, nonetheless, accumulated a lovely collection of drawings, and expressed that it was fine that she had not stuck with her original intent, stating the need to

work in accordance with “inner and outer weather.”¹ For me, this registered as a tender acknowledgement that our days and practices are guided by both of these: we have weather *within* us — shifting and often subtle dynamics in the form of states of mind, emotional inclinations, values and callings of the spirit — that alters and shifts, and deserves to be heeded even as it sometimes interrupt our plans and commitments to the external world. And outer weather, much more commensurable in an observed way, in turn has the capacity to transform how we feel on a given day, thus guiding the very quality of our individual actions much more than any business-as-usual approach would like to admit. The acknowledgement that these inner and outer forces intertwine, and the effects of weather, seasons and earth cycles are pedagogically meaningful, as I will later explain.

The practice of turning inward and listening to what is unfolding within is often also a process of becoming more sympathetic and attuned to what is unfolding outside us. These workings can be subtle and synchronous. In art practice, our senses come alive and we are opened up to the things we observe around us. We *notice* more fully what there is to be noticed in the world around us (Greene, 1995), which is particularly significant in a time where many eyes are occupied by screens. Focusing on drawing the trunks of trees allows me to see them in ways I otherwise would not, or might take time to. I become aware of how, while at first glance they may all look similar, not only do different species have vastly different types of bark, even those of the same species have much that is unique about them. This noticing and this act of perception opens up something in me that brings me closer to the trees themselves and to what they may experience. It is not merely a mental process, for this new knowing resides in parts of me that cannot easily be placed and are certainly not limited to one place. Because senses are involved, because emotions and spirit come into play when I interpret the lines the tree expresses through its physical being, and because my hand is following these lines and my feet are held by the same ground in which the tree is rooted, this is a kind of knowing that involves

my whole being. There is something within, an intuitive understanding not easily nameable, that comes to understand on an embodied and spiritual level that I am a very small part of a larger interconnected realm.

Holistic experience is integral to contemplative practice, as is the sense of being connected to something much greater than oneself. In contemplative educational contexts where spiritual wisdom traditions are valued, ethical considerations — especially those of how we relate to others and other beings — become particularly relevant (Purser & Loy, 2013). Inspired in part by Neil Evernden’s incisive observation that ‘the environment is us’ (1993), contemplative education scholar Heesoon Bai (2012) points to the great need of our time to look inward, to the forces that have shaped who we are and indeed into the soul if we are to have any real hope of meaningful transformation in our ways of being in relation to the earth. Her claim is that healing needs to occur within if we are to have hope to heal the effects of our actions on the planet.

The time at which I write this is one of remarkable shift in perspective brought about by the climate change movement: young people the world over have taken to the streets in protest of governments and policy makers who are too idle in the face of the scientific findings that scream for us to wake up. Naomi Klein (2019) notes the many fires occurring simultaneously: literal fires that scorch forest and grassland across the globe, political fires fed by leaders who look the other way in order to maintain the economic status quo, as well as the fires of youth protest, which offer a great deal of moral energy. Conversations and alarm over the findings of the dire 2018 IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) report raised the level of din to overwhelming levels, and I have been left to wonder one particular question: why is it that the climate is seen by many as a kind of *other*? Even as an enemy? It is true that we feel a sense of genuine threat, not only to the comfortably convenient ways to which we are so accustomed, but to our very being and existence. Yet perhaps rather than looking primarily outward at what can be managed in

¹ I would like to credit Sharon Wherland for the inspiration and for this lovely term.

the environment ‘out there,’ we might also consider what is within.² Most particularly, I feel it important to explore a perspective which views climate and everyday weather as an integral and proximate part of our daily lives; rather than being ‘othered’, the weather might be considered a kind of subtle and immediate partner.

3. Climate, psyche, interconnection

For some time, I have been considering how the structure of our daily lives — determined largely by our economic systems and institutions — pays little consideration to how we, as human creatures, are deeply affected by the seasons and the weather. I was brought more fully to this awareness by the writing of Indigenous Education scholar Eber Hampton (1995) who noted how conventional Western education pays almost no head to the meanings and relationships of the rhythm and cycle of the seasons. He advocates instead an educational approach that honours the primeval pull the turning of the earth has upon us. I, for one, know I am a different person on a damp January morning, which on the Pacific coast of Canada is often socked in by a thick fog or by relentless rain deposited from cloud cover that can make the world feel enveloped in grey, than on a glowing June evening when my body and spirit are suffused with the energy of warmth and glow of the burgeoning summer. The effects of the times of day, the season, the quality and amount of light, the temperature: their influence on us is subtle and significant, yet is often put aside and overlooked in favour of homogenously standardized clock time that runs our schools and workplaces, dictated by industrial systems. Hampton and other North American Indigenous educators (e.g. Cajete, 1994) recognize the integral connection of humans to their geographic place and to the cycles of the earth, and that true ecological education cannot be separated from that.

This is an approach that does not consider us distinct from weather and climate but allows them to be integral to our lives: to the things we do, how we fill our days, and the outlook we assume at any given time. In other words, they are part of who we are as earth-dwelling beings. There is the orientation that our practices and what we teach and live by are infused and often even *guided* by the seasons and weather and by the effects of light as determined by the seasonal position of the earth, as well as by the unique climatic particularities of the region where we dwell. The conscious and attentive noticing I spoke of earlier can apply to weather, especially in urban areas where sky and weather dynamics may be among the only easily accessible elements of nature. While industrial growth societies are now waking to the truth that climate is in dire need of our respect and humble observation, those whose ways of life have had a stronger connection with the land have been humbly observing and respecting — and most notably, affected — all along.

In a talk that calls us to consider climate and its attendant concerns not as distant and abstract but present and immediate in our lives, Stoknes (2017) invites us to see the climate as ‘the living air’ around us — and indeed within us, for we take it into our lungs. This living air is, literally, the breath of our lives. Like us, it is resilient, but sensitive to mistreatment, especially over the long term. It is also something we share and have in common with other living beings, and indeed with all beings who have inhabited the earth before us as well as those who are yet unborn. I find this metaphor very rich not only for its life-giving character but also because it inextricably connects us to other species who experience the air as we do. It also dismantles the hierarchy: we cannot claim to need the air more than do our fellow inhabitants and earth-kin (Haraway, 2016).

² A few days after I wrote these lines I came across a headline in a respected and purportedly progressive political magazine, stating ‘We need a massive climate war effort — now.’ The article was illustrated with war imagery reminiscent of WW2 propaganda posters, with science and technology being the weapons. It was also peppered with captions stating that what is needed is the kind of spending it takes to win wars, claiming that the problem can be solved ‘if

we pay for it’ (Drum, 2020). While I appreciate such a shift in economic focus is important, I was troubled by the war metaphors and the reductive tone. And perhaps most particularly, by the view that climate (and thus the subtler workings of nature) needs to be triumphed over by humans; for it is this view that got us to the position where we now find ourselves.

We might imagine a similar interconnection with water: the precipitation and humidity we often think of in meteorological terms are also, as David Abram says, ‘the local waters flowing through us’ (2010, p. 1). Inspired in part by dwelling with peoples in Indonesia whose lives and livelihood are closely connected with the land, Abram calls for modes of mind and communication that portray our interbeing with the earth rather than severing us from her. There is also the consideration of larger interconnectivity. Corrine Glesne (2018) describes her interaction with an Indigenous teacher in Mexico who explained that in their culture they don’t really talk about ‘the environment’, but talk instead of harmony — of being allied with animals and with the spirits of nature. Her reflection on the conversation brought to light the categorical terms with which Western thinking separates people, animals, and environment. Buddhist traditions, somewhat similarly, look toward habits of mind that enact interdependence and interpenetration rather than individuality, atomism and the mechanization of life (Bai, 2019). Speaking from a background of Buddhist teachings on interconnectivity, Bai cautions against ‘a self that has lost its intrinsic oneness with a sentient planet and all her creatures as well as with the cosmos’ (Bai, 2019, located at 13m:42s).

We can also consider meanings around air and water that are more familiar to Western thought: to be inspired literally means to be filled with breath; metaphors of drinking from the cup of life and being cleansed refer to the element of water flowing into and over us. For me, the representation of taking the air and water into ourselves points also to the substance of who we are, inside. More than the physiological transaction of oxygen, hydrogen and carbon dioxide, this is about receiving and taking into ourselves what is around us: living that interpenetration and interdependence in a psycho-spiritual sense as well as a physical one. Further, being aware that what we *emit* — not only in the physical or gaseous sense (whether with our bodies, or our vehicles and industries) but also in terms of our worldview — has intricate and powerful effects. It implicates our modes of *being*: how we are in

relation with ourselves, each other and the larger web of life.

Stoknes’ (2017) representation of the living air removes the excuse that we have no agency as with something distant over which we have no effect, to continue living as if we have no work to do on this matter. Yet he goes further, inviting us also to consider how our identity — who we are as individuals and as a culture — plays a stronger role than does our intelligence and the scientific knowledge we accumulate. For the values that shape our identity, whether personal or cultural, determine our practices. He sums it up incisively: ‘The values eat the facts, and identity trumps truth any day’ (Stoknes, 2017, located at 6m:40s).

While Stoknes examines the larger psychological considerations and practical possibilities for a way forward, for me, the notion of weather dynamics *within* and moving *through* us comes closer to the more personal and soulful exploration I am engaged in here. In a forward titled *A Psyche the Size of the Earth*, James Hillman (1995) opens with what he considers the core issue of all psychology: ‘Where is the ‘me’? Where does the ‘me’ begin? Where does the ‘me’ stop? Where does the ‘other’ begin?’ (xvii). He calls for habits of mind, and psychological practices, that consider humans as part of — and thus inevitably affected by — the larger world of nature. He urges us to consider that our mental states are not insular: that in treating the existential ills, the psychological and spiritual health of any individual, the wellness of the larger realm of nature needs to be considered:

an individual’s harmony with his or her ‘own deep self’ requires not merely a journey to the interior but a harmonisation with the environmental world. The deepest self cannot be confined to ‘in here’ because we can’t be sure it is not also or even entirely ‘out there’! [...] the most profoundly collective and unconscious self is the natural material world (Hillman, 1995, p. xix).

I believe this interconnection of personal psyche with the larger natural and elemental cosmos is key to a

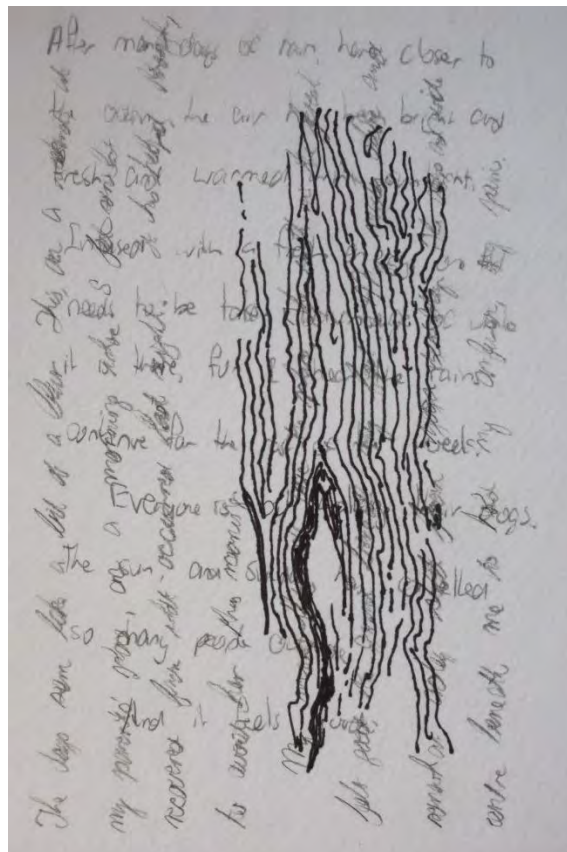
meaningful way forward in these ecologically precarious times.

4. A journalistic practice of tree drawings

When I first started this project, it was the height of summer. The province of British Columbia, where I live, is heavily forested and over the previous two summers many of these forests had been devastated by wildfires. Even those of us who were not in danger areas saw many trees in our neighbourhoods die from the drought of the previous hot seasons. When enveloped in the thick smoke that carried from far across the province, these skeleton trees were a picture of bleak eeriness in many areas close to home. At the onset of the summer of 2019 we were anticipating with much chagrin that this might be the new normal; there were forecasts of such possibilities. It was with much relief, then, that we experienced a milder and even moister season than the previous two. Yet as Klein (2019) describes, there were other, metaphoric, fires taking place: I was potently aware of the burning activism sparked by youth across our country and many others.

For the better part of a decade, I have had a practice of drawing in a local forest I visit often. It is unfortunately not protected from development, yet it offers me continual and deep spiritual nourishment. For this project, I started out with a desire to draw things up close, to experience an intimacy that reflects upon what I might share with these species which are, like me, dependent on the earth's elements. After drawing many plants on the forest floor and being unsatisfied with the result, I became fascinated with the patterns of bark, noticing closely the skin of these trees for which I have much fondness. The drawings are quite abstract, depicting in black felt pen the detailed contours of the bark surface, the particularity and uniqueness of each tree I've considered. With my focus on the connection between inner and outer, the skin of trees seemed apt: of all our organs, the skin is perhaps the one of which we are most aware: it both contains our bodies and touches the outer world — the temperature and the climate. The relative abstractness of the drawings speaks to our relatively limited understanding of the complexity of ecological illness, and indeed of the climate crises itself. While we are becoming wiser on

the dynamics and the complex multiple systems that are our ecologies and climate and of which we are part, to many, the phenomenon remains frustratingly abstract. The abstractness also touches upon the depths of the origins of our lack of connection with the natural world, as well as our elemental, and inextricable, connections with it.



To me, the drawings are a form of contemplative practice in that the main focus is on the experience and the process of drawing; it is about being *present* with what I'm looking at — it is about sincere seeing. The experience of presence and of *being there* with this other being is of greater value than the product of the drawing itself, or any sense of self-accomplishment that may result. Of course, it is wonderful when certain drawings take on a special life of their own, yet in my experience this resonance comes about when the presence and the careful seeing are genuine. There are times when I am distracted, when the mental to-do lists and preoccupations — and the constant conceptual language common to academics — have a hold on my mind, and the experience, like the finished drawing itself, can be perfunctory and flat. Heesoon Bai (2015)

describes strong connections between meditation experience and more vivid seeing, suggesting that a contemplative state of mind helps us to perceive and appreciate the life within the world. In my own experience, and being a relatively new student in meditation practices, I am still coming to understand this connection myself. What I have found repeatedly, however, is that the spatial and holistic mode of mind I sink into when I walk in the woods and especially when I begin to draw, helps bring about a different *sense* of things for me — with the senses coming alive, there is an enhanced feeling of the intricate interconnectedness of all forms of life, and my connection to them.

The process of doing these drawings is an exploration of relationality and of my own place in the sphere of ecological damage and healing. The expressive arts are generally considered therapeutic and while I hesitate to call this therapy *per se*, there is something deeply

curative about being immersed in this pictorial dialogue with other beings with whom I share an ecology.

In my study of the patterns and contours of bark, I was struck by the distinctiveness between tree species. Cedar is common on the west coast and its stripy bark is very characteristic; the bark of fir is blockier in pattern, like a series of shapes that fit together in compact puzzle pieces. The bark surface of maple is much subtler. The age of the tree makes a difference too — older ones are much more fissured and craggy. And the various sides of a tree make a difference too: moss grows on the north side, and how many kinds of mosses there are. Lichen seems generally to prefer northern sides but not always: sometimes it seems to grow all around the trunk.

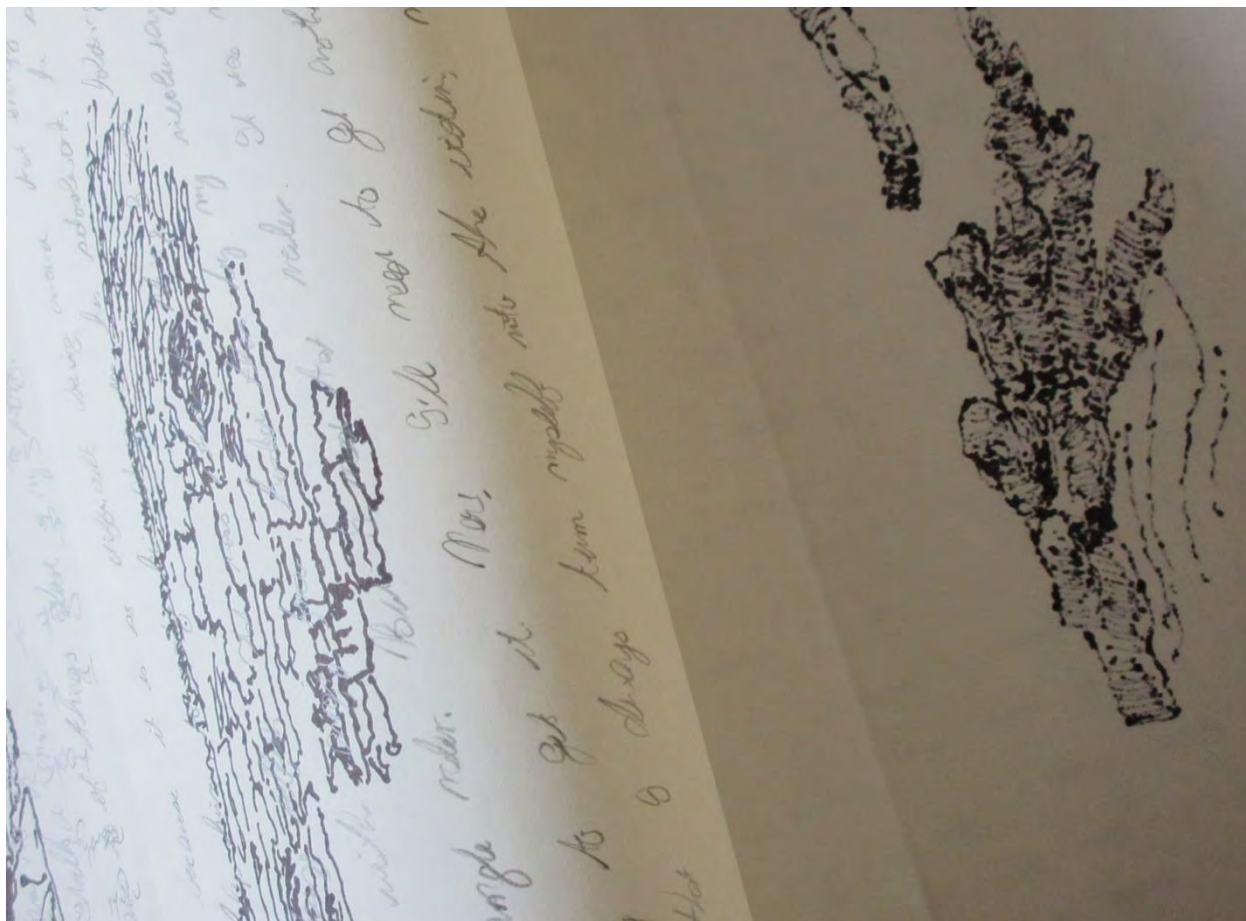
On regular walks outside one experiences the weather on one's own skin, how it shifts and changes, as well as and the effects it has: I notice that hyacinths



and daffodils are sprouting in people's yards, even though it is only January. The record rainfall that is reported this month is not only news, but it is also my own sensorial lived experience. Once at home, I wrote across the ink drawings in pencil. In one direction, I wrote about what I was experiencing that day inwardly, my concerns and preoccupations, the things of life that were lifting me or that I was carrying. I wrote this in a cursive script, a crafted form of writing that I find to be quite personal in that the mark of the hand is so evident.³ In the other, perpendicular, direction, I wrote about the outer world, with a focus on the weather and on general climate concerns both near and far. With all the precipitation we commonly experience here in the winter, my thoughts have gone often to the wildfires in Australia, and their devastating effects on life of all kinds — both human and wild. These observations of

the outside realm were printed, a method of writing that is somehow more standardized and 'rational', with its angular and upright forms. The two written texts cross over each other, creating an interweaving of inner and outer.

The content of the text is not really meant to be decipherable — it is not literal meaning I am after so much as the pattern created by the writing and the idea that layered and subtle meanings are there, even if somewhat enigmatically expressed. In the parts of the writing that are about the weather, I wondered whether to describe the weather in numbers, to look up the weather report on temperature and so on. For the most part, I chose instead to describe the weather as my own intimate experience of it, rather than as a publicly reported prediction, gained from a media source.



³ The learning of cursive writing was removed from our school curricula some years ago, on the argument that it is not useful in the digital age. This may have truth to it, though I wish instrumental thinking that considers 'usefulness' in relation

to the technocratic economy would not so readily rule out a craftful, handmade form of communication and expression, and one that connects us to the past, perhaps not unlike history lessons do.

The land on which I live and do this work, while settled over the last two centuries mostly by Caucasians through colonial regimes, is traditionally the land of the Kwantlen, Katzie and Sto:lo Indigenous people who have lived in the northern Fraser Valley for many generations. The land was not ceded by them and thus it is customary, at the opening of public gatherings and in correspondence, to acknowledge the peoples from whom the land was taken. I feel it right to make that acknowledgement here. This drawing project was done in two main areas, in an established hillside forest and in a neighbourhood park that has a mixture of native and planted trees surrounding a creek.

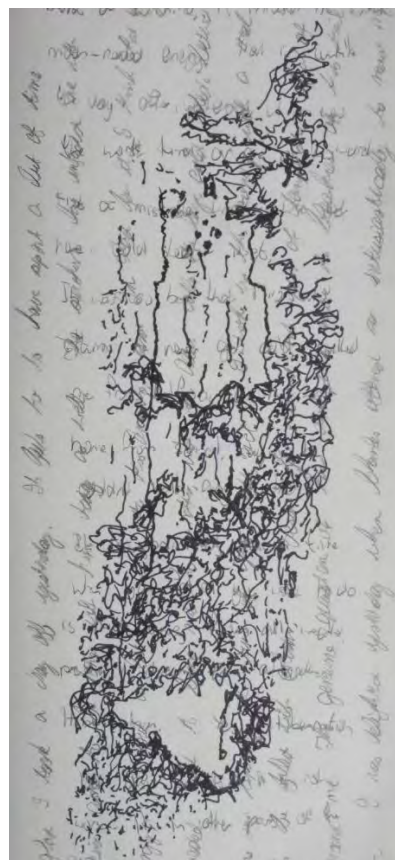
5. Noticing the weather, being present

In the forest today, the air is damp after many days of rain; I have come out during a break in the clouds, yet the water still drips on me from the trees above. My drawing is of a cedar, its characteristic stripy bark. It is punctuated here and there with bits of moss that glow green, lit up inside and out from all the moisture. Beyond the giant cedar, a thick fog envelops the columns of the tree trunks beyond, standing stark and black against the smoky pewter mist.

It is unseasonably warm today; I remove my coat so that I can draw more comfortably. I seem to be drawn to a cedar again, this one with its stripes flowing diagonally like a muted, monochromatic barber pole. The process of drawing is meditative. It allows the preoccupations of my current life to simply sit for a moment without my getting caught up in them: my teenage son's mental health challenges, family misunderstandings, the unhelpful tendencies we carry from childhood. I am in the park adjacent to the elementary school and a teacher has brought her young students out; their voices echo in the background, brought to me on air that is too warm for this time of year to promise enough snowpack for what may later be another parched summer.

What have I learned from this time of consciously noticing the weather, of becoming more aware of how atmospheric conditions touch upon — and intertwine with — those of my own state of mind? Like the

ambience of a room, the weather is often an intangible that has substantial effects. Noticing the weather more consciously on a daily basis allows me to be more present with the world.



6. Pedagogical parallels

Bai (2019) speaks of the value of cultivating a contemplative practice, both for one's own personal well-being as well as for one's integrity as a teacher. Referring to Palmer's maxim that 'We teach who we are', she speaks of the value of being aware of being self-reflective so that we do not pass our unconscious frustrations and pain onto our students. Self-awareness and self-cultivation, according to Bai, are the most important practices of being a teacher. When asked how one maintains a contemplative practice in a busy life, her response is to be attentive, to pay attention to one's own experience, to be able to check-in with oneself about the quality of their consciousness: 'however busy I am, is the world speaking to me?' (16m:02s).

This is a large part of why I take these walks, and do these drawings — so that I can be more consciously

open to what the world is saying to me. While I am affected by subtle things, and have a tendency toward those qualities of life that are immeasurable by any statistic, with this mindful choice to engage with the atmosphere I have allowed myself to be sensitive to the world around me, to take it in and let it alter me. In a sense I am more *awake* with the world. Recalling Greene's (2001) reminder of John Dewey's observation that the opposite of aesthetic is unaesthetic, I feel this aesthetic engagement with my surroundings is a practice of wide-awakeness to what the dynamics of my local nature and climate are telling me.

Turning the value of contemplative practice toward the practice of teaching, there are significant parallels to be drawn here. When we search memories for the teachers in our lives who made a difference, it's likely we focus on those with whom we felt a connection. Perhaps they had about them a presence that was inviting of relationship, not only with the content matter of their teaching, but with the students: they took time to value them as human beings. The sensitivity and awakensness I mention above — the act of being present and of noticing, of slowing down enough to be in the moment with others — is relational. It can be done mindfully, with intention. When one is deeply present and sincere in the creative process of seeing and then drawing, the drawing becomes richer. Similarly, when a teacher slows down to be present with their students, learning tends to go deeper and encompasses something beyond what may be on the next assignment. Returning to Bai's observation that to be mindful is to be open to what the world is saying to us, so, too, can we become mindful teachers by cultivating an open attentiveness with students, and being receptive to their humanity. Equally significantly, awareness of our own inner workings — the shifting dynamics within and the tendencies we harbour — enables us better to know 'who we are', to use Palmer's maxim, and thus to teach more consciously. In my experience, as well as that of many colleagues I have known, creative engagement enriches life and one's relationship with the world; this richness also nourishes our teaching practice.

7. Nature, the self, & a creative state of mind

I open the back door on a January morning when it is still dark outside. The rain is coming down plentifully, making its sound on everything — the leaves of the laurel bush, the puddles on the small patio and rushing down the spouts. The air comes toward my body with a freshness that only such rain and the early morning could create, welcoming me to the day. Something about the way this rain is everywhere in all the space outside and falling on everything makes me feel joined to it all. I am reminded of a passage from Thomas Merton I once read about his delight in listening to the rain fall on the roof of his cabin hermitage, offering that as long as it rains, he will keep listening to its beautiful sound.

Having deep appreciation for the earthly things of this world is a powerful phenomenon, as it frees us for a time from the hold of an industrial growth society that constantly feeds us messages that we — in our relations with ourselves, each other and the earth, and without consumer goods — are not enough (Macy, 2014). I think also of Cajete (1994) and Hampton's (1995) reminder that when our minds and bodies are attuned to the seasons, cycles and natural rhythms we open to different forms of knowledge and wisdom. We are also somewhat released from the clutch of the industrial template of clock time and institutional scheduling.

The process of drawing, and especially of drawing directly in response to the phenomena of the natural world, has a power to bring me to this deeper sense of rhythm, feeling and knowing. There is a sense of flow that is akin to the process of water itself. It is a process not easily put to words and there is good reason for this: the hemisphere of the brain that processes images, forms and space differs from the side that processes rational language. In creative practice, like in meditation (Bai, 2015), we see things as a whole rather than in categorized and separate parts; we sense the world as being interconnected. I think often of Gregory Bateson's idea that 'when we find meaning in art, our thinking is most in sync with nature' (Van Boeckel, 2011, 1).

I want to clarify that my finding the rain beautiful and appreciating its cleansing freshness does not mean I

romanticise it in an idealised kind of way (though an appreciation of the romantic in itself is not a bad thing). Westcoast rain is a force of its own that I need to respect, sometimes in the form of facing daunting expenses to stave a leaky roof, panic over a flash flood a couple of years ago that had me wading ankle deep and bailing it away from the door in attempts to prevent it from entering the house, and constantly checking the downspouts and crawlspace of an old home to prevent worrying damage. I am also well aware of floods that have caused much more serious consequences as well as loss of life, both near and far. Walking outside, however, gives me another relationship with it, as does drawing — even when I need to stop drawing altogether because the paper is too wet to absorb the ink from my pen.

After doing my drawing of the trunk of an alder tree and the delicate and exuberant moss that clings to it, I walk back along the path that runs parallel to the creek. The other trees make themselves known to me — the way a young alder is struggling for room under a taller cedar; a tall trunk of unidentifiable species, now dead, its top blown off by a one of the gales we've had — it is now feeding ground for an enthusiastic red-shafted flicker.

After the torrential rains the air is crystal fresh, as if newly born, and I am grateful for it being morning. I know that later in the day the exhaust from engines and traffic will taint the atmosphere and I think twice about taking my vehicle into town for the errand I was going to run — is it really necessary? Certainly, it is necessary on many days, but it is necessary today?

I also notice how I feel brighter with the freshness, the sunshine and the existence of blue sky above me. After the mid-winter blanket of grey that hung over us, after the repeated downpours, the world feels different. Such a simple thing, really, to be fueled by the energy of the sun and especially after being cleansed by rain. I think of Macy's principle of gratitude and how the connection to this simple thing is indeed far more than just itself.

Making space in one's life for a creative contemplative practice is about making space to be with oneself, and to explore and cultivate one's

connection with the larger world and the cosmos. It is an experience of deepening within and expanding without. For my own practice, what I have found particularly relevant and meaningful, especially considering the time in which we now find ourselves, is connecting to the more-than-human and to the larger cosmos. In a practice of drawings of bark that focus on tree trunks and walks that contemplate the effects of weather, I am creating a sense of self that includes larger spheres of being and includes the living air, the atmosphere, the flowing rivers, the turning earth.

Faced with news of abuse on the atmosphere and of climate catastrophe, many of us are gripped by the question of what, in my own small and limited way, can I *do*? Returning to the idea that our ecological crises begin with what is within, we can consciously work on our relations with the natural world and the larger cosmos, and in the case of climate, with the weather itself. Noticing, engaging, becoming *open* to these things are a humble but powerful beginning.

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