

Natural Reading, Reading Nature:

the critical role that eco-literacy skills play
in building a sense of belonging in this world.



You cannot conserve something
you don't love.
You cannot love* something
you don't understand.
You cannot understand something
you don't know.

*(After the Senegalese poet-conservationist
Baba Dioun) * Love in this context is much
more than a feeling, it is a verb.*

When I ask people who love and care for young children if they want the children to grow up respecting and conserving nature, the answer is always, "Of course we do." That is the hope they have for the children in their care, they want them to be in tune with nature, and to respect nature. Respecting nature and being in tune with her are measures of our belonging on this beautiful planet. We human beings are not apart from nature, (also known as Life), we are a part of it. This biosphere that we are a part of is one integrated system. We, as electromagnetic-beings-in-the-flesh, are subject to all of the pulls and cycles, to all of the influences and seasons that are Life on this earth.

Soaking in it

Wanting children to be in tune with and respect nature is not enough. It is like *wanting* our children to read text. There are things that have to happen before a child becomes literate and can tackle and appreciate the marvel of decoding text. One of the prerequisites is that the children inhabit a text-rich environment. There will be many different genres, many different formats, many different styles, different voices, different illustrations. Total immersion, in text diversity.

Let me introduce you

Being surrounded by text alone is also not enough, as the people who pondered over Egyptian hieroglyphics knew all too well before the Rosetta Stone gave them the key in. *There has to be a key in.* The key into literacy is one with the knowledge, the adult who, preferably, loves text. When adults share their love of the spoken and written word with the children, at every opportunity, the child cannot help but soak in all the requirements to eventually become literate in their own right. I don't think anyone would expect a child to read who had not been soaked in literature and who had not been given the key in. It is the role of the adult to give the key, to introduce the child to literature so that she can get to know it, then understand it, and then love it - in that order.

If the environment is the 3rd teacher...

Recently I was working in an urban nightmare, inside and out, an early childhood centre. I have no doubt that with the training, the skills and knowledge the staff at the centre possess, it is the best they are capable of. They would not say something like, "We know how to set up an oasis in the city but we can't be bothered, so let's do our best and make a dismal job of it." By contrast, I was recently in a urban paradise, also an early childhood centre. It is one of the most beautifully

planted places for small children that I know. We were doing a day workshop about the fundamental role this earth plays in the education and nurturing of the human child. A more suitable setting for becoming eco-literate would be hard to find. With the watery sun shining through the bare branches and reflecting off wet evergreens we went inside and our morning began.

Tuning in to be in tune

To tune in with the living beings that are part of the environment there, we began by guessing: How many trees enlivened the grounds? Their section is roughly 33 by 28 metres. (Go on, you make a guess how many trees.) We were wildly out in our guessing, we guessed far too few. Someone who knows the centre really well laughed when she realised she was 500% out. We counted and agreed: more than forty-five and less than fifty. So many trees. Some of the people on the workshop owned up to working at centres where there isn't even *one* tree. The cleverly planted deciduous trees were letting in the winter light and sun, while in the Summer they provide cool dappled shade. There is one small sail over the sand pit and no need for additional sails because of the living shelter the trees offer from the harmful sun's rays.



What a gathering. They were all there.

The planting has been well thought out with many different species represented, each growing and showing its own particular features as it dances with the cycles. Amongst the bare trees, magnolia buds fat and furry, and weeping cherry blossom will announce the Spring. The weeping willow in flower will in turn be a-hum with bees, the early alder tassels will pollinate perfect tiny cones to fascinate toddling collectors, pin oaks will make acorns and stunning autumn colour. The walnut will set about making nuts, the apple will make apples and the grapevine will bring forth bunches in the Autumn. The feijoa, the lemon and the lime all add their fruit generously. Did I mention that there were daffodils, jonquils, assorted annuals and perennials, evergreen trees and shrubs as well as a whole family of trees who call this country home? Kowhai, pittosporums, cabbage trees; all of whom will flower and perfume the air in their pursuit of 'continuing Life'. The children and adults, just by being there, can soak in and observe the rhythms of the seasons, the same rhythms by which they too are moved. Total immersion in biodiversity. It is a credit to the people who had the vision and went on to create such a place of harmony and beauty.

By the way, have you heard from *Turdus Philomelos* lately?

Back inside the building we could have been the privileged audience to a virtuoso performance coming from high in the weeping willow. No-one even noticed it. In our 'unawareness' we had missed the overture from the resident Song Thrush, *turdus philomelos*. It's not that the song was muted or hard to hear, it wasn't. It was clear and, as my bird book describes it, "flutelike". The reason we missed noticing it was that many of us *have not learned literacy skills in birdsong*. We have been immersed in it, yes, but we haven't had the key in. We have been following models who themselves do not know how to 'read the text' of the natural world that they are a part of. Many adults, if not most, do not know the habits of the creatures they share their world with,

they do not 'know' them. And since this is about relationship, they in turn are 'not known,' they are out of relationship. Children may recognise the ubiquitous golden arches of McDonald's on or before their second birthday, but it is unlikely that they will recognise the stunning song of the ubiquitous Song Thrush if the adults in their lives are oblivious to the same. If no-one 'notices' the Song Thrush, they cannot 'notify' the child. They cannot offer the child the key in. If adults do not draw the child's attention to the 'fellow travellers on this earth' in the way the advertisers draw our attention to the Yellow M, then the child's world is immeasurably poorer in friends and in belonging. Worse, the child will be illiterate, unable to read the 'text' of their home environment.

Introduce them? I don't know them myself!

You don't need to know the latin name, the maori name, or the common name of *anything* before you can meet them and make yourself known. In fact, knowing the name of something can *stop* you getting to know it because you already have it pigeon-holed and filed. Watch a child getting to know something. Without language and names she explores and absorbs sensory impressions. She turns the *treasure* to observe it from every angle; touching, tasting, weighing, balancing, endlessly fascinated with her found treasure. It is the adult who, having named and filed the *object*, has stopped being in touch and getting to know more about the *treasure*. The adult might say, "Put that down, its just a pine cone." And now the relationship is over.

Getting to know you, getting to know all about you

Paradoxically, it is the child who can show us how to get to know nature so that we can give them the key in. The child will show us how to make friends with earwigs and freesias, with rye grass and earthworms. All you have to do is **just notice**. Its like learning to read, noticing the shape. Do bits go down or up? Is there a dot there? What is the context? What does this mean when its like this? Is that the same as that? Use all your just noticing skills when you hang out a bird cake. Just notice who comes, how they hang there, which way up they are when they 'swallow', look at the colour on their wings. Is it different from under their tummies? Or their backs? Notice how they move from one place to the next... At the urban paradise centre there are many birds on their premises to get to know and understand. They even have a mobile hen house with two richly coloured puff-ball bantams to love and care for. They haven't let OSH or the ministry scare them out of their common sense.

Just noticing is your key in

On that mid Winter morning we guessed how many different kinds of wild flowers we would find in the grounds. You guessed it, we were wrong again. There were eleven species in flower. We used the skill of counting to realise just how little we notice unless we take the time to get present and tune in with our earth. Counting, knowing your colours, classifying, comparing, differentiating, enjoying, etc., there is no need to buy any equipment for any of it. In Europe and Britain and they have 'forest kindergartens' where the woods are both the home and the 'classroom'. The 'equipment' is all there and none of it is bought. And subtle - Earth is the master of subtlety. Children who learn the above mentioned skills in the earth-school will be practiced at noticing subtle differentiations. Within a bunch of forget-me-nots there will be at least a dozen subtle shades of blue to become aware of. A mound of pine needles is subtle in texture, in shape, in smell and in colour. There is not a chance of that kind of sophistication with commercially produced equipment. In workshops grown-ups tell stories of making huts with pine needles when they were children, and they can, decades later, remember all of the subtleties that were soaked in with the senses. There is a richness in these experiences on the earth that is noticeably absent when the play and exploration is with manufactured equipment.

Ecological oasis or manufactured wasteland?

Are your grounds rich in Life so that your children could grow in natural eco-literacy and get to know, understand and respect the Nature that they are a part of? We are Earthlings, every one of us, and we cannot afford to raise another generation of children who have no sense of relationship or belonging with the earth, neither for their personal mental, physical, intellectual and spiritual wellbeing, nor for humans' long term survival. It is sadly true that most of us do not know how to create an ecological oasis, but we **do** know one when we see one. That is where our hope lies. If your grounds lack the Diversity-of-Life factor we have been talking about, call in someone who can guide you and your colleagues to create your oasis.

Literacy means 'competence or knowledge within a specified area'. As we saw, a great many of the skills of literacy with written code are developed as children grow their eco-literacy. They grow these generic literacy skills as they get to know and read the living world with meaning and understanding. You, the adult, hold the key into 'The Book of Life' for the children. Will children learn to read the greatest mystery story every told when they are in your care, or will they have to be content with looking out the window at the cover? The choice is yours. But know that each child's physical, mental, intellectual and spiritual health depends on fluency **within** the pages of 'The Book of Life'. And so does our future on this "beautiful little planet" - to quote my Dad.

Pennie Brownlee



The grass in flower

Who will draw the child's attention to the grass flowers? When the anthers are laden with pollen it will be the adult who gives the child the key in to noticing and getting to know the grass flowers.

If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in.

Rachel Carson

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