

Initiation into a Living Earth

An Essay Journey created by Shante' Sojourn Zenith



WEEK FOUR Ecological Imagination

Our creative imagination is a response to the ecological imagination that flows through us. This initiation is based on the gate of grief that witnesses "The Sorrows of the World."¹ It is an invitation to re-member our belonging to the web of Life.² This is also the place in which we heal from the wound of "disconnection from nature" which is a social cause of depression.³

¹Weller, Francis. *The Wild Edge of Sorrow: Rituals of Renewal and the Sacred Work of Grief*. North Atlantic Books, 2015, Page 46.

² Thomé, Azul Valérie. "Grief Composting Circles." SOULand, <https://www.souland.org/grief-composting.html>.

³ Hari, Johann. *Lost Connections: Uncovering the Real Causes of Depression – and the Unexpected Solutions*. Bloomsbury USA, 2018, Page 158-254.

Unsettled

Once, placing your bare feet on the earth, you perceived through your sensitive skin the back you were standing on. Then, you felt the spring break through inside you also, sensual blossoming erupting into tender pink buds. In the autumn, a part of you also fell away to disintegrate into soil. And as snow covered the bare shoulders of the hills, you retreated with bear into hibernation, to be dreamed by the land.

The truth is, the severing of belonging is a violence that must be constantly repeated. Your entanglement spreads ever outwards, each thing you pull on connected to the others, a cord that keeps needing to be cut. There's no way to find an origin point, a single moment of disconnection. The disconnection originates in this moment also, but it is practiced so continually that you don't even notice it anymore.

The Initiation of Ecological Imagination

Knowing that you love the earth changes you, activates you to defend and protect and celebrate. But when you feel that the earth loves you in return, that feeling transforms the relationship from a one-way street into a sacred bond.

—Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*⁴

Three years ago, lonely on a solo trip to England, I spent a week filming myself performing every day at an orchard in Kent. Sometimes, I would dance to music playing on my headphones, sometimes I'd sing and play my accordion, sometimes I would improvise stories. The arbitrary rule I made for myself was that the trees were my audience. Anything I danced, sang, or spoke was to be embodied as a gift for these imagined witnesses. Over the days, each tree began to take on a personality. They watched me expectantly, nodding their branches in agreement, whispering to me in rustles, and swaying when I danced.

When I read David Abram's book *Spell of the Sensuous* later that year, I was reminded of my time in the orchard. Abram quotes cultural anthropologist Richard Nelson's description of Koyukon Indian cosmology:

⁴ Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. First Edition edition, Milkweed Editions, 2013.

[t]raditional Koyukon people live in a world that watches, in a forest of eyes. A person moving through nature—however wild, remote, even desolate the place may be—is never truly alone. The surroundings are aware, sensate, personified. They feel. They can be offended. And they must, at every moment, be treated with the proper respect.⁵

In the orchard, I had felt the visceral sensation of being held within a witnessing being. I realized that the playful perception through which we see the world as children was perhaps a means of sensing as vivid as the rational mind.

It is this very sense of perception that is degraded when children begin to be told that their imaginations are "pretend," when they receive the myth that mind-based, reductionistic factoids are the only way of knowing what actually exists. Our society determines that children's natural animistic tendencies should be shut down as they grow up, that the vast expanses of non-intellectual ways of knowing—dancing, singing, embodied sensuous presence, emotional vitality, intuition—serve little or no purpose within the world children are being educated for. Alexander Technique teacher Michael Gleb observes that most children undergo drastic shifts in physicality when they begin school, explaining that "generally well-balanced five-year-olds often become tense and uncoordinated seven-year-olds."⁶ This is the beginning of what Francis Weller calls "the

⁵ Abram, David. *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*. 1st Vintage Books Ed edition, Vintage, 1997, Page 67.

⁶ Gelb, Michael. *Body Learning: An Introduction to the Alexander Technique*. Macmillan, 1995, Page 123.

slow, insidious process of carving up the self to fit into the world of adults."⁷ Weller describes this narrowing of self as an experience of shame:

"We become convinced that our joy, sadness, needs, sensuality, and so forth are the cause of our unacceptability, and we are more than willing to cleave off portions of our psychic life for the sake of inclusion, even if it is provisional. We become convinced, on some basic level, that these pieces of who we are, are not good enough—that they are, in fact, shameful—and we banish them to the farther shore of our awareness in hopes of never hearing from them again."⁸

As children lose their full spontaneous imagination and disconnect from their sensual embodied presence in the world, the circumference of their lives is reduced from a curiosity as vast as the ocean into a reality the size of a glass of water. Diné artist and spiritual teacher Pat McCabe describes this when she tells a story from the book *Native Science*, in which author Greg Cajete inquires into the reasons that colonial scientists believed native peoples were "childlike and primitive":

[He] said "alright, so what I'm observing about these men from Europe, is that they are allowed up to a certain point in their life—five years old—to sing, to dance, to pretend, to play, and then at five years old, especially for the aristocracy, right, it's time to get down to the serious business of being a man. And so, you can have hobbies, but the primary business of being a man is to develop yourself in one way of knowing, that one way of knowing is through the intellect." So, when these men came over to have a look at us, what were we doing? We were singing, we were dancing, we were visioning, we were pretending. And so, of course, that was their point of reference for those kind of activities,"those are the activities of children, and even the grown men are participating in this. So this, they must be a very primitive culture."⁹

⁷ Weller, Francis. *The Wild Edge of Sorrow: Rituals of Renewal and the Sacred Work of Grief*. North Atlantic Books, 2015, Page 34.

⁸ ibid

⁹ McCabe, Pat. *Earth Talk: Thriving Life - The Feminine Design and Sustainability*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gCDyEGI7ssc>. Schmacher College, Dartington, Devon, England.

Far from being primitive, McCabe describes indigenous cultures as intensely innovative in their "wide spectrum of ways of knowing," equating this widened perception with sustainability. Charles Eisenstein calls this kind of perception the "living planet paradigm."¹⁰ (*Climate* 127) Eisenstein explains that children inherently know "the livingness and sacredness of all things." He observes:

*If you ask a child, "What's it like to be that tree? What's it like to be that house? What's it like to be that cloud?" That's not a ridiculous question for a child because they understand innately that it's like something to be that thing. But then we think we grow out of that. That it's just "anthropomorphic projection," the projection of human qualities onto an inanimate thing. And similarly we think that culturally we've grown out of that as well. But we're losing confidence in our story.*¹¹

For Bayo Akomolafe, re-membering the ways of knowing that adults shut down is an essential step in the work of decolonization. Akomolafe invites us to find "ways of healing our estrangement from land, improvising new rituals of being in touch, and allowing ourselves the luxury of confusion, the luxury of not knowing what comes next." He calls us to "sit with the awkwardness" that arises when we "come to the edge of everything we know to be true," inviting new possibilities of perception.¹²

For descendants of settler-colonist Europeans, the work of decolonizing and returning to indigenous relationship to place is filled with the complexity of learning from the indigenous people whose lands we have stolen. Native scientist Robin Wall

¹⁰ Eisenstein, Charles. *Climate--A New Story*. North Atlantic Books, 2018, Page 127.

¹¹ Eisenstein, Charles. *The Earth Talks: Charles Eisenstein*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=losz7_A14Cw. Schumacher College, Dartington, Devon, England.

¹² Akomolafe, Bayo. "Dear White People." Bayo Akomolafe, <http://bayoakomolafe.net/project/dear-white-people/>

Kimmerer invites settler-colonists to "become naturalized" and feel responsible for caring for the land we are living on. This view is a reworking and deepening of responsibility, a surrender into a wider intelligence in which the "land is the real teacher."¹³ Kimmerer advocates for "a grammar of animacy" that invites us to:

Imagine walking through a richly inhabited world of Birch people, Bear people, Rock people, beings we think of and therefore speak of as persons worthy of our respect, of inclusion in a peopled world...Imagine the access we would have to different perspectives, the things we might see through other eyes, the wisdom that surrounds us. We don't have to figure out everything by ourselves: there are intelligences other than our own, teachers all around us. Imagine how much less lonely the world would be.¹⁴

Accessing these animist teachers does not require that you belong to an ancestral lineage with unbroken indigenous knowledge. Diné artist Pat McCabe sees it as her mission to show people that "those entities that taught my ancestors are still present, they're right here, and they're willing to teach right now. They're willing to teach someone like me who was raised completely in the city, who was raised completely apart from my culture and from Native culture in general."¹⁵ Kimmerer had a similar experience, she remembers speaking to a Cheyenne elder, explaining her despair that she "had no native language with which to speak to the plants and the places that I love." The elder responded:

¹³ Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. First Edition edition, Milkweed Editions, 2013, Page 273-282.

¹⁴ ibid, Page 86.

¹⁵ McCabe, Pat. *SEEDing CHANGE*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s18o0DRk8IA>. Foundation for Global Humanity.

*"They love to hear the old language," he said, "it's true." "But," he said, with fingers on his lips, "You don't have to speak it here." "If you speak it here," he said, patting his chest, "They will hear you."*¹⁶

This past year, I began a conversation with the tree in the alley behind my house. This tree crouches on a vacant lot, eccentric, an old woman muttering "nonsense" to herself in a corner. She's the last of her kind, a remnant of a world that doesn't exist anymore. I see her sometimes as an old babushka with an Eastern European Jewish vibe. She remembers the old country. She was a girl there. Standing still, she has seen so much and traveled so far. She's a displaced person who "doesn't matter," an immigrant who came through Ellis Island in traditional clothes with a scarf around her head.

I love that my imaginal encounter with this tree-being also connected me with my Eastern European ancestors and to my neighborhood in South Minneapolis, which was red-lined as a lower-class immigrant section of the city. This encounter also invoked the "nonsense mutterings" of an old woman who was still in relationship with the traditional knowledge of her people. Perhaps this tree was planted by such a woman, preserved in seeds carried from the old world. The tree has made peace with the soil here, fully settled into relationship. She remembers the rattle of the train nearby, the time when the ground was farmland, her memory extending back to before the city. She watches the happenings of the neighborhood with amusement, she speaks the crazy wisdom of the deep time ancestors. Everyone goes by her so fast and she is isolated. She

¹⁶ Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. First Edition edition, Milkweed Editions, 2013, Page 86.

is lonely. She wants company, like a grandparent does. She is not a tree to be worshipped, she has the sacredness of a relative. She would like to be brought presents, ordinary beauty, gifts that a child would bring

I bring a drawing to give to her and a small fragment of fabric that was my first attempt at weaving, placing the offerings between her roots, the hole in her trunk becomes my altar. Sitting next to her, I realized I'd forgotten the full beauty of her physical presence, her sister trunk broken away in a storm leaving a big hole near her roots, her branches bent at odd angles. She is part time capsule also—a hundred year old nail pressed into her bark, a dog chain rusted around her trunk, the piece of reflective metal screwed into her bark to stop cars from running into her at night.

She creaks as I lean against her, as the wind blows through the holes in her trunk. We watch a plastic bag float across the landscape carried by the wind, a strange bird taking flight. I see the lilacs making ready to bud. I'm eager for spring to arrive, to watch the transformation of the seasons. I take in this relationship she is offering—this invitation to apprentice myself to ordinariness. I commit to slow time, to a year of imperceptible changes, to showing up. "Finally you notice me," She says. "Welcome home, my daughter."

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

When in your life have you felt connected to the ecological imagination?

How has your relationship with the earth expanded your ideas of “the real”?

What aspects of your child self’s connection to nature and creativity would you like to reclaim?