THE HOLY OAK SCHOOL OF ART AND ECOLOGY:

A PROPOSAL FOR ARTS-BASED ENVIRONMENTAL

EDUCATION PROGRAMMING

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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The following is a proposal for arts-based environmental education programming in elementary schools, after-school programs, and day-camp programs, entitled the Holy School of Art and Ecology. Ecophenomenological, arts-based environmental education (AEE) takes a step in another direction and encourages learners to consider non-scientific or non-naturalistic elements of the natural world, like the aesthetic/affective as well as the ethical. Practitioners of AEE teach according to an educational philosophy that values and prioritizes embodied experience and aesthetic engagement, which enables learners to develop or continually develop their ecological selves.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The following is a proposal for an educational non-profit organization that offers arts-based environmental education programming in elementary schools, as well as after-school and day-camp programs. Before delving into the philosophy behind, and methods of, this program, I will first share a bit about myself and why I am interested in this work.

The Educator

My first experience with environmental education was during the time I was doing AmeriCorps service. The local nature center was looking for volunteer naturalists, and I joined them to lead a few nature hikes with first graders. Much to my surprise, at the end of my first hike without the guidance of a more seasoned naturalist, I received grateful hugs from several of the children. This was not only my first experience with environmental education, but also my first experience working with children. I actually found this experience of being the lead naturalist quite challenging, but the few hours that I spent outside with these children brought me great joy.

I spent my childhood, as a first-generation immigrant from the Caribbean, living in the suburban sprawl of the Sonoran desert. Among my childhood memories of countless hours of cable television, broken up by drab walks around endless, monotonous blocks of beige houses and desert landscaping, are memories of moments that I remember as special. There is a feeling present in those memories that stands out. A feeling of being connected. I remember watching tadpoles in a canal along a cotton field near our house. After discovering them, we (neighbors, siblings, friends) would race there on our bikes

every day to watch these creatures to see what was happening, what had changed; to see what had not changed. To just *see.* The desolate monotony was broken up by these moments; jackrabbits in the park. I have a memory that I am sure is invented, of coyotes running through the dirt lots of incomplete housing developments and cotton fields. I am fairly sure that I was told by a neighbor that coyotes had been seen there, having traveled there by way of the canals, which I now know were largely built by the Hohokam people over 500 years ago and now serve nearly 5 million people. Coyotes in the suburbs--I never witnessed it, only heard about it and saw it in my mind. That image is still in my mind; an invented memory produced by my natural, childhood longing for moments like those in my memories of the tadpoles.

I cannot remember many other events from my childhood in which there was as much excitement as there was in observing those tadpoles. I do remember, quite vividly, the moment of watching a caterpillar raised in a jar released as a monarch butterfly; I remember the bright desert light, the sharp contrast of fire orange against the deep blue sky. I'm sure I was excited about other things, in my childhood. but they are not in my immediate memory. Something about this was so important—and I do not mean the memories, but perhaps also the memories--the events were important. It felt important to observe the tadpoles and the emerging-to-the-world monarch; to be there with them, witnessing them.

While teaching a learning pod of kindergarteners during the COVID-19 pandemic, I heard an exchange between the students during recess. One child was concerned about some leaf-wilting she was seeing on shrubs and trees; I believe she referred to it as

"leaphydra". She insisted that her classmates help her discover the source of this problem. I recall her telling them "it's important!" That is how I felt watching the tadpoles as a 10-year-old, the butterfly as a kindergartner. It was important. But I didn't need to do anything. What was important is that I was there, present with them, witnessing.

The Holy Oak School of Art and Ecology is dedicated to giving people, especially young people, the space to bear witness.

The climate crisis is the result of many things but one could argue that an apparent fundamental cause is the lack of environmental education for young people, particularly in North America. This absence is most apparent in schools; environmental education is not typically a component of primary education in North America (see Lynch and Stapleton, 2021).[1] One could imagine environmental educators and other advocates of environmental education arguing that for this reason, many children (and people, in general) do not have any major sense of their responsibility to, or place in, nature. I would argue further that the climate crisis is caused by a dearth of opportunities for us to bear witness.

1. Lynch and Stapleton argue for a "scaffolded, embodied practice" in environmental education for children, in which activities take place in alternating modes of "movement" and "stillness" to increase children's connection to the natural world.

Environmental philosophers (deep ecologists, in particular), sometimes refer to the concept of the "ecological self"[2] (Wang, 2016). For the purposes of this project, I use that term to refer to an understanding of oneself as a member of the ecological community. To be unaware of, or to have, an undeveloped ecological self, is to experience oneself as separate from nature (Salmón, 2000). That the development of the ecological self is not a serious consideration of standard education systems can be understood as a source of this rift.

In contrast, environmental education can aid in developing a sense of the ecological self in its students. For the Holy Oak School of Art and Ecology (HOSAE), the development of the ecological self is an explicit, primary goal. HOSAE is informed by already existing practices and research into arts-based environmental education (AEE). Practitioners of AEE teach according to an educational philosophy that values and prioritizes embodied experience and aesthetic engagement. Thus, arts-based environmental education is an *embodied* education; one that helps to deepen the relationships between learners and the natural world. Some environmental education researchers believe that "the field of aesthetics provides an affective basis for interpreting our perceptions of environments and relations with other more-than-human beings" (Iared et.al, 196).

2. Many scholars have engaged with the concept of the "ecological self", which is typically attributed to Arne Naess and the deep ecology tradition. For Naess, our identity is fundamentally unified with nature; that is to say that I *am* nature, or at the very least, on Mathews's reading, an inseparable part of the whole (Wang, 2016) (Mathews, 2018). I find Mathews' identification of an internal contradiction within deep ecology persuasive and share her conception of the ecological self in more ecofeminist terms: one of many individual ecological beings belonging to an ecological family or community with whom one approaches with an ethic of care.

This kind of education can be viewed as one necessary step in solving the climate crisis, or more aptly, an intrinsically valuable and necessary education that would have prevented any such crisis in the first place. I am proposing an education program that deems engagement with the arts, creativity, and the natural world *essential—as essential as the air we breathe.*

Program Goals:

1. Development of the ecological self
2. Arts engagement
3. Facilitating creative activity and self-discovery

1. Development of the Ecological Self

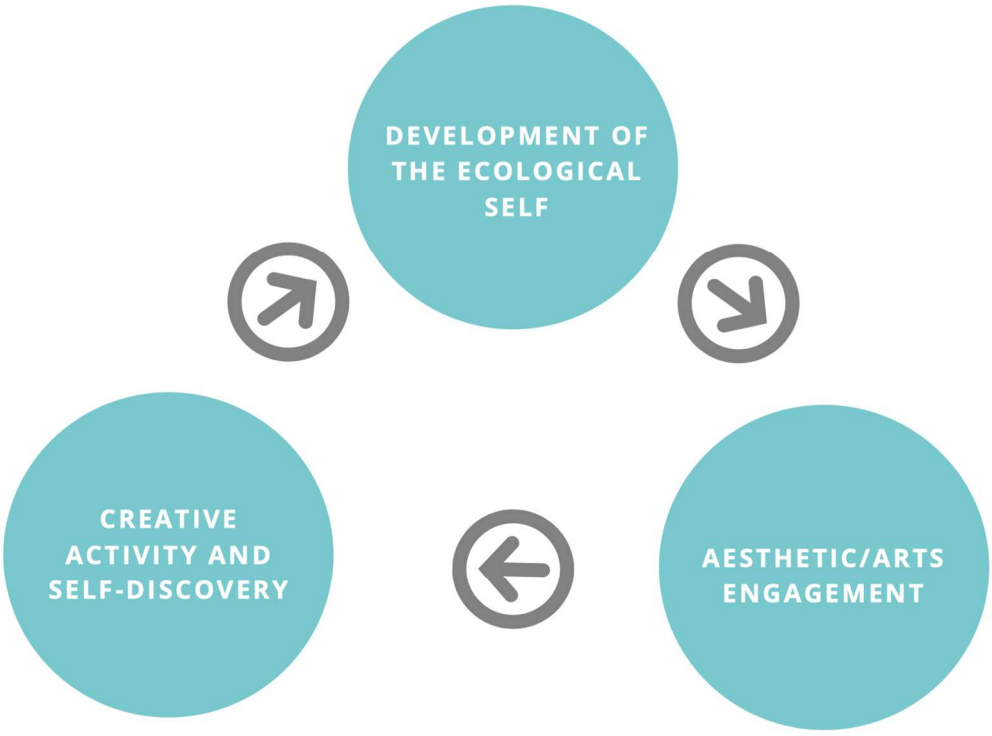
The primary goal of this program is to provide students with an education that calls attention to the relationship between their embodied selves and the natural world, helping children to develop their "ecological self"—sensing and conceiving of themselves as ecological beings. This is accomplished via a rich, sensuous engagement with nature, art, and the students' own creativity.

2. Arts Engagement

This program aims to provide students an opportunity to engage with the arts. This includes, but is not limited to, visual art, poetry, music, and more. Students will not only develop their own artistic abilities, but also gain an appreciation for the arts, in general.

3. Facilitating Creative Activity and Self-Discovery

This program aims to provide students with a creative outlet through which to not only express themselves, but also learn about themselves while simultaneously learning about the natural world. Self-exploration is not a mere incidental, added benefit to the program, but an important priority.



As shown in the diagram, there is a complementary relationship between these three goals. Development of the ecological self entails real self-discovery, as the student comes to recognize themselves as an ecological being, rather than as separate from nature (and the deep ecological tradition holds that self-discovery *is* the discovery of the ecological self (Wang, 2016). Engagement in the arts can (and often does) inspire creative activity, while likewise, one's own creative work can initiate an interest in the arts and the creative work of others. The question of whether engagement with the natural

world can spark creative activity is an interesting one, and worth exploring in the future to demonstrate added benefit to participating in this kind of educational programming.

I have found that these goals are not typically (or rarely, if at all) components of a standard public education in North America. The Holy Oak School deems them essential.

In the next section, I will share further background on the philosophical and pedagogical framework of this project. This includes my reasons for choosing these particular goals for the program as well as broader, longer-term, large-scale goals.

II. NEED STATEMENT

The Undeveloped Ecological Self:

In the modern, Western world, people tend to experience themselves as separate from nature. They tend not to identify with nature[3] (Johnson & Murton, 2007). This separation from nature and lack of identification contributes to environmental destruction and degradation of the natural world (LaFreniere, 2008) (Norgaard cited by Pelling et al., 2012). Further, I would argue that it contributes to the sense of emptiness and profound boredom that is so common in modern Western societies. To be disconnected from nature means that one is ultimately disconnected from self, for human beings are as much a part of nature as the raven flying in the distance, or a stone at the bottom of a cold, swiftly moving creek. Removed as we may be, nature is our home.

We are ecological beings, in need of a conception of ourselves as ecological selves. By ecological self, I'm referring to the notion that nature is not just our home, but more than this, that nature is who we *are*. While human beings differ from much of nature (but perhaps not all, as far as we know) on account of being conscious beings, as *embodied*, conscious, *animal* beings, we're fundamentally embedded in the natural world, whether we realize it or not—even if we have separated ourselves from it to the degree that doing so is possible, since completely removing ourselves from nature is never truly

possible. Joanna Macy describes the ecological self as "profoundly interconnected and interdependent" (Gablik, 1).

Lack of awareness of nature means a lack of awareness of the ecological self. This lack of awareness and understanding of nature, and subsequent lack of understanding of ourselves, means that we act without being conscious of how our actions harm nature—and therefore, harm ourselves. Environmental education, or EE, often aims to heal this disconnect between humans and nature. According to the North American Association for Environmental Education, one of the essential underpinnings of environmental education is that human wellbeing is "inextricably bound with environmental quality" because "humans are a part of the natural order" (NAAEE, 12). In my experience as a volunteer naturalist, environmental education programs tend to emphasize this via ecological education. In studying ecology, students learn about the relationships between organisms in ecosystems. They may learn about interdependency among organisms, including humans. What the Holy Oak School of Art and Ecology aims to do, in addition to this, is to encourage students to truly consider *themselves* in relation to the natural world. There exists a practical interdependency between us and nature; for example, we depend on pollinators for our food. This is certainly significant and not to be taken-for-granted. But there is a relationship beyond this—for my relationship to nature is essential to who I am and my place in the world. Art allows us to access those other dimensions of being—the sensory, perceptive, and emotional dimensions; we could also call these the "aesthetic" and/or "affective" dimensions—those which "precede language" and tend to be "prereflective" (Iared et. Al, 196). Art

gives us access to this realm, and AEE enables us to relate to nature beyond a practical understanding. This is accomplished through an emphasis on *perception.* A focus on being perceptive as well as *re*ceptive encourages students to experience the world and form intimacy with it, to connect. We can use the necessary openness of the artist to connect with the natural world. Art is an ideal tool in coming to know the ecological self, because it "asks us to resist habits of conventional thinking", like that we are separate and disconnected from nature, and to instead "consider what we live for" (Graham, 387). Mantere tells us that "'better perceiving is the necessary starting point to different ways, to creative changes in personal and collective decision-making" (Mantere, CBS 1).

"Attention is the beginning of devotion." - Mary Oliver

Arts-based Environmental Education

The Holy Oak School of Art and Ecology is based on my own experience, practice, and research in the intersection of arts education and nature education. In particular, it is informed by my own work and research in arts-based environmental education, or AEE. Finnish art educator Meri-Helga Mantere, of the University of Helsinki, believes that an arts-based approach to environmental education enables learners to gain environmental literacy and an ecological ethic. This happens as a result of "becoming more receptive to sense perceptions and observations, and by using artistic methods to express personal environmental experiences and thought" (Mantere, 1). Another art-educator and AEE researcher and practitioner, Jan van Boeckel, describes AEE as a "form of artmaking which specifically aims to facilitate…(re)connection to the

natural world" van Boeckel, *AHE* 23). I have had the pleasure of personally working with van Boeckel as a participant-observer of his own arts-based environmental education programs, which I will discuss further in the Similar Programs and Case Study sections.

Van Boeckel describes artmaking as a way to "sharpen and renew our perception" (van Boeckel, *AHE* 15). Focusing our attention on our own embodied experiences allows us to have a more attuned, deeper engagement with the natural world. Environmental arts and humanities scholar and artist Beth Carruthers observes that when she is engaged in the practice of artmaking, her "attention is honed and oddly expanded into an attentive focus" (Carruthers, RRG 9). When this happens, she finds that a "participatory interchange" between self and the world occurs (Carruthers, RRG 8). Artmaking demands an awareness of embodied experience. It focuses us on our perceptual experiences, deepening our receptivity to nature and enabling us to perceive nature as it reveals itself to us. When Cézanne says "the landscape thinks itself in me, and I am its consciousness", he is suggesting that nature expresses itself "through embodied life", to use the words of Toadvine (Toadvine, *MPN* 15). In Toadvine's reading of Merleau-Ponty, nature "discloses itself through our expressive acts" (Toadvine, *MPN* 15). We can, I believe, read the term "expressive" there as "embodied". Such expression is actually required for nature's disclosure, says Toadvine. Both Toadvine and van Boeckel, on my reading, seem to suggest that artmaking in response to nature allows nature to disclose itself in this way.

David Abram argues that art is "a cooperative endeavor, a work of co-creation…in which…[earth-born materials] contribute their more-than-human resonances to human culture" (Abram, 278). Similarly, Carruthers states that art-making is a "collaboration" between oneself and the world (Carruthers, RRG 10). This collaboration requires "listening" and being "attentive to the murmuring between…self and world" (Carruthers, RRG 10). Says Carruthers, "the world is always speaking, but because we are primarily concerned with the human, most of the time we do not allow ourselves to listen intently" (Carruthers, RRG 8).

Artmaking focuses us on our perceptual experiences and requires that we pay attention, enabling us to "perceive clearly what is there, ready to 'reveal itself" (Van Boeckel, *AHE* 71). Mary Oliver said that "to pay attention" is "our endless and proper work" (Oliver, 2006). In our busy, overstimulated lives, we don't stop to *notice* the world around us. We don't *pay attention*. There is so much information presented to us all of the time—are we receiving it? Are we *receptive*? We must be receptive to the world in order to begin to know it and understand it. This receptivity is what allows us to have a genuine experience of nature, and consequently, to better know and understand ourselves. But receptivity is something we must learn, and we lack rich educational experiences in which we are encouraged to engage with the world at the level of perception. As Carruthers poignantly states, "the senses are an opening with the world" (Carruthers, RRG 8). Artmaking draws our attention to our senses, to the world; it requires that we

listen, that we are "attentive to the murmuring" that takes place between ourselves and the world (Carruthers, RRG 10).

> *"Indeed, when we are in the woods, we not only use our eyes to see the trees' colors and shapes and our ears to listen to the birds' singing and the sounds of leaves, we also feel the coolness of the breeze on our skin and smell the clean air. All these perceptions and feelings result in an abundant, whole, and real natural environmental experience, in which we feel integrated into the natural environment" (Yi, 3).*

In the same poem in which Mary Oliver tells us that we must pay attention, she also tells us that "imagination is better than a sharp instrument" (Oliver, 2006). Imagination is what allows for the creation of the instrument. First, we must imagine the exact tool with which to get our work done. Then we must imagine how exactly we will use this tool to accomplish our work. Engaging the imagination is what enables us to create solutions to problems facing us. If we're not engaging our creativity, how can we ever come up with creative solutions to the challenges we face—including the great existential threat facing our planet?

In addition to research in art and environmental education; Holy Oak is also largely influenced by existing work in ecofeminism, decolonial thought, and feminist epistemology. The Holy Oak School deeply values other ways of knowing, beyond science and Western thought. Additionally, this project is largely influenced by environmental philosophy; in particular, ecophenomenology. Phenomenology assumes

that the world is not just to be understood mechanistically. Because human beings are conscious beings, we are always conscious of or about something. We relate to the world meaningfully. In *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 20th-century French philosopher Merleau-Ponty states "there is not a human word, not a gesture, even one which is the outcome of habit or absent-mindedness, which has not some meaning" (Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, xxii). For example, there is more to the tree in front of me than its root system, its symbiotic relationships with other organisms, and its various physical characteristics and natural processes. As a conscious being, I have a relationship to the tree beyond these; my experience of the tree is of more than these things. I have a particular understanding of trees, of this tree—an understanding that is not only informed by my scientific knowledge of the tree. I have a history of prior experiences of trees: trees I climbed as a child, trees I have pruned, trees I have planted, trees I associate with certain places and people, trees I saw only in books and movies, trees I slept under, trees I have stared out the window at for hours on end. This history informs how I experience *this* particular tree. At the same time, this tree is informing how I will experience and understand trees in the future. I understand my physical interaction with the tree, as I stand before it—sensing it, smelling it, breathing in the oxygen it produces, impressions of memories arising from the smell—as meaningful. I understand my relationship to it as meaningful. In particular, we relate to the world meaningfully through our bodies. Consciousness is embodied. It is always enacted through the body, in the world, interacting with the world. Phenomenology, especially Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, is concerned with this conscious, embodied experience of being in the world. It is also concerned with phenomena; in our

aforementioned example of the tree, the tree is the phenomenon that we consciously and thus corporeally experience—"corporeally" meaning through our bodies, and not just our minds. Husserl famously described phenomenology as "a return to the things themselves"; that is to say that through phenomenology we engage with the world and the phenomena of the world directly. Merleau-Ponty tells us that the world "is not what [we] think, but [what we] live through" (Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, x).

The Holy Oak School is an arts-based environmental education school grounded in ecophenomenological thought. By ecophenomenology, I am referring to a phenomenology that takes into consideration that embodied consciousness, with its intentional relationships to the world, is necessarily always embedded in the *natural* world. Brown, Toadvine, and Wood argue that ecophenomenology is a natural next step for phenomenology, for this very reason; when we speak of "the world", we must, of course, also speak of the natural world of which we are a part. Phenomenology is a study of lived experience, and the most fundamental level of experience is "at the intersection of the body and nature" (Brown & Toadvine, 2003) (Toadvine, *MPN* 19) (Wood, 2001). Merleau-Ponty describes body and world as being of the "same fabric"(O'Loughlin, 3).

As Iared et al and Payne remind us, there is little research in education (including environmental education) that focuses on the "'affective' nature of lived experience" (Iared et al, 198). This project is just one attempt at doing so. It is also influenced by Payne & Wattchow's notion of "slow pedagogy", which encourages students to "experientially and reflectively access and address" their embodiment, sense experience,

and the way their bodies interact with the world and other beings (Payne & Wattchow, 2009).

Ecological education is essential, but ecophenomenological, arts-based environmental education takes a step in another direction and encourages learners to consider non-scientific or non-naturalistic elements of the natural world, like the aesthetic/affective as well as the ethical. This environmental education program is an opportunity for learners to examine the "interrelationship between [self,] organism, and world" (Brown and Toadvine, xiii).

III. PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Population Served

The Holy Oak School of Art and Ecology is primarily for lower elementary school-aged children, but will offer some programs for all elementary school-aged children, K-5. I have worked with children at the lower elementary level in both environmental education and classroom-based activities, and have found that children at this age are both open-minded and curious. I have also found them to be quite flexible about their beliefs, open to new ideas, and sincere. All children can benefit from Holy Oak's approach to environmental education, regardless of experience in the outdoors or exposure to the arts. It is my aim for this program to be an inclusive educational experience in which diverse experiences and perspectives are valued.

Geographic Communities

The Holy Oak School is located in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Western North Carolina, on traditional Cherokee land. The beautiful forests of this southern portion of the Appalachian Mountain range are some of the most biodiverse temperate forests in the world. Environmental education programs are plentiful in this region. Holy Oak differs from many because it is, in a sense, an art school, taking art as its starting point, rather than science. However, the approach also differs from traditional art education. As an arts-based environmental education school, at Holy Oak, art is engaged with not just for art's sake, as is often the case in traditional arts education, but also as a tool to come to

know and understand the ecological self. But Holy Oak is a school of art *and* ecology, embracing many different ways of knowing, and this includes science and ecological education, as well.

Program Structure

My aim is to implement a number of offerings for arts-based environmental education programming, one of which is a school program. This program would take place in collaboration with local schools, both public and private, in the schoolyards. It would take place once a week for 1-2 hours, for 6 weeks[4], with the 6th week's session taking place in another outdoor location. The purpose of having this program in schools is 1) the recognition that nature and arts education are essential components of a child's education and 2) to ensure that all children have access to this essential component of their education, regardless of socioeconomic status or their own experience with environmental education and/or in the outdoors. Holy Oak will also offer an after-school program, twice a week for 10 weeks, as well as summer day camps, 5 hours a day, 5 days a week.

Funding and Partnerships

There seems to be an interest in the intersections of art & science in the public consciousness (Frasz, 2015). Holy Oak will need support from funders and donors who share this interest, who recognize that we need imagination and inspiration as much as

4. Semester-long programs are likely not possible due to seasonal constraints.

botanical studies, as much as we need water to drink. Holy Oak seeks funders who can support the program in the areas of supplies, equipment, personnel, and operations, in the form of monetary as well as in-kind support. In particular, we will need long-term funding and donor support. The program will also be sustained by fee-for-service after school, summer camp, and day programs. These programs will offer tiered tuition rates, allowing families to enroll according to need, ensuring that the program is affordable for all. The higher-rate tiers work to subsidize the lower-rate tiers so that program costs are covered. There will also be a sponsorship option, allowing higher income households to sponsor children from households that cannot afford any of the tiered tuition rates, as well as a scholarship program.

It is my intention to partner with local schools to establish an ongoing, regular program throughout the school year. Another important partnership is with Strawtown Studio, an established arts-based environmental education program in Rockland County, NY., who are able to provide some training and educational resources for Holy Oak teachers.

Program Activities

As stated earlier in the Needs Statement section, this program is an ecophenomenological, arts-based environmental education program.[5] Some of the

5. It is worth stating that this statement is slightly redundant, as I believe ecophenomenological education and arts-based environmental education to essentially be one and the same, as, upon analysis, arts-based environmental education is ecophenomological in nature.

activities appropriate for such an educational program include: making observations, speaking about one's experience, writing about one's experience, and creating art related to one's experience (Selvi, 44).

At Holy Oak, students will regularly be asked to complete the following steps as they interact with the natural world:

1) Grow quiet and listen
2) Come to an inward clearing
3) Describe or interpret the experience (using an artistic medium)
(Moustakas in Selvi, 40-41).

Holy Oak provides students with opportunities to deepen their engagement with the natural world through artistic expression. For example, one's experience of hearing a meadowlark song might be expressed in a painting. Jeannette Winterson describes the artist as "a translator; one who has learned to pass into her own language the languages gathered from stones, from birds, from dreams, from the body, from the material world" (Winterson in Carruthers, RRG 9).

As another example, one activity might be performing an experiment in which kindergarteners plant two groups of wildflowers, group A and B. The children sing once a week to group A, and not to group B. They then make observations about which plants have grown the fastest, and if their singing had any effect on the plants. This activity 1) introduces scientific concepts to children at an early age and 2) helps them to achieve an intimate connection with nature. Such activities can, to use the words of artist-educator Jan van Boeckel, "heighten their awareness to the presence of their embodied self" and can foster a sense of interconnectedness (Van Boeckel, *AHE* 15).

While teaching the learning pod mentioned earlier in the Introduction, I created a "Good Morning" song for the group to sing each morning. Every day we sang "good morning" to each individual child by name, and each child would choose something or someone else that they would like to address: "good morning, earthworms" or "good morning, pine trees"—in acknowledgement of the natural world of which they were a part, greeting it as they greet each other, beginning the day with an awareness of their kinship with nature.

An example of an activity that demands a sensuous engagement with nature is the Mystery Object game. After a nature walk, the teacher brings back several small objects from the forest. The students are blindfolded and then instructed to use their other senses (with the exception of taste for safety reasons) to learn about their object—by feeling it, paying attention to texture, using their sense of smell. All of the objects are then put together, the blindfolds are removed, and the students have to identify by sight the object that was theirs.

Because a goal of the program is arts engagement, students will have some exposure to works of art of various media, including forms of visual art like sculpture and painting as well as poetry and music. An example of such an activity is a brief lesson on Henri Matisse, in which the class reads the book *Matisse's Scissors* and then proceeds to make their own cut-outs, inspired by those of Matisse, in an attempt to recreate the landscape and together create a wall mural of cut-outs that represent the landscape around us. [6]

[6] A component of this lesson example is taken from the book Art Making with MoMa (Frish and Margulies, 2018).

Additional examples of activities will be described in the Case Study, in which I detail my experience at a 5-day arts-based environmental education workshop for adults led and facilitated by Jan van Boeckel.

IV. OBJECTIVES/OUTCOMES

I anticipate the following outcomes for Holy Oak students:

1. Students will express having a greater sense of their place in the natural world and a deeper relationship with it, essentially conceiving of themselves as ecological beings.

2. Students will express a greater or strengthened appreciation for, and interest in, the arts.

3. Students will express feeling more embodied, rather than disembodied, after participating in program activities.

4. Students will have developed greater confidence in, and awareness of, their creative and artistic abilities.

5. Students will have discovered something meaningful about themselves by participating in the program activities.

These outcomes will be determined successful based on student responses to a questionnaire at the end of each 6-10 week program session. These objectives will be met through a rich educational experience that emphasizes attention to perception and sensory experience, offers exposure to the arts, and engages the students' creativity.

V. CASE STUDY: WILDPAINTING, WILDSOUNDING

In 2018, I visited a course of Jan van Boeckel's in collaboration with philosopher David Rothenberg, titled "Wildpainting, Wildsounding". The course took place at 42 Acres, a regenerative farm and nature reserve in Somerset, England, over the course of 5 days. The course emphasized not only artistic practice in nature but aesthetic experience in nature, in general. I experienced the course as a participant observer. All of the participants in the course were adults who enrolled in the course because of their interest in the subject matter. The number of participants changed from day to day, but in total there were approximately 10-15 people. Of these, only a few were practicing artists. Over the 5 days, numerous exercises were led by the course facilitators. These included, to name a few:

- Discussions on sound, types of sound, music, art theory, environmental philosophy, and poetry.
- Participants choosing a spot on the property to go and sit, alone, eyes closed, and practice deep listening[7] in the landscape to the sounds around them. Afterwards, participants were asked to express what they had observed through some medium—drawing, a poem, or bodily movement.
- Observation of two oak trees and following instruction to create a charcoal drawing not of the oak trees but instead of the negative space between them, in order to allow the two trees to emerge.
- Color wheel/color theory lesson.
- Listening to and studying birdsong.
- Plein air painting.
- Poetry writing.
- Creating a small clay sculpture of oneself while blind-folded.
- Multi-modal improvisation (painting, drawing, dance, singing).
- Drawing the lines of one's non-dominant hand and sharing the drawing with another person, who then meditates on the drawing to imagine a landscape, any

7. Inspired by Pauline Oliveros's work on Deep Listening (see Oliveros, 2005).

landscape, real or imagined, and imagines themselves in it.
- Listening to and studying whale songs.
- Group singing in the forest.

The purpose of this study was:

1. To observe an arts-based environmental education course in action.
2. To determine how participants of Wildpainting, Wildsounding experienced the course as meaningful.
3. To determine if participants in the course had experienced what they believed to be a deepening of their receptivity to the natural world.

I wanted to make these observations in order to gain some insight into whether arts-based environmental education is an effective means to developing the ecological self.

Methodology

Throughout the course, I took field notes to document my experience and observations of consenting participants. I also conducted face-to-face interviews with a number of participants during the course. The interviews took place predominantly in the quiet, private library of the old farmhouse at 42 Acres. One interview took place outside on the patio while the interviewee was painting, using a flower as their paintbrush. Another began in the library, was continued on a train to London, and finally completed over the phone.

In my analysis of the data, the following themes emerged:

- Enhanced bodily/sensory awareness; often in conjunction with:
- Enhanced awareness of surroundings and the natural world
- Mindfulness and intention

(cont., page 27)

Field Note 1:
Sitting alone with eyes closed, listening to the landscape.

Listening

laughter
the buzzing in my ear, in my face
cheeter, cheeter.
through the teeth
pippit, pippit
through the heart

(*cont. from p. 25)*

Enhanced bodily/sensory awareness, often in conjunction with enhanced awareness of surroundings and the natural world:

A number of the participants described new ways of experiencing themselves in a space and sensing the space around them, as well as noticing things about themselves. For example, one participant noticed that their hearing right-ear dominant, and found that interesting since they are right-handed.

Multiple participants expressed that they had become more aware of their surroundings and the natural world during the course activities. One participant said that they felt that as a result of the course activities, they found themselves looking at things "with a completely new pair of eyes". The same participant expressed a newfound appreciation for, and sensitivity to, color, noticing interesting colors where they would not have before. They also expressed that using their senses in the way they did during the course activities "slow[ed] things down" for them and enabled them to "reconnect to things". One interviewed participant stated that it was "interesting to engage the mind and senses and see reality in a different way" than they normally do.

Mindfulness and intention:

It is not at all surprising that activities that ask participants to be wholly attentive to their sensory experience would bring up thoughts about mindfulness and intention for those participants. One participant described how using their senses and practicing deep

listening throughout the course made them feel “a bit more engaged” and “intentional”. Another described how using their senses felt like “rewiring the brain”, “different parts of the brain that are lesser used” become “more sharpened”. Another described “developing a presence of mind”, saying “it’s not just the mind thinking; it’s a different kind of mind—[the] body-mind.” Another said they found an “energizing” “stillness” that took them “away from the chatter”. They of the “stillness”: “[it] brings me back to myself”.

Field Note 2:
Written in response to hearing another person describe the landscape they saw themselves in [Doñana National Park, Spain] while looking at a drawing of the lines of my hand.

the veins of the Earth
are sapphire blue
like human blood
before the heart delivers oxygen
to an ocean of need

Conclusions:

Notably, course participants did not describe themselves as feeling a greater connection to the natural world as a result of the course, at least not in a significant way. It is worth remembering that these were adults who chose to participate in such a course, and in interviews all expressed already having a "connection" to nature. A few explained that they felt that their relationship with nature is one that they are continually working on developing, "something we always have to learn"; that at times "we feel connected, and then we feel disconnected" and that it is worthwhile to "engage purposefully in doing that", and that participating in the course enabled them to do so.

These interviews took place over the course of one week. Some took place very early on in the course. One participant, when asked "if creating art in nature or in response to what you experienced in nature affected how you understand nature, or even the world", replied that it was too early to respond to that question. Participants responses would likely differ after weeks of participating in such a course. In any case, interviewee responses suggest that they did experience a deepening of their receptivity to the world. Some of the participants expressed their identity in relation to the natural world in such a way that might suggest that they conceive of themselves as ecological beings, but not necessarily moreso after their participation in the course. I find the remark that one must continually work on developing their relationship with nature and/or the non-human compelling, as it suggests that it is a relationship to be continually worked on like any

other meaningful relationship. This suggests that the development of the ecological self is a continuous, lifelong practice, rather than something to be achieved at once. If this is true, then arts-based environmental education then becomes a valuable lifelong practice.

If one clear thing emerged from the interviews, it is that the course seemed to be impactful for those participants interviewed, and that the arts-based approach of the Holy Oak School of Art and Ecology can be very valuable to its students, not just during childhood but throughout their lives.

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